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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Process of Leaving a Domestic Violence Shelter for Mothers and Children

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic violence (DV) shelters provide a safe place for women and children; however, they are only intended to be a temporary solution until residents can find a safe place of their own. In Sweden, the social services are responsible for helping and supporting victims of DV to get away from the violence, which can include everything from practical help and housing to emotional support. The present article aims to investigate mothers' descriptions of leaving a DV shelter where they were staying with their children. Interviews with 13 mothers of children aged 0–6 years are analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that the process of leaving a DV shelter begins almost as soon as the mother and her children arrive, as it can take quite some time to find a new safe place and to mentally prepare for the move. Additionally, it takes a lot of effort to plan for life outside the shelter. This involves hardship for the mothers and children, meaning that they need support from both shelter staff and social services. Implications for social work practice and policy are discussed.

## 1 | Introduction

Men's violence against women and children is a global public health problem (World Health Organization [WHO] 2013) and can lead to various consequences such as post-traumatic stress (PTS), depression, behavioural problems in children and missed schooling (Bacchus et al. 2018; Cater et al. 2015; Dillon et al. 2013; Fredland et al. 2014; Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2008). In such cases, a domestic violence (DV) shelter can provide a safe place to which women and their children can flee. The conditions associated with living at a DV shelter can still be difficult and lead to feelings of isolation, limited social contact and children failing or dropping out of school (Arnell and Thunberg 2023; Øverliien 2011; Thunberg, Vikander, and Arnell 2022; Vass and Haj-Yahia 2020, 2021). The limited social contact with their former social network can have negative effects on the children's wellbeing (Vass and Haj-Yahia 2023), while a child-friendly environment, access to activities and positive social relationships at

the shelter can have positive effects (Arnell and Thunberg 2023). These studies all illustrate what it is like to live at a DV shelter; however, staying at a shelter is often temporary. Little is known about the process of moving from the shelter to one's own housing, which is the focus of the present study.

Many women feel that they received adequate assistance and support during their stay at the shelter, and this satisfaction does not appear to be related to length of stay (Sullivan and Virden 2017a). According to Sullivan and Virden (2017a), the length of stay at a DV shelter may be related to the number of needs identified, with longer stays being associated with more identified needs on average. Wood et al. (2023) also show that a limited length of stay may create stress and have a negative influence on family relationships. This suggests that shelter staff should possess a wide range of knowledge to be able to meet these needs (Sullivan and Virden 2017a). Sullivan and Virden (2017b) also show that despite their varying needs, the

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DV victims felt they received a lot of help and support at the shelters. Still, although they received a lot of support concerning information and safety, aspects related to jobs, housing, childcare and custody showed more variation when it comes to whether the DV victims received support. With this in mind, in order to have positive effects, support to DV victims needs to be long term and should include several different types of support, both for the shelter stay and for leaving DV (e.g., Jarvis, Gordon, and Novaco 2005; Tengström 2011; Wood et al. 2023). The present study goes beyond the immediate support at the DV shelter after escaping violence and focuses on the help and support needed to live independently after the time spent at the DV shelter.

Research on the situation for mothers, and especially children, when they leave a DV shelter is scarce. However, Wood et al. (2023) point to the challenges for mothers, highlighting the difficulty of finding affordable and safe housing while maintaining stability for the children, and Øverlien, Jacobsen, and Evang (2009) found that children know that life at the shelter will not last forever. For some children, the process of moving out is well planned, and a new home awaits them, while others move back into the home they left, sometimes with little time for practical or emotional preparation (Øverlien, Jacobsen, and Evang 2009). In another analysis, Øverlien (2012) found that children interviewed about their future and postshelter life expressed a desire for a 'normal' everyday life, free from violence and the opportunity to go to school and have friends. Vass and Haj-Yahia's (2020) analysis of children's perspectives revealed mixed experiences of leaving the shelter. The children in their study described both sudden moves and moves that occurred after extensive preparation, though often without consideration of their readiness. Vass and Haj-Yahia (2020) also discussed the consequences of housing instability for children with experiences of living at a DV shelter, arguing that it can have negative social, emotional and educational outcomes. The research presented here illustrates the importance of planning to prepare both the children and their mothers for life outside of the shelter.

In addition, women who are subjected to economic violence may be left with debt and few financial and material resources to provide for their own and their children's needs (Postmus et al. 2012; Sanders 2015). Depending on the nature of the debt, this may also make it more difficult to find a new place to live when planning to leave the shelter. Thus, mothers and their children may face multiple problems on different levels when leaving a DV shelter. This suggests that planning and preparation are needed before moving out of the shelter.

### 1.1 | DV Shelters in the Swedish Context

In Sweden, where the present study was conducted, approximately 6500 women and 6200 children stay in a DV shelter each year (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2020). This reflects an increase in the number of women and children fleeing DV and seeking shelter. The number of DV shelters in Sweden has also increased, from around 200 shelters in 2013 to 282 in 2020. The shelters are run by actors from different sectors and have different management structures, with about 54% being run by nonprofit organizations, 37% by private companies and

about 9% by municipalities (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2020). The average length of stay at a DV shelter is approximately 2 months, which may be related to a general shortage of housing in Sweden (SOU 2022:14). It is also important to note that there are examples of longer stays elsewhere. For example, Øverlien (2011) describes stays of up to 4 months in Norway and the possibility of multiple shelter placements (see also Øverlien 2012).

In Sweden, the social services are responsible for providing assistance and support to victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes providing them with suitable temporary housing (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2014). The National Board of Health and Welfare (2022) has also shown that contacts between social services and IPV victims are rare after the victims have left DV shelters and that IPV victims sometimes have to move back in with the perpetrator, or to a place known to him, because of the lack of support and shortage of housing. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, there is no specific legislation in Sweden that regulates DV shelters and how they are run and managed (Ewalds 2021). However, there are plans to enact new legislation in April 2024 that will regulate DV shelters. With all this in mind, leaving a DV shelter is not simply a matter of moving out; the process can take a long time for reasons beyond the mothers' control.

### 1.2 | Aim of the Study

In light of the research presented, the aim of the present study is *to investigate mothers' descriptions of leaving a DV shelter where they were staying with their children*. The research question is: What do mothers describe as important to them and their children when leaving a DV shelter?

## 2 | Method

This article is based on data from the project *Article 19: What sheltered housing means for abused children*. The project included interviews with older children (7–17 years old), but in this article, we use interviews with 13 mothers of children aged 0–6. These mothers all had experience of living at a DV shelter with their young children. Eight had moved out, and five were still living at the shelter at the time of the interviews. The length of their stays ranged from 3 months up to 3 years, and some had experience of multiple DV shelters. Nine of the mothers had more than one child, and four of them also had older children living with them at the shelter. There were 21 children living with their mothers at a shelter, with a mean age of 4.7 years. No incentives were offered for participation in the study.

The interviews were conducted during 2021 and 2022. They were semi-structured with open-ended questions and were organized around the five phases developed by Rösare (2015). These phases are as follows: arriving at the shelter, the first week, the time at the shelter, the final time at the shelter and, finally, the time after leaving the shelter. The interview questions were asked in chronological order, following the sequence of these phases, to try to capture the entire process from fleeing the violence to finding a place of their own after leaving the shelter.

All mothers were asked questions about all phases, regardless of whether they were still living at the shelter or had moved to a place of their own. This article focuses on the last two phases, the final time at the shelter and the time after leaving the shelter, and more specifically on the practical needs of the mothers and children when moving out of sheltered housing. Some mothers talked about their needs retrospectively, while others talked about their plans to move out of the shelter and what they expected to need when they moved. In other words, all of the interviews included the mothers' perspectives on their final time at the DV shelter as well as the time after leaving the DV shelter, since they all had experience of thinking about and planning their move.

As mentioned above, the interview questions focused on the youngest (0–6 years) children's situation. However, because many of the mothers also had older children (7–17 years), the narratives sometimes also included the older children's situation. Therefore, for ethical reasons, the full narratives have been included, though with a focus on the younger children's experiences as described in the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 40–90 min and took place in locations where the participants felt comfortable. All but two interviews were conducted at a shelter or in the interviewee's home, and the remaining two were conducted by telephone or video conferencing. Although technical issues can be a problem, and it can be difficult to read visual cues, research has shown that it is possible to obtain rich data on sensitive topics with digital interviews (Thunberg and Arnell 2022). We found that the digital interviews allowed us to let the participants participate on their own terms, so they felt safe and comfortable disclosing their experiences.

To recruit the mothers, contact was made with different DV shelters and organizations in Sweden. The staff of these organizations were given information about the study and were asked to forward the information to mothers who had stayed at a shelter with their children during the previous 3 years. The mothers were then invited to participate in the study.

## 2.1 | Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2020:04561). All potential participants received written information about the project and how participation might affect them. This information was passed

from the researchers to shelter staff and then to the mothers. If the mothers expressed interest in participating, contact was made between the mothers and the researchers so that the researchers could present the information about the project and answer any questions before the mothers agreed to participate. The mothers gave informed consent before the interview began and were also reminded that they could withdraw at any time if they changed their minds. All names presented below are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. Names of places and specific organizations have also been changed or removed.

## 2.2 | Data Analysis

A combination of narrative thematic analysis (Riessman 2008) and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic analysis was used. The analysis began with the narrative thematic analysis, with a focus on understanding parts of the material in relation to the whole narrative told by the participants. To do this, the analysis alternated between examining the individual parts and the whole narrative. In addition to the narrative thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006, 2019) were used. Both authors conducted the interviews and transcribed each other's interviews to familiarize themselves with the data. The transcriptions were also read and reread several times to generate codes and search for themes related to the last two phases, with a focus on the process of leaving the shelter. The first author then did the initial coding and thematization, which was then reviewed and revised by the second author after mutual discussion in order to validate the analysis. In total, three themes remained after the authors' discussion about the initial coding and thematization. In the final step, the presentation of the results, relevant excerpts were selected for their depth and clarity and translated into English.

## 3 | Findings

This section presents the themes that were found in the analysis. They are as follows: *planning the move*, *the physical move out of the shelter* and *life after the shelter stay*. Although these themes are described as different parts of the process of moving out of a DV shelter, there is some overlap between them. For example, *planning the move* includes not only planning the physical move but also some aspects of life after the move, for example, emotional support and safety concerns (Table 1).

**TABLE 1** | Description of themes derived from the analysis.

Themes	Examples of subthemes (and codes)
Planning the move	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early planning (e.g., housing queues, security plans, finding a new pre-/school)</li> <li>• Preparations (e.g., buying things for their life after leaving the shelter)</li> </ul>
The physical move out of the shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal help (e.g., from the social services or the shelter)</li> <li>• Informal help (e.g., help from family or friends)</li> <li>• Lack of help</li> </ul>
Life after the shelter stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness for a life outside of the shelter (e.g., security plans, a place of their own)</li> <li>• Treatment for the children (e.g., emotional support, therapy)</li> <li>• Normality and everyday routines (e.g., job for the mother, pre-school and school for children, friends)</li> </ul>

### 3.1 | Planning the Move

The first theme focuses on planning to move out of the DV shelter. It is clear from the interviews that the destinations of the moves vary. For example, some mothers move to an apartment that they find themselves, while others move to an apartment arranged by the social services. The housing arranged by the social services varies. In some cases, the social services help the mother to find a place to live. In other cases, the mother and her child/ren move into an apartment reserved for people in vulnerable life situations (e.g., homelessness or violence) and maintained by the municipality. Even with the help of the social services, finding housing is not always easy. It often requires a great deal of planning and assistance from the shelter staff. For example, Jacqueline describes how the planning began early in her stay at the shelter:

I got help from the counselor, the first one I had. Pretty early on, I put myself in the housing queue and started thinking, and collecting housing points<sup>1</sup>, started thinking about what one might want to get. Both from a safety perspective, but also what feels right and what I think will suit me and [my daughter]. Also, when I began to feel ready, I began to take the first step and felt it was the right time, felt that [my daughter] should start preschool. That we needed to start living more normally. I felt that I wanted to move before she got too old and too aware. So, it took quite a long time.

Jacqueline's narrative shows that leaving the shelter is a process that can take a long time and is related to several issues, such as safety issues and Sweden's shortage of housing, especially affordable housing. This can make it difficult for women to leave a DV shelter if they do not have enough 'housing points' or a job, which means that they must begin thinking about what will happen in their lives after a shelter stay quite soon after arriving. In larger cities, it is not uncommon to have to queue for years to get an apartment. However, sometimes, landlords or municipal housing agencies have a special queue for DV victims. DV shelters in Sweden are also meant to be temporary, but due to these circumstances, mothers and their children may have to stay longer than necessary.

Planning the move also includes such things as buying furniture and cleaning your living space before you leave. Some of the mothers interviewed also described needing help to find a solution for the children's preschool and school, or to find a job for themselves, as exemplified by Helena's narrative:

This is where we started planning, that we would probably stay in this city, and so then they helped us with school and preschool and so on. It started quite early, I think. [...] We got help both from here [the DV shelter] and the social services to get an apartment. So, I waited for quite some time. It felt like that anyway. We just wanted to leave as soon as possible and build an 'everyday-life'.

As in the quote from Jacqueline, Helena describes an aspiration for some normality, to get a place of their own that, in this case, was in the same town as the shelter where they were living. The mothers and children thus need support from the social services and the shelter in planning the move and finding a new place to live, a job for the mothers, and school for the children. Moving to an apartment outside of the shelter can also be associated with fear and uncertainty, especially for the children, as exemplified by Margot's narrative:

Now, I hope we can take it one step at a time [...] The need for security and protection, I think that's absolutely the hardest thing, and it's also what I said before, that it's what the children don't understand either, 'what's changed so that we don't have to live in a domestic violence shelter anymore?' Because they haven't seen any changes regarding that [the threat].

Margot and her children are planning to move, and they describe the fear of what might happen, because leaving the shelter also entails a greater risk of being found and subjected to renewed violence by the perpetrator. These risks, the fear of what might happen after the move and the mothers' thoughts about their children's safety and security are illustrated in both Jacqueline's and Margot's narratives. Moving to housing of their own can thus be seen as just the next step in the process of breaking free from the violence. Planning the move is accordingly not only about finding a place to live but also about validation, emotional support and ensuring that the mother and her children have the security arrangements they need to feel safe.

To summarize, it is not easy to find an apartment that meets the special security needs of the mothers and children, especially as the waiting lists for housing are long. Similarly, it is important that both the mothers and their children are mentally prepared to move and are able to manage their situation and security needs on their own. It may therefore be necessary to prepare the support and plan for the move well in advance and to involve the children in the planning process.

### 3.2 | The Physical Move Out of the Shelter

As mentioned in the previous section, moving from a DV shelter to a new home without the same level of security can be both liberating and frightening. On the one hand, the families will have greater freedom of movement and be able to participate in such things as school, preschool and recreational activities. On the other hand, although most of the participants had a protected identity, losing the security measures of the DV shelter brings uncertainty and, as mentioned, the possibility of renewed violence if they are found. In addition, the mothers and their children also expressed a need for help with the practicalities of moving from the shelter to housing of their own. Their experiences of support and practical help differed, however. Some mothers described receiving help from family members, while others were helped by the social services. For example, Erika states:

The social services helped me, they did, with a moving company. All our things were in a storage unit during that time [at the DV shelter]. So yes, it was them [the social services]. Otherwise, I would have taken care of everything myself. I would have.

The help that Erika describes receiving from the social services is uncommon in the mothers' narratives. Instead, it seems that mothers are expected to be able to manage their own situation when leaving the shelter, or to ask other people for help, such as family members. Both Rebecka and Cecilia describe how family members came to their assistance:

My eldest sister came and helped me. My family came and helped me. And the woman from shelter number three, because there was a woman who also helped.

(Rebecka)

Uh, so the idea is that I'll pick up the key on Thursday so that my mother can come here. She will travel a long way, five hours. She'll come in the morning and help me move.

(Cecilia)

Based on Rebecka's and Cecilia's narratives, family members play an important role in their lives by helping them with the physical move out of the shelter. Rebecka also received help from a woman at the shelter, which means that she received help with the move from several different people. However, not all the mothers have experience of receiving help; many are expected to sort out the situation themselves. Cecilia describes not only how she managed to find an apartment on her own but also how the limited support from the social services affected the process of moving:

We'll get the key, the social services said, and then usually they'd extend my contract or whatever you call it, the housing here each month. But mine expired at the end of [date]. Normally, as I understand it, they get it extended for a couple, for a couple of days after the date of the move, so they have time to clean it and get it ready, get a bed and things like that, but my social services decided that I couldn't do that, so as soon as I get my key I have to leave.

Cecilia's experience, as described in the quote, illustrates some of the difficulties the mothers can face when leaving the shelter. It is not only a matter of finding an apartment, but also of managing the process of moving from the shelter to the new place. One interpretation of the quote is that the social services more or less abandoned Cecilia and her children and were only willing to pay for her actual stay at the shelter and nothing else. Although public institutions should not spend more than necessary, they are required to support women and children escaping violence (see Chapter 5 §11 Social Services Act 2001:453). Sometimes, escaping violence and finding a place of their own involve moving to a new geographical location to be more safe, and the mothers' and children's existing social network may be far away, leaving them without social support during the physical move.

Based on the mothers' narratives, as exemplified in the quotes above, neither the DV shelters nor the social services seem to have a strategy for when the mothers are leaving the shelter. In some cases, the social services offer assistance with practical matters during the move, but most of the time, based on the interviews, it seems that the mothers have to manage the situation on their own. As we mentioned in the previous section, the move should be viewed as a process. One mother, Malin, who was able to return to her own apartment after leaving the shelter, expressed that she and her children got used to living in the apartment again by visiting it while they were still living at the shelter. She describes how she gradually built up the confidence to stay there overnight and eventually felt safe enough to move there permanently with her children. However, this is not very common in the material.

To summarize, the mothers and their children have different experiences of the physical move to housing of their own. Some have to manage the move on their own, asking family and friends for help, while others receive support from the shelter and, on rare occasions, from the social services. If the move is not thought through from the outset, there also seems to be a risk that both the mothers and their children will feel frightened, insecure and uncertain about whether they will be subjected to more violence.

### 3.3 | Life After the Shelter Stay

Leaving the DV shelter is not only the end of a phase but also the beginning of another. This is the fifth phase, described by Rösare (2015) as the time after leaving the shelter. Based on the mothers' narratives, leaving the DV shelter also implies the hope of gaining some normality for themselves and their children. At the same time, as mentioned above, they may be afraid of what will happen if they are found and/or subjected to renewed violence. Jacqueline expresses this as follows:

For me there was a lot of insecurity again. When at the [new] place 'I haven't done anything reckless now, I'm ready now, right? What if he finds out where I live? What if he follows my parents? What if he gets the idea of following my parents when they come here and, well ...' There was a lot of worrying.

Jacqueline's narrative shows that many 'what if' scenarios come to mind, which can be understood as related to the level of threat she faces and what she has experienced. Thus, the question of security influences the planning of the move, like Margot's narrative illustrated above, as well as the time after the move has taken place. Regardless of the security issues that need to be considered, asking these kinds of questions, as Jacqueline does, could be a good way of assessing the risks associated with leaving the shelter, the new housing situation and other factors related to the mothers' return to work and the children's enrolment in preschool or school. For many mothers and children, the safety risks are something they will have to keep in mind for a long time.

The new situation after leaving the DV shelter, as mentioned in the previous theme, can involve conflicting emotions. It can be

both liberating and filled with fear and worry. In their narratives, the mothers also express that normality and safety are their main wishes for the future. They highlight these things as important for both themselves and their children. When talking about normality, or in other words a 'normal everyday life', they stress the importance of being able to have social relationships, to go to preschool, school or work and to move freely in the environment where they live. Rebecka and Sofia express this as follows:

Oh yes, my children are safe now. They go to preschool. They have made their own contacts or whatever you call it. They're doing really well now. Sure, it can happen because of the Staircase Model [Sw. Trappan], because it brings things up in the conversations, because everything's still going on. It's not all over yet. We may have periods when she has nightmares, but now I know how to handle it. They're really secure now. In my opinion, my children are doing really well, from where we were to where we are now, it's a [inaudible] turnaround.

(Rebecka)

Yes, it's my hope that we can, that he [the son] can go back to his normal, to normality in some way. And that's where the preschool and the job, my job, play a big role. Where we live is less important. As long as you can stick to these daily routines. I hope so, so that he [the father] doesn't start making a lot of trouble, for [my son's] sake.

(Sofia)

Despite the expressed fear of being found, the risk of renewed violence and the negative aspects of talk therapy (Staircase Model) such as reliving painful memories, the quotes signal a hopeful view of the future. In their narratives, the mothers express the possibility for their children to build new social networks in their preschools/schools, as mentioned in Rebecka's quote. She can see that this is already happening with her children, that they feel safe and have begun making friendships of their own. Rebecka describes their new life situation as a turning point and says that her children are doing well. This can hopefully lead to the sense of normalcy that Sofia wishes for.

However, because of the violence to which they have been subjected, there are safety issues that cannot be ignored. Everyday activities that people who have not experienced violence take for granted may be things that these mothers and their children need to be wary of. Long after they have moved out of the shelter, they will have to make safety plans and adjustments in their lives just to be able to socialize with friends, participate in recreational activities or go to school or work. However, the level of support, practical help and need for safety plans may vary, depending on their situation, networks and previous experiences. Focusing on their basic needs is described as helpful, and keeping to their routines can be understood as a way of strengthening their agency. However, fear of the perpetrator, most often the father, or uncertainty about the future can lead to a constant awareness of one's surroundings, a state of vigilance

and anxiety that to some extent will not be overcome until the threat level is reduced.

## 4 | Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate mothers' descriptions of leaving a DV shelter with their children and, more specifically, what mothers found to be important when leaving the shelter. Our analysis shows that moving out of a DV shelter is a process with many barriers that begins already on the first day of the shelter stay. Preparing for the move includes planning for an independent life outside of the shelter, conducting the physical move, and making a new independent life with everyday routines in their own housing, all of which are barriers that must be overcome to establish a life after leaving the shelter. The present study contributes to previous research by presenting the perspective that moving to an independent life outside of the shelter is both a mental and a physical process and that this needs to be considered when planning help and support in the longer term.

The reason for starting the preparation for leaving the shelter early is that it takes time to find a new place to live that is safe, and the mother and her children also need to be mentally prepared for the move (e.g., Wood et al. 2023). This may be related to the readiness described by Vass and Haj-Yahia (2020), as children need time to mentally prepare to live on their own with their mothers, and this preparation, if they are involved in planning the move, may be important for their well-being (see also Øverlien, Jacobsen, and Evang 2009). This is especially true because housing instability has been shown to have negative social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children with experience of DV shelters (Vass and Haj-Yahia 2020). Therefore, the mothers and their children need support with planning the move to independent living and not just support while in the shelter (Sullivan and Virden 2017a; Wood et al. 2023). However, Ewalds (2021) points out that little is known about the forms of support provided, and hence, there is little information about whether the help and support provided includes aspects related to leaving the shelter. The present study shows the importance of practical help with such things as buying furniture, applying for housing and knowing which housing companies may prioritize helping DV victims. Here, the consequences of economic violence also need to be considered. It may affect the mothers' ability to become self-sufficient (Postmus et al. 2012; Sanders 2015), as debt may make them less eligible to rent an apartment.

Concerning the physical move out of the shelter, it is important to remember, as mentioned above, that most of these mothers and their children do not have access to a social network (see also Arnell and Thunberg 2023; Øverlien 2011; Thunberg, Vikander, and Arnell 2022; Vass and Haj-Yahia 2020, 2021) and thus lack personal support to help them with the move. Moving (both to and from a DV shelter) may also involve a long journey to a new city. Therefore, as the results show, it is important to coordinate the move with shelter staff and the social services, and to tailor the support to the needs of the mothers and their children in order to facilitate the move as much as possible (cf. Sullivan and Virden 2017a, 2017b). It cannot be assumed that the mothers and their children can just move from 1 day to the next without proper planning and preparation. In other words, the planning of the move needs to begin early.

Regarding the time after leaving the shelter, the present study shows similar results as Øverlien (2012), mainly a hope for 'normal' daily routines and the possibility for the mother to work and for the children to attend preschool/school. The mothers also mentioned the importance of friends, or contacts, which can be understood in relation to the isolation and loss of social network they experienced at the DV shelter (e.g., Vass and Haj-Yahia 2023). It is important to remember, however, that many of these mothers and children will have to live with protected identities for many years to come, meaning that their lives will continue to be different from those of others. This means that they may need ongoing support to adjust to their new lives and to process any trauma they may be carrying (Jarvis, Gordon, and Novaco 2005; Jarvis and Novaco 2006; Tengström 2011; Wood et al. 2023). However, as Ewalds (2021) notes, ensuring that the mothers and children receive the help and support they need after leaving the shelter is a challenge. In the worst case, as The National Board of Health and Welfare (2022) has shown, mothers and children who lack support and housing may have to move back in with the perpetrator, or to a place known to him, with the risk of renewed violence or even death.

In conclusion, the analysis in the present study shows that for the mothers and children, moving out of a DV shelter is not just a matter of physically leaving the shelter. Instead, it is a process that takes time and has many barriers. It is therefore important to start planning early—as soon as the mothers and children arrive at the shelter. When the time comes to move, they need to be ready, which includes emotional preparation, arranging for various forms of security and dealing with practical aspects such as finding an apartment or at least signing up for the housing queue, planning and carrying out the physical move and cleaning up the living space at the shelter. All of these tasks make the move a lengthy process, one in which it is possible for the children to participate, for example, by expressing their wishes and concerns about the move and their support needs. Preparing both the mothers and the children for the move early in their stay at the shelter increases their readiness for the actual move. This is the present study's main contribution: that the move must be seen as a process of preparing for life outside the shelter.

#### 4.1 | Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on the analysis of the mothers' narratives in this study, it is important that the social services and DV shelters work together to find strategies for offering practical help and support to mothers and children who are moving from a shelter to housing of their own (e.g., Wood et al. 2023). It is not just a matter of 1 day deciding to move and then doing it. The social services, with the help of the DV shelter, must recognize that the process takes time and needs planning—and that the children should be involved. Therefore, we believe it is important to coordinate the move together with the shelter staff and the social services.

In addition, children may not always share their feelings with their mothers or the shelter staff (e.g., Bowyer, Swanston, and Vetere 2015). Therefore, it is important that support services are directed toward the children, regardless of the mothers' support needs. Because of the varying consequences of violence and the different lengths of stay at DV shelters, it is necessary not

only to consider issues related to new housing but also to provide long-term emotional support for both the mothers and the children (e.g., Jarvis and Novaco 2006; Wood et al. 2023). This can include various forms of therapy to address, for example, the consequences of PTS, depression and behavioural problems in children.

To sum up, mothers leaving DV shelters with their children need support from a variety of sources, including the municipal social services, DV shelters, counsellors, legal professionals, employment agencies and landlords. All of these have a role to play in the process of leaving a DV shelter for a more independent living situation outside the shelter.

#### 4.2 | Limitations and Future Research

As with all studies, this one has some limitations. First, the sample is quite small. Nevertheless, the present study contributes to the knowledge of how mothers and their children experience the process of moving out of a DV shelter. Second, doing interviews with the mothers, rather than the young children, has its limitations. In this case, the children's experiences were interpreted first by their mothers and then by us as researchers. Although this means that the children's own points of view were missed, this procedure made it possible to investigate the mothers' and the youngest children's situation, and we deemed this strategy to be necessary from an ethical standpoint, because of the young age of the children (0–6 years).

Based on our results, further research is needed to determine whether digital solutions for school and work can improve the situation for children and mothers during their stay and help ease the transition to life outside the shelter. Another topic of interest, as has been noted previously (e.g., Ewalds 2021), would be how to improve the collaboration between municipal social services and DV shelters during the relocation process and the provision of support after the move.

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#### Disclosure

The funder was not involved in the analysis or the conclusions drawn in the study. The text was written by the authors.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The system with housing points is common in Sweden. People queue for available rental apartments. Each day spent in the queue gives one point, and the person with the most points is offered the apartment.



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