

Rebuilding Life Post Abuse: Leveraging Technology to Support Well-being and Independence

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August 13, 2024

Life transitions, particularly those involving the escape from abuse or forced marriage, represent profound and challenging shifts that can leave individuals feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and disconnected from their sense of self [17]. Escaping such circumstances often requires leaving behind an entire life—familiar surroundings, relationships, and a sense of security—only to start anew in a completely unfamiliar environment [1; 11]. This is especially true for survivors of forced marriages, who may be compelled to move away, start new jobs, and rebuild their lives from scratch [11; 14]. In many patriarchal societies, leaving a forced marriage is seen as bringing dishonor or shame upon the family, leading to threats, further abuse, and even the terrifying possibility of honor killings. To escape these dangers, survivors must seek safety elsewhere, which only compounds the challenges they face as they work to overcome trauma and reclaim their autonomy [11].

Amid these daunting transitions, technology can serve as a vital companion, guiding survivors through the complexities of their new reality [8; 10; 13; 15; 9]. For many, this journey to independence involves learning new skills and managing life autonomously for the first time—tasks that were previously controlled by others within a restrictive and oppressive environment. Digital tools [7; 5; 22; 12; 9; 4; 15], such as educational resources and financial management apps, empower survivors by providing the knowledge and skills they need to regain control over their lives. By offering structured support and fostering a sense of achievement, these tools could help alleviate the overwhelming nature of starting anew.

Beyond the challenges of learning independence, survivors of abuse also face significant trauma that can result in mental health disorders, such as depression, PTSD, and anxiety [2; 18; 20; 19]. To address these challenges, the field of HCI has increasingly focused on how technology can support the wellbeing of those who have experienced abuse [12; 6]. One of the key ways technology assists is by creating safe spaces where survivors can connect with others who share similar experiences. Online platforms and support groups provide a secure, anonymous environment for survivors to share their stories, seek advice, and offer mutual support, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and promote healing [12; 3]. Additionally, technology empowers survivors by helping them regain control over their lives through tools like health data and wellness tracking. These tools allow individuals to monitor their recovery, set achievable goals, and observe their progress, which can be both empowering and restorative [6; 14; 1; 10; 21; 16; 9].

My work focuses on designing technology to support help-seeking and life after abuse, emphasizing how these tools can maintain survivors' independence and provide safe spaces for recovery. By enhancing technology's role in rebuilding lives and fostering autonomy, my research aims to empower survivors

throughout their journey. In conclusion, technology plays a vital role in every stage of a survivor’s journey—raising awareness, supporting recovery, and aiding in the transition to life after abuse by providing essential tools for independence and healing.

Short Biography

Nimra is currently pursuing a Fast Track PhD under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Elaine May Huang at the People and Computing Lab. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Informatics from the University of Zurich, where her thesis, "Designing Technology for People Affected by Forced Marriage," was honored with the UZH Impact Award in 2022. This work, which has been featured in the OEC magazine, highlights her dedication to addressing critical social issues through technology.

In March 2023, Nimra received funding from the DIZH for her project, "Supporting People Affected by Forced Marriage through Digital Transformation." Later that year, she joined the DSI through its PhD Excellence Program. For the past four years, she has also been collaborating with the Swiss Federal Department against Forced Marriages, contributing to meaningful advancements in this critical area.

Nimra’s research interests lie at the intersection of Feminist HCI and Social Justice, with a focus on designing and developing digital interventions for vulnerable and marginalized communities. Her current work addresses domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and forced marriages, with an emphasis on exploring how technology can raise awareness, support self-help, and create safe spaces for affected women. Utilizing trauma-informed and participatory design approaches, Nimra’s methods empower participants by giving them a sense of agency and ownership in the technologies that emerge from her projects.

Relevant Keywords: Forced Marriages, Abuse, Feminist HCI, Women’s Well-Being, Recovery

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