

**Research on domestic violence and abuse with racially  
minoritised and seldom heard groups:  
Utilising life history interviews with victims/survivors within  
multi-method qualitative studies**

SUNDARI ANITHA

PROFESSOR OF GENDER, VIOLENCE AND WORK

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN



UNIVERSITY OF  
LINCOLN



# Two studies, diverse contexts

- ▶ On transnational marriage abandonment in India;
  - ▶ A hitherto hidden problem, invisible victims;
  - ▶ Gap in our knowledge and therefore possible responses;
  - ▶ Me positioned as an outsider (having got my ILR and then British citizenship) but insider as an Indian, language, cultural commonality;
  - ▶ Research led by me with Co-I Prof Roy from JNU, India + researchers in field (incl practitioners).
- ▶ On Polish women's experiences of domestic violence in the UK;
  - ▶ A hidden problem, less visible victims;
  - ▶ Gap in our knowledge and therefore possible responses;
  - ▶ Me: an outsider to that community but knowledge and experience of working with 'by and for' DVA orgs BUT
  - ▶ Crucially, research conducted by a Polish academic Dr Iwona Zielinska – Marie Curie Fellowship, supervised by Prof Anitha, Prof Ros Kane (UoL) and Dr Michael Rasell (Uni. of Innsbruck) .



# Transnational marriage abandonment

- ▶ Frontline domestic violence practitioners, turning away women in need with NRPF;
- ▶ Initial research on NRPF for Saheli (Manchester) – eventually led to change in provisions for women on spouse visa suffering domestic violence;
- ▶ Further anecdotal reports of ‘missing’ / ‘disappeared’ women from practitioners and some calls for help from overseas;
- ▶ Led to this research – to understand what was happening AND to do something about it.



# DVA in Poland and in the Polish diaspora in the UK

- ▶ DVA in Poland: 1 in 3 women (Gruszczyńska 2007) to 1 in 6 (Nowakowska and Jablonska 2002);
- ▶ Polish people hidden within the UK census category of 'White other' – so hard to uncover prevalence data from crime surveys;
- ▶ But statistics from a 10-year overview of femicide between 2009-2018;
  - 81% of the 1419 homicide victims were UK-born, 19% born outside the UK (vs 13% non-UK born in 2011 census) – so migrant women at higher risk of homicide;
  - Polish-born victims second in number to UK-born and 1.7% (24 victims) of all victims; higher than their 1.2% proportion of UK population over this decade.
  - See Femicide census: [Femicide-Census-10-year-report.pdf \(femicidecensus.org\)](https://www.femicidecensus.org/femicide-census-10-year-report.pdf)
- ▶ Low referrals of Polish women experiencing DVA to UK services
- ▶ Lack of research DVA among Polish people living in the UK



# Background: Selecting the topic and first steps

- ▶ In both cases initial knowledge of the problem through a combination of practice and academic investigation;
- ▶ First steps were establishing the extent of our gap in knowledge and understanding;
- ▶ Early collaboration with practitioners to understand their perspectives and the questions they had;
- ▶ Before the bid writing stage, a period of collaboration to tap into their needs and the possibilities arising from the research – not always an easy process.



# Life histories as a feminist method: a collaborative process

- ▶ Life history interviews: giving voice to women and breaking the silence;
- ▶ Co-construction of narratives in all interviews - interviewers ask questions and interviewees tell their stories;
- ▶ Life story not an already constructed narrative, ready to be produced – selective recall of our remembered selves subject to present context;
- ▶ That context not only the purpose of the interview, perceptions about the interviewer (standpoint, skill, ethics) but can also be the interviewer's own biography, positionality and politics.



# Analysis and interpretation

- ▶ Content analysis of narratives – what story is told (the life events); the experiences and meanings; individual women's stories within their particular contexts; but also common themes across accounts;
- ▶ Narrative analysis - the telling of the account, to *us* – how that life is narrated and the social relationship of the interview;
- ▶ And the depth of the data: understanding/hearing.





# Nestled within a broader qualitative study

- ▶ Triangulation of data and methodological rigour – in both cases, practitioner perspectives and in TMA, court documents;
- ▶ As a first study, there was little to stand on, so sample was till data saturation – which in the case of TMA was 57 life history interviews (+ 21 practitioners); for Polish women was 28 (+ 40 practitioners incl. pilot project);
- ▶ Also enabled us to build links with practitioners for the afterlife of the research.



## TMA RESEARCH

### Domestic violence: coercive control, physical and sexual violence

- ▶ *He never stayed at home – he was out most nights, and I thought, maybe he was with someone else. I refused to have any relations with him, but his parents wanted a grandchild. He complained to his mother, "It seems that this girl does not like me. She does not even allow me to touch her!" When my mother-in-law talked to me about it, I told her, "We haven't even spoken to each other properly yet. How can we have any relations with each other?" After that, one night when I came home from work, my mother-in-law gave me food and milk to drink and I fell asleep. I don't know what happened, what was in it, but when I got up in the morning, I found bite marks on my shoulders, breast, neck, thighs and stomach. I had pain all over my body and in my stomach. I called out but no one was home. When I called up my husband, he told me that he had (sexual) relations with me (Chandni, 35).*



# TMA RESEARCH

## Sexual violence by other in-laws

- ▶ Also in the context of disinterest by husband, women seen to have lost the protection derived from men's claims to exclusive sexual access to their wives;
- ▶ Just under a quarter (13 women) disclosed sexual harassment/violence by male in-laws – primarily father-in-law and in a few cases, brother-in-law.
- ▶ *My father-in-law began coming to the room where I used to sleep with my son to watch me sleeping. When he began to touch me, I used to get up and get angry. Once, I even slapped him. When I told my husband about it he did not believe me. Instead, he threatened me. Then I told my mother-in-law, and she said, "Are you going to disgrace your god-like father-in-law?"*



# TMA RESEARCH

## The abandonment

- ▶ *He often used to hit me. He would tell me that he had much better girls to choose from. After three years like this, we came to India for a holiday. ... After two to three days, he left me at my mother's place. We had return tickets - we were planning to go back together after two months. But he phoned me and said he was returning to the UK that very night and I should come back later. I was surprised, but I thought, he must have got some new project at work. We all went to the airport to see him off and he left. Later on, he suggested that I stay on to attend English classes so I could pass some exams that I was planning to take in the UK, so I extended my return ticket. It was only later that I realised that he was waiting for my visa to expire. As soon as the deadline passed, he called to say he was going to divorce me (Hira, 32).*



# Women's experiences following abandonment

- ▶ The abandoned woman – stigma and loss of status in a context where marriage primary marker of woman's identity;
- ▶ Ex-parte divorce, intentional deprivation of rights incl financial settlement upon divorce, maintenance, separation from children;
- ▶ Cannot apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK (because of the domestic violence) or re-enter UK;
- ▶ Financial insecurity, precarious position in natal home.



# POLISH DVA PROJECT

## Role of migration in the nature and impact of isolation and control

Perpetrators closed women's 'space for action' (Kelly 2003) through systematic and persistent strategies of humiliation, isolation, control over their everyday life. Weronika and Julia recounted the difference that migration made to their experiences:

*Separation, separation from people who care about me. I couldn't call anybody, I couldn't send them email—he was checking my phones, he was checking my email. He controlled me one hundred percent of time; I couldn't move without his knowledge. [...] I didn't have my passport because he hid it. (Joanna, 42)*

*We came to England, and it was like [...] everything was in his name, the phone contracts were in his name, when I started work, I gave them his e-mail address, because [he said] "what do you need an e-mail for?" And you don't really pay attention to such things, do you? [...] When I wanted to go out with my friends, just you know, the Polish lady who worked with us invited me to her place and wanted to take me to an English pub, to see what it was like. So, he gave her this lecture that I can go to her place but we absolutely can't go to the pub. (Julia, 40)*



# POLISH DVA PROJECT

## Socio-cultural and religious factors: shame, stigma, gendered conceptions of family relations

Dominant constructions about gender and family in Poland worked to constrain women's disclosures about the violence and abuse they were suffering.

- ▶ *In Poland it's a taboo subject, and there is not much from church side that they can support you; they teach you to forgive and to love, even if it's a situation like that. [...] It's like, no, he's your partner, he's your husband but, you know, it's better together. How can you grow your children without him? [...] I was the black sheep because I was trying to run away from a 'perfect marriage', or whatever you can call this. [...] It was so many times when I was covered in bruises, blood, and I ran away to the church just to sit in the bench and just pray by myself; there was no reaction from, from people who were there. (Joanna , 42)*
- ▶ *It leaves a terrible stigma on women like me. [...] Because In Poland, people do not speak, and I do not hear about such things. I can't imagine going to Poland and telling people, for example [...] I doubt that people there would understand, because they look at you like it's your fault [that he was violent] (Mirka, 35)*



# POLISH DVA PROJECT

## Fear of the services as a barrier to help-seeking: police and social services

Fear of formal services constituted a significant barrier to help-seeking reported by women and practitioners. Fear of UK social services featured very heavily across the data.

- ▶ *There are non-stop threads like that - that Polish children are great and they [social services] get some money for it! And that if you're depressed, God forbid you talk anywhere about [it], that you're in treatment, because they'll take your child away too! I've always wondered where this comes from, this idea that social services take children away? Especially Polish children! That these Polish children are so valuable that they are simply taken like gold. [...] And then such a victim of domestic violence wants to seek help, but they won't contact social services, because they're terrified, because social services like the devil, they're taking the children, aren't they?" (Laura, 40)*

Perpetrators also reinforced these fears to prevent disclosure and help-seeking.

- ▶ *That's how I was intimidated by him, as soon as I'd speak out, say anything [...] all the time he brought this up: 'What are you going to do with the children? [...] They'll take your children away from you!' and I'd say 'On what grounds'? 'Because you're a bad mother. I am going to report you.' (Aniela, 39)*



# Research outputs are just the start...

- ▶ Drew upon the collaboration with practitioners to draft recommendations of TMA research;
- ▶ Launch organised by Southall Black Sisters at HoC for TMA research due to policy implications – so stimulated policy debates;
- ▶ For Polish DVA project, got funding to work with a ‘by and for’ Polish DVA service to launch report and a day of learning – widely attended from across the UK and some speakers + practitioners from Poland;
- ▶ Training events for practitioners from both projects;
- ▶ And a lot of ongoing work – for TMA, it has been a recent success story but more to be done;
- ▶ For Polish DVA project, just starting... being taken up by various other organisations to organise campaigns targeting the Eastern European community in Lincolnshire etc;
- ▶ Need to let go of research to some extent... but keep a watchful eye, step in where needed!



# Conclusion

- ▶ 'Seldom heard' groups are not 'hard to reach' – we are sometimes hard at hearing their stories, concerns, needs;
- ▶ Important to work with non-academic organisations and those working on the ground on issues affecting them;
- ▶ Choice of methods important – life history methods enabled rich deep data and restores voice and recognition to those who have not been heard so far;
- ▶ Where working with a different community, important not to take over but to collaborate – solidarity and knowledge exchange;
- ▶ Also important to enable ownership of research and cause to achieve any lasting impact.



## Further resources from TMA research:

- ▶ BBC programme on youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6OmhfOgj\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6OmhfOgj_4)
- ▶ Anitha, S. (2020) Understanding economic abuse through an intersectional lens: Financial abuse, control and exploitation of South Asian women's productive and reproductive labour. *Violence Against Women*.
- ▶ Anitha, S. and Roy, A. and Yalamarty, H. (2018) Gender, migration and exclusionary citizenship regimes: Conceptualising transnational abandonment of wives as a form of violence against women. *Violence Against Women* 24(7):747-774.
- ▶ Anitha, S., Yalamarty, H. and Roy, Y. (2018) Changing nature and emerging patterns of domestic violence in global contexts: Dowry abuse and the transnational abandonment of wives in India, *Women's Studies International Forum* 69: 67-75.
- ▶ Anitha, S., Roy, A. and Yalamarty, H. (2017) *Abuse, violence and abandonment in transnational marriages: issues for policy and practice in the UK*. *Safe: The Domestic Abuse Quarterly* 60:23-26.
- ▶ A series of three articles in *Family Law Journal*, 2016, no. 46 (issues 10-12).
- ▶ Anitha, S., Roy, A. and Yalamarty, H. (2016) Disposable women: abuse, violence and abandonment in transnational marriages: issues for policy and practice in the UK and India. Project Report. British Academy. Available at: <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/20091/>

## ▶ Resources from Polish DVA research:

- ▶ Full report and summary: <https://dvsupport.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/>