# “A kind of warm agony that like, just sits there”: The Impact of Everyday Violence on Women

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# RESEARCH SUMMARY

**Aims:** The research aimed to explore how everyday violence impacts women and critique discourses surrounding violence against women and girls.

**Background:** A wealth of research explores the impact of violence against women and girls, but little examines the impact of everyday violence, despite its pervasiveness. Existing research either explores actioned violence, harassment or stalking. Moreover, the majority of research does not utilise a social justice framework or incorporate the voices of those who have suffered the harm.

**Methodology:** An ontological critical realist and feminist relational epistemological stance underpinned this research. I adopted an intersectional feminist and survivor framework, reflexivity was important and women's voices are centred. Consultation was sought from a domestic violence refuge. I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, supplemented by the use of visual creative methods with women providing photographs. Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis produced discursive themes and 'I poems' (Thompson et al., 2018).

**Findings:** Five discursive themes highlight the pervasive and universal experience of everyday violence and how violence against women and girls is normalised and accepted in UK discourse. Themes emphasise the devastating impact on women's mental health and sense of self. Additionally, the themes indicate the joy, pain and felt community that accompanies the 'womanhood' experience.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight several implications for clinical practice and policy for women. Aligning with the discursive themes, the research indicates the importance of gender-transformative care, critically challenging existing gender norms and societal discourses around violence. Everyday violence has a significant impact on women's mental health and sense of self. In particular, womanhood was an important theme, highlighting the need for peer support and community care in services supporting women. In addition, the convergence of intersectionality and identity is highlighted as an area to explore in future research, particularly for queer people and the Global Majority.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Chapter Overview

This chapter includes reflexivity, provides the rationale for the present study by broadly highlighting the research around violence against women and girls (VAWG), and emphasising the importance of exploring the impact of everyday violence against women and girls (EVAWG) by addressing the gaps in knowledge from current literature. Firstly, I discuss the construction of women's distress within a patriarchal society and the construction of gender, before presenting a broad context of VAWG and discussing women's experiences of EVAWG. Finally, I explore current discourses of VAWG present in UK society and then consider the role of shame in women's experiences of violence. A systematic narrative synthesis of the current literature explored how shame and help-seeking intersect when women have experienced violence follows. Finally, I present the rationale for the study, summarising the need for an exploration of EVAWG and a critique of UK discourses around VAWG to understand how this may affect women.

## Reflections on Why I Chose this Research Topic

"They tell me
I'm being paranoid
but I am convinced
a woman gave me life
and men
have been trying
to kill me
ever since"

Poem by Lauren Eden (2018).

I have always had this pull, this tug to be among women, a shared unity of warmth and hardship, of joy and pain, a feeling of community and feeling grateful to be part of it, and of rage, anger, and melancholy at the inexplicable destruction that women face. I find women to be spectacular, and despite the fury and the agony of womanhood, the warmth, the softness and the relational delight I feel make them a gang whom I would always choose. I have thought about this and the draw is more than the shared journey of being a woman myself. I lost my mother when I was eight years old, and this loss shaped part of my identity, closed parts of me up and thrust me into a difficult, male-dominated household. This loss opened holes within me; there was a longing for strong female role models and I was witness to various forms of violence in these formative years. I was lucky enough to have strong women insert themselves into my life, open me back up and shroud me in teachings of feminism, of intersectionality, and encourage me to take up space.

My journey into womanhood was not linear; I would argue whose is? My journey was paved with many feelings of confusion and questions. Should I conform? Try to suppress that feeling of *'being paranoid'* to protect myself? Yet, I have always struggled with authority. The authority of the patriarchy made me want to rebel, to run towards the danger and dismantle that feeling of vulnerability.

"A desperate woman
is a dangerous woman.
all teeth. all bite.
a wolf in pearls"
Poem by Lauren Eden (2016).

This dissonance posed a risk; I felt confined and wanted to rebel, however, by doing so I was making myself vulnerable to the threat of violence. Both compliance and rebellion felt like a cage,

I was reacting to the social norms of expectation either in my submission or in my defiance rather than thinking about my own expectations and values. I believe this feeling, coupled with the framework of intersectional feminism (Sabik et al., 2021) created a space where I felt able to reflect. I could channel that feeling of rage into my work and ideas for my research. Research for me always has to be more than doing research because it is an expected part of a university programme; I need to feel it, and my hope for this research I am conducting is to have tangible meaning. This was part of my hopes for this research; I knew it would be enduring and painful at times, it would evoke strong feelings in me and remind me of my own difficult experiences. Nevertheless, I wanted to ensure it celebrated women, and at the forefront, to revel in the strength that women hold by having to exist within a world that tries to force them into submission; by responding to ideals posed upon them by the gender binary, heteronormative and patriarchal discourses.

I want to note here that gender is a fluid spectrum, and I am aware that I often speak about gender in binary terms throughout this thesis. Violence is gendered, and there is violence enacted across the gender spectrum, not just towards women but towards men, non-binary people and trans people too (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020; Rogers, 2021). I do not wish to exclude people's experiences or for people to feel isolated, and future research is necessary to explore the impact of different forms of violence across the gender spectrum. However, for context, this piece of research explicitly focuses on the experience of women and their experiences of male violence, in particular, their knowledge of everyday violence, hence the binary distinctions of gender.

I am aware of my positionality and that I hold personal interest in the subject area. I have my own experiences of violence across the spectrum, from a vast account of EVAWG, to witnessing and experiencing actioned violence. I have embedded reflexivity throughout this thesis to reflect upon the research process and for transparency, so that the reader can see displayed my own thoughts, reflections and feelings. There are various arguments when considering the role of the personal in research, however I advocate for the importance of recognising personal investment to help generate rich insights into complex phenomena that hold a living experience lens (Budgeon, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2022).

Throughout this research, I have included poetry, lyrics and prose that inspired me during the research process. Classism in academia is an institutional and systemic problem; social class is intertwined with rules like etiquette that implement a 'secret code', which upholds barriers to those who are not part of the upper classes (Durante & Fiske, 2017). However, it is also important to recognise that classism functions as a deliberate practice; it serves to maintain privilege by restricting access to those with less privilege. It upholds visible barriers of exclusion via the language and research it chooses to use, by maintaining feelings of otherness and signalling to certain people that they are not welcome or do not fit the mould of academia (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). It is important to acknowledge that I hold privilege within my skin colour as a white woman and that my experience would likely differ from a person from the Global Majority, particularly in the intersection of race and class. Reflecting on my experiences of classism, I was working-class growing up, and although I now position myself as middle-class, I still sometimes experience that feeling of exclusion. Therefore, my hope for introducing different texts within this research is that it can promote a sense of inclusivity whilst rebelling against exclusionary structures.

Jacqueline Rose (2021, p. 32) stated, “Fictional writing plays a central role. It is for me one of the chief means through which the experience of violence can be told in ways that defy both the discourse of politicians and the defences of thought”. This statement resonated with me; I found utilising different texts to be a helpful way to document my process and highlight how inspiration for research can be emotionally driven and augment academic texts and empiricism. Furthermore, it was important to me that this research is accessible to the women who participated. Thus, having a variety of academic and non-academic literature throughout, painted a story more accessible to the many and not just the few.

## (In)sanity and sexism: The Construction of Women’s Distress through the Lens of the Patriarchy

Broadly, patriarchy has been defined as “women’s oppression through male domination”, however this does not account for the many instruments that uphold the patriarchy (Gupta et al., 2023). Patriarchy is a social system made up of political, cultural and economic structures, in which its practices, values and beliefs position men with disproportionate power and privilege. Patriarchy privileges masculinity, the oppression and exploitation of women and other marginalised groups, and is structured around gender inequality (Evteeva et al., 2024; hooks[1], 2004; Walby, 1989). Moreover, is it also argued that the patriarchal system harms men too by enforcing rigid gender roles that favour emotional suppression and limit individual identity, in which hooks (2004)

[1] bell hooks intentionally did not capitalise her name. Her stylistic choice was an attempt to decentre herself, move away from hierarchy and ego and shift focus toward her work on race, feminism, and class. I have honoured bell hook’s preferred grammatical stylising in this thesis and any future references to her, including references and in the reference list, will use lowercase spelling.

describes patriarchy as the "single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that patriarchy is not a singular form of domination, but a multi-faceted system of power. Contemporary research conceptualises patriarchy as a social system of power that operates via intersecting political, cultural and economic structures that shapes people's realities through mechanisms of both privilege and oppression (Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Ferry, 2025; Tabassum & Nayak, 2024; Williams, 2025). Thus, understanding patriarchy as a socially-embedded and historical system of inequality highlights the need to interrogate patriarchy in relation to intersecting structures of power and how it can produce negative outcomes for all genders that do not fit within prescribed rigid gender roles (Setyorini et al., 2024).

The patriarchal demands present in society can have a significant impact on women's mental health (MH), and there are many different arguments for whether some MH difficulties are a 'disorder' or whether they are a reasonable response to these unjust demands (Ahsan, 2022; Busfield, 1996; Silverio, 2021). Whilst sexism in the history of MH difficulties is a contentious subject, we can witness the pathologisation of women throughout the years (Cohen & Hartmann, 2021; Ussher, 2013). There are arguments that women's experiences of trauma are misconstrued through the lens of the patriarchy and that sexism covertly operates in MH diagnosis (Borgogna & Aita, 2020; Byrant-Davis, 2023; Homan, 2024; Klonoff et al., 2000). For instance, thinking about the gendered nature of "emotionally unstable personality disorder" (EUPD), could we argue that this is a modern-day label for hysteria?

The gendered nature of EUPD is not a new phenomenon; conceptualising women's experiences as defective or 'hysterical' can be historically traced (Tasca et al., 2012). Research highlights that those who receive an EUPD diagnosis may perceive this negatively due to stigma and harmful attitudes and may often experience negative self-concept, which can have a detrimental impact on how they view themselves ('Who am I?') and how they perceive the world ('Where do I belong?') (Motala & Price, 2024; Oyserman et al., 2012). Receiving this diagnostic label of EUPD can threaten a person's self-concept and induce feelings of alienation, otherness and invalidation of self (Motala & Price, 2024; O'Connor et al., 2018). Thus, one can ask what is the utility of a diagnosis that induces these negative appraisals in people? For instance, a typical experience participants flagged was that they felt coerced into accepting a conceptualisation of their difficulties that did not feel fitting for them (Motala & Price, 2024). The label of EUPD characterised them with a disorder of personality rather than acknowledge that their reactions may be a comprehensible response to their experiences of interpersonal trauma or to the world they were living in (Motala & price, 2024).

Regarding experiences of violence and abuse, research highlights that individuals who have experienced violence are more likely to receive a diagnosis of EUPD or another personality disorder label (Aves, 2021; Cloitre, 2020; Lomani et al., 2022). By labelling a person with a 'disorder' rather than acknowledging their trauma, may blame them for their distress and disregard their experience, which can act as a barrier to people accessing vital trauma-specific pathways (Lomani et al., 2022; Oram et al., 2022). Silencing an individual's experience or pathologising women's reactions to violence or oppression by labelling their responses or their 'personality' as

disordered not only perpetuates unhelpful narratives around violence but may also serve to re-traumatise individuals (Lomani et al., 2022; Oram et al., 2022).

Whilst one longitudinal study indicated that 78% of people with an EUPD diagnosis had a period of remission (Zanari et al., 2012), it is important to note that 'recovery' was strongly predicted by social factors, such as education, their vocation, or their relationship status (Winsper, 2021). This may indicate that an individual's access, for example, to community, education, wealth, and a sense of purpose, may bolster MH, which suggests the problem that people are experiencing could be located within the system and broader social context. Therefore, using labels like EUPD may disregard the socio-political context, and the pervasive patriarchal demands present in society may contribute to the medicalisation and individualistic diagnosis of women's MH difficulties (Gupta et al., 2023; Oram et al., 2022).

Several theories substantiate how the systemic oppression of women in society may contribute to the medicalisation of distress. For instance, early empirical research demonstrates how unequal social positioning can negatively affect MH. The Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that women's perception of their self is influenced by the culture and people around them. Objectification can increase feelings of shame, anxiety, depression, rumination and a reduced awareness of internal bodily states in women (Calogero, 2004; Grabe et al., 2007), as well as meta-dehumanisation, which means women feel as though they have been dehumanised by those doing the objectifying (Chevallereau et al., 2021; Kronfeldner, 2020). Moreover, being objectified can also lead women to self-objectify and endorse the impacts of dehumanisation in that they may perceive themselves as feeling less human or having fewer social qualities (Pecini

et al., 2023). Whereas, the Role Strain theory indicates that not being able to meet expectations of a role, such as gender roles, generates feelings of stress and is detrimental to good MH (Sachs-Ericsson & Ciarlo, 2000; Pugliesi, 1992; Weissman & Klerman, 1977). More recently, the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) supports these indications that patriarchal norms may be contributing to women's supposedly poorer MH (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). The PTMF asks questions, 'What has happened to you?', 'How did it affect you?', 'What sense did you make of it?', and 'What did you have to do to survive?'. The PTMF does not locate distress within the individual; rather, it considers the broader structural and systemic context around them and how it privileges or oppresses individuals (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Thus, the PTMF suggests that women's experiences of battling gender inequality can contribute to poorer MH outcomes (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Some research suggests that gender may not be as influential as a determinant for poorer MH as other research suggests. Smith et al. (2016) argues that men's MH is less researched and that research has traditionally focused on gender differences rather than within-gender differences. Thus, more research may be needed to ascertain whether there are significant gender differences at play regarding poorer MH. The Social Stress theory (Dressler et al., 2005) proposes that social factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality influence the development of poorer MH due to increased exposure to stressors, including discrimination, unemployment, less social support and fewer resources or coping strategies to manage stress. However, Meyer et al. (2008) conducted research exploring the association between social stress theory and gender, concluding that whilst race/ethnicity and sexual orientation did negatively

influence the development of stressors, especially prejudice-related stressors, gender was not a factor that influenced this.

The Gender Similarities hypothesis posits that men and women are mostly similar, for instance, regarding their emotions, personality traits, stress levels or intelligence, with evidence from meta-analysis supporting this statement (Hyde, 2005). However, this hypothesis fails to take into account context, whereas, The Social Role theory (Eagly, 1987) highlights how women and men are positioned into specific social structures and that gender roles have a powerful effect on how individuals are perceived and how they act (Eagly et al., 2012). Additionally, empirical evidence highlights that a person's intersectional identity, with the additional layers of discrimination, otherness and oppression further exacerbates poor MH (Gopalkrishan, 2018; Kirkbride et al., 2024). This research, conducted across a variety of geographical locations, cultures and different societies, includes support for evidence highlighting that patriarchal norms and gender inequality likely negatively impact women's quality of life and poorer MH (Gopalkrishan, 2018; Kirkbride et al., 2024; Yu, 2018).

From this discussion, one may suggest that gender inequality, sexism and patriarchal norms may contribute to the oppression of women and maintain women's elevated levels of 'madness' (Busfield, 1988; Cohen & Hartmann, 2021; Shai et al., 2021; Silverio, 2021; Ussher, 2013). Both historical and contemporary research shows support this statement, highlighting that there is a positive correlation between an experience of gender discrimination, harassment or sexism and poorer MH, implying that the theoretical perspectives used to classify MH diagnosis mirror women's role and position in society (Borgogna & Aita, 2020; Klonoff et al., 2000; Vigod &

Rochon, 2020; Voss & Gannon, 1978). For example, numerous replicated research indicates that what a 'healthy male' looks like informs the diagnostic criterion for a clinically healthy adult, and individuals deviating from or opposing social norms inform much of the criteria for MH diagnosis (Broverman et al., 1970; Sherman, 1980; Wirth & Bodenhausen, 2009; Slade & Longden, 2015). This indicates that much of what meets criteria for actual MH diagnosis or poor MH is informed by control, power and inequity. This may also indicate that power imbalances and sociocultural challenges, like gender inequality, sexist and patriarchal norms, and marginalisation, may make women feel distressed and disempowered (Allen, 2022; Hertzberg, 2010). Interestingly, research shows that when women counter patriarchal norms, they are likely to experience increased wellbeing, feel more empowered and experience greater psychological empowerment (Rawat, 2014). Therefore, this may imply that MH difficulties have been constructed from existing patriarchal norms and power relations present in society to serve as a form of social control of women (Busfield, 2008; Gupta et al., 2023; Tinner & Curbelo, 2024).

It is important to note that whilst this discussion has centred on a critique of psychiatric diagnosis and how patriarchal norms formulate and affect women's MH, the way clinical psychology as a discipline constructs MH difficulties should also be discussed and deconstructed. Contemporary clinical psychology has attempted to move towards becoming a more holistic discipline that accounts for broader systemic context and socio-cultural-political determinants of poor MH (Bostock et al., 2023; Kirkbride et al., 2024; Weir, 2023), and guidelines from the British Psychological Society (BPS) and Health Care Professionals Council (HCPC) state that clinical psychologists should explore social context and intersectionality (Wood & Patel, 2017; HCPC, 2015). However, clinical psychology still propagates and benefits from the medicalisation of MH

difficulties and is complicit in psychiatric diagnosis. Psychological services are shaped around psychiatric diagnosis and can serve as a barrier to individuals accessing care; it explains distress in a pathologising manner, such as 'thinking errors' rather than attempting to explore what is behind these 'thinking errors' or conceptualising understandable worry or sadness as anxiety or depression (Boyle, 2011; Stein et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2023). Moreover, clinical psychology as a discipline often focuses on pathologising people rather than focusing on systemic strain and the damaging social structures prevalent in UK society (Boyle, 2011; Read & Dillon, 2013; Thomas et al., 2018).

This discussion highlights how a feminist framework has informed this discussion of distress and the universal phenomenon of VAWG, grounded in the principles of Feminist Relational (E)pistemology (Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2010; Willet & Etowa, 2023). To limit potential reductionism (Busfield, 2001), I highlight how I have not discussed various psychological and sociological understandings of MH difficulties. This discussion critiques positivist enquiry and aligns with the epistemological position of the research, highlighting how the 'macrosphere' of societal forces and continued power imbalances in MH research, diagnosis and intervention contribute to impact people's wellbeing negatively (Ballou et al., 2002; Grundy et al., 2017). This is seen in research that explored the limitations of clinical psychologists who are hindered by existing systems and structures in their attempt for social justice and transformative care (Thompson et al., 2022). Therefore, one can see how, from a feminist perspective, femininity and 'madness' have long been affiliated, likely arising from patriarchal norms and gender inequality in UK society (Meyer et al., 2011; Gupta et al., 2023).

## The Construction of Gender

We must consider the construction of gender identities in our society; it allows us to explore the operation of perceived gender differences as a social process rather than assuming it as a biological fact (Gurieva et al., 2022) and pertains to the epistemological positioning of the research. Moreover, if we do not critically explore gender as a social construction the possible constraint that perceived gender norms can impose on women's lives, and power, is huge. For instance, Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory indicates that gender is a process: an act of 'doing', prescribed to individuals from the beginning of their social existence, they state:

> "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of natural sort of being".

Butler (1990, 2004) indicates that dominant norms of heteronormativity and masculinity inform this social process of constructing gender identities, specifically regarding the female self, a concept supported by both Bartky (1990) and Butler (1976). Bartky (1990) refers to the sex-role stereotype, which considers women as "childlike" and "less capable of substantial cultural accomplishment" (p. 23). Both Butler (1990) and Bartky (1990) highlight the consequences of such stereotypes; women are dehumanised and psychologically oppressed. This means that it becomes harder to consider individual needs and "achieve an authentic choice of self" (Bartky, 1990, p. 24), leaving women disadvantaged and possibly doubting the validity of their own needs due to both the explicit and subliminal societal discourses that imply women are inferior. Similarly, Butler (1976) indicates that women conform to this Western feminine ideal to establish a sense of

fragility to protect themselves. Butler (1976) outlined adjectives that are associated with womanhood, such as “affectionate”, “childlike”, “flatterable”, “gentle”, “soft-spoken”, “understanding” and yielding” and in contrast, a woman is not “aggressive”, “assertive”, “competitive”, “dominant”, “independent”, “self-reliant” or “strong”, to name a few. Interestingly, this mirrors a current trend on social media that compares the adjectives that come up when you google “manly”, such as “courageous”, “daring” or “determined” compared to “womanly”, where the adjectives are, for example, “voluptuous”, “shapely” or “curvy” (Feminist, 2024). There are fifty years between this trend and Butler’s (1976) critique of gender and language, yet this indicates the importance of exploring research that looks at the impact of gendered language and discrimination.

Butler (2024) has since developed their original theory; they continue to contest the anti-gender ideology movement that treats gender as an immutable monolith, arguing that gender has become a powerful “phantasm”. Butler (2024) considers how gender is a psycho-social phenomenon that has become socially organised as an existential threat that ignites fear and anxiety within the public consciousness. They acknowledge how people in positions of authority abuse their power to manipulate the status quo and fuel reactionary politics globally. Gender identity poses a threat against traditional ideas of nationhood, where fears of replacement, in particular a loss of patriarchal power, the sanctity of heteronormative families, white supremacy, and national purity are projected. Butler (2024) reflects upon how this fear of gender is a global issue that is used to maintain the patriarchal system, they challenge and reject white liberal feminism and its links to a neoliberalist system that causes harm globally, and they instead invite us to think about the ways that sex and gender are socially constructed. Thus, from Butler’s discussion, we can bear witness

to how the weaponization of gender has played a significant role in maintaining a patriarchal system that causes harm not just to women but to people globally.

As stated previously, for this research, gender is presented predominately in gender binaries of women and men, but this does not seek to minimise the spectrum of gender and all of the gender identities that exist within and outside these binaries. Moreover, this also emphasises the dangers of conforming to a view that views the gender binary as the norm, as the gender stereotypes that prevail within societies may maintain discrimination and gender inequality, subsequently contributing to the power struggles that women face (Saguy et al., 2021). The ubiquity of gender is salient in our society and this salience informs various behaviours, powers and values that society assigns to men and women (Epslen & Jolly, 2006). We see it played out structurally in, for example, institutions like schools, universities, and work. Within these systems, people reproduce ritualised gender norms purported by societal norms, and if people deviate from these norms in a way that subjugates the gender binary, then others perceive this as abnormal (Butler, 1990, 2024; Jenkins & Finneman, 2018). Precisely because stereotypes and ascribed gendered roles pathologise non-binary and trans people, and men and women who do not conform to gender stereotypes, this consequently maintains gender inequalities and the disempowerment and oppression that women can face (Stewart, 2021).

Cuddy et al. (2015) highlighted that gender norms are not the same worldwide, men were usually regarded as the dominant gender and, therefore, stereotypically masculine traits were more culturally valued or depicted as unifying with maleness. This notion that women are submissive to men regarding privilege and power (Berkowitz et al., 2010) is supported by multiple meta-analyses

conducted across various cultures, ages and generations (Batz-Barbarich et al., 2018; Pessin & Arpino, 2018; Zell et al., 2015). This emphasises that the traditional masculine power structure that informs our perceived notions of how we 'do' our gender reflects how society typically presents the gender binary, by that of subordinate women and dominant men (Connell, 1987). Thus, likely exacerbating the disempowerment that women can experience in a social world (Brickell & Chant, 2010).

Empirical evidence substantiates the hypothesis that women experience distress and disempowerment from the pressure of conforming to a socially prescribed gender roles, and the associated power struggles of maintaining this, and also highlights that women who flout these gender stereotypes are more vulnerable to being given a MH diagnosis (Blum et al., 2017; Chesler, 2005). This suggests how the power struggles women face can filter into their sense of self, coercing women into feeling as if they are not powerful and should therefore experience shame and oppression from not conforming to their gender role (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015). For instance, the theoretical role of language in the construction of what it means to be a woman can be damaging and internalised. Messages such as "she was asking for it" or "she shouldn't be dressed like that" are a more subtle way of calling a woman a "whore" or a "slut" and a way to control female sexuality by placing a man's entitlement to a woman's body over her agency and sexuality (Dunne, 2022; Kristeva, 1979; Morton, 2021; Stollznow, 2024). This is highly problematic as it maintains the status quo that eroticises women's sexual desire or agency as subordination, and perpetuates the internalisation of women blaming themselves for sexual violence and the rhetoric of victim-blaming present in our society (Hamid, 2021; Jordan, 2022; Kitzinger, 1994). Thus, it is proposed that differences between cishet men and women are

constructions of perceived gender hierarchies in society (Brickell, 2006); if women contest these then they do not conform to 'appropriate' categories of female sexuality, desirability and subordination to the male gaze, which can evoke feelings of distress and shame (Butler, 1990; Commane, 2020; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

## Violence Against Women and the Invisible Perpetrator

> "'Til I felt his ice-cold hands
> And how I pay the price now, damn
> God damn, no what the, God damn
> Everything you did, it left me in a ruin
> And no, I didn't say a word, I guess that proves it
> I'm a woman, oh yes
> 'Cause I'm a woman"
>
> *Ice Cream Man*, song by Raye (2023).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2013) declared VAWG as a "global public health problem on epidemic proportions", yet addressing the many forms of VAWG has historically been under-represented within global health concerns. The UN (2000) millennium development goals did not include reducing VAWG until 2016, sixteen years after the goals were established (UN, 2016, 2021), and since this addition, there has been little change (Spencer et al., 2021). VAWG remains overwhelmingly pervasive globally, and estimates suggest it affects one in three women across their lifetime (WHO, 2021), with COVID-19 exacerbating this systemic issue (Hisham et al., 2021). Often remarked as the "shadow pandemic" (Fogstad et al., 2021), the rise in violence is associated with restrictions and lockdowns. Whilst this jump in abuse may not be showing up in medical records (Fogstad et al., 2021), juxtaposing data from domestic violence (DV) hotlines

(Refuge, 2021) and trends in VAWG highlight a sharp increase across the previous two years (Bourgault et al., 2021). Thus, the pandemic presented as an enabler of violence whilst also highlighting the entrenched patriarchal discrimination present within policy globally (Fogstad et al., 2021).

Recently, the UK government pledged to halve VAWG over the next decade and declared the endemic of VAWG a "national emergency" (Home Office, 2024; NPCC, 2024). A national analysis highlighted that, on average, a woman in the UK is murdered by a man every three days (ONS, 2024) and between 2018 and 2023 the number of recorded offences of VAWG increased by 37% (NPCC, 2024), whilst police calls related to DV were estimated to be made every thirty seconds (Home Office, 2024). However, it is important to note that these statistics only refer to recorded cases. Thus, the data does not refer to reported but unrecorded cases or the vast majority of unreported cases (End Violence Against Women (EVAW), 2024). The government's pledge has given some indicators of how they would like to shift policy actions, including their mission of creating 'safer streets'. To implement this, the government has suggested first steps, such as, embedding DV specialists and specialist advisors, piloting new DV protection orders, changing how we charge DV suspects, tackling sexism in schools and highlighting the danger of misogynistic influencers and the messages they relay (Topping, 2024).

Whilst these are reasonable first steps, data related to VAWG is sparse and misses out minority groups. We need more women sitting at cabinet level to discuss these issues, and a system that focuses on the issues holistically; prioritising prevention, intervention and prosecution of perpetrators (Topping, 2024). Therefore, it is difficult to see how the government intends to halve

VAWG without stating the indicators they are going to use; the EVAW Coalition (2024) suggested annual targets to decrease murders of women by men, yet it is also important that an approach is not too target-driven as this may not focus on the whole systemic problem. Moreover, since last year, VAWG has been declared a 'national threat', yet specialist VAWG organisations are often cut and receive a fraction of the funding counter-terrorism measures receive, despite them both being a 'national threat' (Topping 2024). Similarly, in 2021 the women and girls sector received only 1.8% of £4.1 billion worth of charity grants, and a third of designated ended up going to organisations that had no specific focus on women or girls (Damn et al., 2023). Thus, the government must focus on tackling the problem of VAWG on a systemic level that includes implementing measures that stop perpetrators before they cause harm, and if they cause harm, to respond with measures of harsh intolerance (Topping, 2024), as well as highlighting the importance of research like this that explores the spectrum of VAWG that may help inform future policy.

When examining VAWG, we must consider the concept of power and explore the underlying causes and effects of women's subjugation in our society. Foucault's (1998) theory of power suggests that power is an everyday phenomenon that people are socialised to participate in by observing others and joining societal discourses. Foucault (1977) used a panopticon metaphor to illustrate the relationship between social control and surveillance. However, Foucault has been critiqued as he does not explore constructed gender differences in power (Bartky, 1990; King, 2004). Sandra Bartky (1990) expands on Foucault's panopticon model to consider women's experiences; she states that in childhood, women learn that they are "subject to the evaluating eye of the male connoisseur" (p.28), in that women are more subject to policing both via the male gaze,

as well as through their own gaze, as taught by patriarchal and gender norms. Bartky (1990) expands on this by referencing Frantz Fanon's (1952) theory of psychological oppression by highlighting how women are oppressed and subject to insidious and pervasive forms of control and as a result, experience a negative impact on their sense of agency, self-esteem and internalise a feeling of inferiority by experiencing "a measure of shame added to her sense that the body she inhabits is deficient" (p.81). This can have deleterious effects on women who experience violence; they may experience a sense of powerlessness, embody shame and blame, or, as Bartky (2005) highlighted, may be subject to subtle features of coercive power and control that legal institutions and societal discourses embody to obstruct women from seeking help or justice.

### *Categories of Violence*

When conceptualising violence it is helpful to distinguish between different categories of violence. Interpersonal violence is the intentional use of power, physical or psychological force, or all options, used against another person, group or community (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). It is violence between individuals or groups and can take the form of physical, sexual, psychological or emotional harm or deprivation or neglect (Mercy et al., 2017). Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), DV and everyday violence would fall into the category of interpersonal violence. IPV is physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional harm in a sexually intimate or romantic relationship (Wessells & Kostelny, 2022). This includes sexual coercion, psychological abuse, controlling behaviours and acts of aggression. DV is similar to IPV, but the violence can occur within non-romantic or sexual relationships, for example, between a parent and child, siblings, roommates or friends (National Centre for Domestic Violence, 2025). Everyday violence refers to the perpetration of

violence that enlists victim-blaming and has become so pervasive and normalised that we are habituated to accept it as routine. Everyday violence includes verbal and psychological abuse, misogynistic and sexual harassment, and micro-aggressions against marginalised groups (Bourgois, 2004; Saleem et al., 2021; Scheper-Hughes, 1996).

Structural violence is obstruction; it causes direct harm and is rooted in inequality and embedded within economic and political structures (Galtung, 1969; Macassa et al., 2021). Cultural violence specifically relates to how any aspect of a culture, like beliefs, values, and symbols, that can be used to legitimise structural violence (Galtung, 1990). Epistemic violence is violence against knowledge and it is rooted in colonialism. It is the privileging of a dominant way of knowing and it occurs when the knowledge of marginalised groups are dismissed (Foucault, 1965; Spivak, 1988).

When considering interpersonal violence, we review the direct acts of violence and can study the impact on women who have experienced IPV, domestic violence or everyday violence (Innes & Steele, 2018; Montesanti, 2015; Romito et al., 2005). Considering structural and cultural violence, we examine about the root cause of violence and consider how power structures such as gender stereotypes, misogynistic attitudes and patriarchal norms and attitudes, continue to perpetuate and normalise violence (Montesanti, 2015; Sinha et al., 2017). Whereas, considering epistemic violence highlights the importance of adopting a framework of intersectionality (Reverter, 2022). It considers the hermeneutical injustice that women have experienced as a consequence of experiencing violence throughout history. Hermeneutical injustice is when people do not have the right words or concepts to describe to others the harm or violence they have experienced (Edlich

& Archer, 2025). For example, before there was language for marital rape, even if a partner was forced to have sex, it was not called rape as the concept itself did not exist; women may conceptualise their suffering but may tie it to societal norms, such as that is what happens in marriage (Siegel, 1995). Thus, considering epistemic violence means challenging systems of oppression that may silence or invalidate women's lived experiences, as well as considering how these different systems of oppression can compound to produce unique forms of violence (Lokot et al., 2024; Reverter, 2022). Therefore, thinking about these different categories of violence in relation to VAWG helps provide a comprehensive perspective.

### *The Psychological Context of Violence and Aggression*

When examining how violence is organised psychologically, it is important to recognise that violence is a behavioural act, yet it is also a social, relational and contextual phenomenon that is embedded within systems of power (Montesanti, 2015). Social Learning Theory posits that violence and aggression are learnt behaviours (Bandura, 1973). For example, people may internalise cultural narratives that normalise violence and patriarchal values and reproduce violent behaviours as a consequence of observing or having these behaviours modelled to them from their family dynamics, relationships with their peers or through media portrayals on television, film, books, news, radio and social media (Copp et al., 2016; Huesmann & Taylor, 2006; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2018). However, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973) has been critiqued as being too simplistic; people learn that aggression is a masculine trait, which is directed towards femininity (Copp et al., 2016; Malonda-Vidal et al.,

2021). Thus, violence is not simply a behaviour but functions within structural, cultural and epistemic power systems (Copp et al., 2016).

Psychoanalytic and attachment-based theories, like Fonagy's (2004) theory of mentalisation suggest that violent behaviour is a result of poor early attachments and failures in empathy and mentalising, as it is proposed those who cannot mentalise may be more likely to cause harm. However, this theory has been critiqued as depoliticising violence as it locates the problem of violence within the individual, rather than exploring how structures of power may perpetuate and maintain violence and inhibit the capacity for relational attunement and empathy (Burston & Frie, 2006; Layton, 2004; Sinha et al., 2017). Whereas feminist frameworks describe how violence and aggression are mechanisms of social control maintained by patriarchal ideals (Crenshaw, 1989, 2017; Hall, 2015; Hanmer, 1990; hooks, 1981; Kelly, 1988; Loza, 2022; Millett, 1970). Interpersonal violence operates along a continuum, from coercion to overt harm, and is an organising principle of gendered relations embedded within cultural narratives of patriarchal order and female blame (Kelly, 1988). Thus, a more intersectional feminist framework may ask questions regarding empathy and mentalisation, such as who has the capacity to mentalise and whose capacity is systematically eroded by environments of oppression?

Judith Herman's (1992) Trauma and Recovery Theory posits that violence is situated within our social context that favours patriarchal domination and control. She emphasises how interpersonal, structural and cultural forms of violence are an ongoing form of trauma that can occur every day for women and erode their sense of connection, identity and safety (Herman, 1992). This framework is helpful for understanding how constant acts that have become normalised, like

harassment or encroachment, can accumulate and compound into chronic everyday violations that can produce hypervigilance and negatively impact women's sense of self and self-worth (Herman, 1992; ONS, 2021).

The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides an integrative framework that describes how violence is sustained by interconnected cultural, structural and relational systems. For example, we can conceptualise EVAWG with this ecological framework. Women's Microsystem pertains to their immediate environment, their interpersonal relationships within their family or relationship dynamic, where they experience direct interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, women may experience gendered microaggressions here that can negatively impact their mental health and self-worth (Royal Pharmaceutical Society, 2025). Women's Exosytem are the settings and institutions that they exist in and it can indirectly influence them positively or negatively (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, if their peers or workplace have misogynistic or sexist attitudes then this can further maintain EVAWG, whereas if there are opportunities and support networks available then this can have a positive influence (Machisa et al., 2018; Srivastava et al., 2017). Finally, the Macrosystem is the over-arching cultural and societal structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Patriarchal norms are a fundamental driver of VAWG, along with social and cultural norms and stereotypes that normalise violence and perpetuate tropes of women as fragile beings (British Council, 2024; Javed & Chattu, 2020; Lomazzi, 2023). Thus, EVAWG is reproduced through these different structures, yet also experienced individually. An ecological framework argues against individual blame and rather acknowledges how everyday violence is maintained via multiple layers of causation of interpersonal, structural, cultural and epistemic power structures.

Understanding the psychological organisation of violence requires acknowledging how structural, interpersonal, cultural and epistemic systems intersect and that violence is a relational and systemic process that shapes women's realities (Essue et al., 2025; Lomazzi, 2023). This integrated framing aligns with the feminist relational epistemology and critical realist ontology that underpins this research, proposing that violence is a product of structural inequality, learned behaviour and relational trauma that is woven into and shapes individual worlds and society (British Council, 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crenshaw, 2017; Herman, 1992; Kelly, 1988).

### *Intimate Partner Violence*

VAWG presents in many forms, and historically, research has explored the impact of actioned violence, such as IPV, as this is a common form of VAWG (Fogstad et al., 2021). IPV, as defined previously, can have harmful physical health impacts on women, such as substance abuse, HIV, reproductive health problems (Ellsberg & Emmelin, 2014; Pallito et al., 2013), as well as significant MH impacts, including depression, complex trauma, anxiety and eating difficulties (Ellsberg & Emmelin, 2014; Ludermir et al., 2008). Data highlights that the United Kingdom (UK) does not reliably record the prevalence of IPV (Women's Aid, 2021); however, of the data presented, the most reliable suggests that approximately 1.6 million women over the age of sixteen experienced IPV within a year across the UK (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2020). Furthermore, within different contexts, cultures and settings, IPV may be an accepted facet of society (Maguele & Khuzwayo, 2019), thus help-seeking behaviour may be less familiar (Rodriguez et al., 2009). There may be multiple reasons why women do not seek help, including

stigma, fear, discrimination, shame, worries of losing their children and lack of knowledge of available services (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Prosman et al., 2014; Shaheen et al., 2020).

There is variable data regarding the most common form of VAWG; The United Nations (UN) (2020) suggest that IPV is the most prevalent form of VAWG, whereas the World Bank (2022) recognises non-partner sexual violence as one of the most common forms of VAWG. Moreover, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis highlighted that lifetime psychological violence is the most common form of IPV, and it noted that women in the community were at greater risk compared to clinical groups for experiencing a higher rate of physical, psychological and sexual violence across the past year (White et al., 2024).

***Everyday Violence***

> "Yeah, you scare me
> Does that make you feel manly?"
> […]
> "Everyday (everyday, everyday)
> I have my keys in my hand"
>
> *I'm Fine,* song by Self Esteem (2021).

There is a wealth of research exploring the impact of IPV. However, one may argue that a more insidious form of VAWG falls within the catchall of 'everyday violence', a term coined by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993). Everyday violence, as defined previously, refers to pervasive violence that individuals are habituated to accept as standard and normal (Scheper-Hughes, 1996). Specifically, for EVAWG, it can include harassment, misogynistic and sexual harassment,

stalking, catcalling, unwanted touch or staring (Kolysh, 2021). Laura Bates (2018) describes this experience and the "process of scanning the street you walk; the constant alert tension" in her book:

> "The men were overtly looking me up and down, eyes lingering on my breasts and legs, before turning back to one another, saying something I couldn't hear, and sniggering. My heartbeat quickened, the hair rose on my arms and I felt the usual emotions flood through me. Fear. Anxiety. Impotence, Anger. Frustration. Misplaced embarrassment and shame."

This excerpt from her book describes an experience of threatened violence, encroachment and harassment that so many women will have likely encountered. For example, throughout this research, I have had many conversations with different women: informal conversations with friends and my partner, in focus groups conducted with staff from Next Chapter, in thesis supervision, at university and, of course, in the interviews. One overarching similarity, no matter the type of conversation, was that every woman had at least one story, more commonly many, of these 'everyday' experiences. This mirrors the 2017 #metoo movement (me too, 2025) that exposed how commonplace sexual assault and harassment are for women, highlighting how at the root of harassment is power, and the importance of shifting societal discourses so that women can move away from the feeling of blame and shame and acknowledge the enablers of violence. The #metoo movement raised more awareness around sexual harassment; for example, people were more likely to acknowledge that they had unwanted sexual experiences and to believe their own stories (Jaffe et al., 2021). It created space for survivors to come forward, enacted policy change at state level and created progress by holding more institutions accountable (Corbett, 2023).

However, there is still work needed. Whilst some people had more awareness of their unwanted experiences, some still struggled to recognise these experiences as assault, and the prevalence of sexual assault remained unchanged (Jaffe et al., 2021). The rise in popularity of online influencers, such as Andrew Tate, who drive extreme misogyny and toxic masculinity, also continues to blame and shame women (Wescott et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to keep this conversation alive and continue to focus on shifting and changing harmful societal discourses, as well as championing policy changes to ensure progress is progressive and permanent.

There is a paucity of research exploring the impact of EVAWG. Therefore, I will explore literature focusing on the negative consequences of people who have experienced stalking and harassment and how the feeling of fear impacts them to inform how EVAWG may affect women. For instance, Tjaden (2004) suggested that the definition of VAWG should be broader to include stalking, psychological, and emotional abuse. Research highlights that people experience psychological and social consequences to their wellbeing, such as high levels of fear, anxiety around their safety, fear for the safety of others and a negative impact on their leisure and work time because of the threat of being stalked (Matos et al., 2019; Tjaden, 2004; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

Storey et al. (2023) also highlight the damaging psychological impact of stalking, including fear of death or harm, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), experiencing flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness and suicidal ideation and attempts taken to end one's life. Alongside physical health impacts, like sleep disturbances, headaches and appetite disturbances, and the practical limitations it places on a person's life, such as changing their lifestyle to avoid their stalker, increases in sick

or annual leave, moving home, wearing concealing clothes and limiting social activities or leaving their home. Moreover, Storey et al. (2023) outline how this can then impact a person's sense of self, sense of others and the world; those who had experienced stalking felt increased suspicion and mistrust towards others, a feeling of reticence towards strangers, social withdrawal, feelings of loss of agency, inner unrest and shame, and fears of starting new relationships. If we view this research through the lens of EVAWG, this experience burdens women's autonomy and sense of equality, thus likely impacting their sense of self and dignity (Bowman, 1993).

The fear-gender gap describes how women generally feel more fearful than men (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023). Women's reported fear of crime is three times higher than men's, and women are more likely to have increased fear of crime if they have had negative experiences with strangers, such as receiving unwanted attention that can then transfer into a feeling of 'stranger danger' and hyper-vigilance regarding unknown men (Scott, 2003; Stanko, 2008). Research regarding the fear-gender gap spans decades (Cockburn, 1986; Ferraro, 1996; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023; Koskela & Pain, 2000; McLean & Anderson, 2009; Snedker, 2011), with women's felt vulnerability posited to be linked to the 'shadow of sexual assault' hypothesis (Ferraro, 1996; Hirtenlehner & Farrall, 2014). This suggests that women's fear is informed by a constant threat of sexual harassment or assault, and women are more likely to perceive public spaces as more dangerous due to this threat, particularly at night (Ferraro, 1996; Valentine, 1989). Research also highlights that experiences of harassment heighten women's fear of rape and that women may be more fearful of assault from a stranger than someone familiar because of the unpredictability of harassment (Carretta, 2018; Davidson et al., 2016; Pryor & Hughes, 2013). Moreover, this has a compounding impact, harassment induces fear in women, which may then

produce negative feelings of shame, self-blame and be predictive of PTSD symptoms (Carretta, 2018). Thus, this has damaging effects on women's sense of liberty; fear is an intrusive and disempowering emotion and experiences like street harassment, objectification and encroachment, or even the threat of them occurring, are unfortunately an incontrovertible experience of womanhood that has negative emotional, psychological and physical consequences (Ahmad et al., 2020; Valentine, 1989).

### *The Patriarchy and Violence*

Historically across cultures women have been dehumanised; their bodies have been regulated or treated as objects of ownership or exchange through religious or philosophical ideas, common law legal code, lineage practices, marriage or via systems of kinship and property (Fox, 2002; Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Fox (2002) highlights how three bodies of thought, Judeo-Christian religious ideas, Greek philosophy and common law legal code, influenced Western society's treatment of women. For example, this ideological justification of patriarchy as the natural state of being was ordained by gods, supported by priests or implemented by the law, and even with the wave of liberalism that began to reject male dominance, the cultural memory of the patriarchy still existed, thus VAWG continued to prevail (Fox, 2002).

The phenomenon of VAWG is not uniquely Western or contemporary. Historical and anthropological research highlight how embedded structural and everyday VAWG is within cultural life across different societies via practices such as, witch trials, corsetry, honour killings, dowry-related violence and female infanticide (Anand, 2022; Choudhry, 2016; Dobash & Dobash,

1979; Merry, 2006; Stone, 2012). For example, Stone (2012) highlighted how cultural practices in both Eastern and Western societies, such as foot-binding, neck rings and corsetry create chronic stress and work to immobilise the bodies of women. Stone (2012) highlights how "the female body is often used as a transcript for the lived social and political experiences in different cultural contexts", which describes how cultural practices can serve to control women, as well as normalise and reinforce constructions of gender and produce the "social identity of femininity". It is a clever tool of the patriarchy to have women perform these acts on each other, as women become the enforcers of their own oppression. These practices work to restrain, restrict and reduce women, so that they are smaller, less powerful and less able, and this process is twofold. The enshrining of violence in cultural practice causes pain and chronic health problems, whereas the physical act of restriction or making oneself smaller adheres to social norms authored by the patriarchy that purport women as fragile (Blake, 1994; Stone, 2012).

VAWG persists in contemporary context too and may be particularly insidious; everyday violence is hidden within everyday customs and social norms that are deemed ordinary (Scheper-Hughes, 1993). Whilst actioned violence may not have worsened, the persistence of VAWG, including everyday violations, in this contemporary time is particularly problematic. This is because despite legislative progress towards equality and the recognition of women's rights there is still a contrast between social reality and law, as people live in a reality where they still encounter everyday misogyny, where abuse is normalised and institutions do not provide acceptable support (EVAW, 2025; ONS, 2020, 2021; Ofsted, 2021). Thus, people experience a cognitive dissonance; there are equality acts, yet the way laws are enacted and the prevalent societal discourse are not in alignment (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2025; Falb et al., 2025; Merry, 2006; Stöckl & Sorenson, 2024).

Today, mass media, social media, global connectivity and evolving legal frameworks make everyday violence more visible (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025; me too, 2025, Our Streets Now, 2025). Yet, these same mechanisms that can be used for awareness and resistance also normalise and maintain violence, and as patriarchy intersects with other systems of power, like capitalism, colonialism, racism, classism and heteronormativity, in different settings new forms of violence are created (Collins et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023; hooks, 2004; Morales, 2023, 2024; Phipps et al., 2017). Thus, future research with non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries) populations would be beneficial to reveal the similarities and differences in how EVAWG manifests across cultures globally (Apicella et al., 2020; Medina, 2023).

## Guilty until Proven Innocent: How does the Discourse in UK Society impact Women's Internalisation of Violence?

> "It's second nature to walk home before the sun goes down
> And put your keys between your knuckles when there's boys around
> Isn't it funny how we laugh it off to hide our fear?"
> […]
> "Boys will be, boys will be
> Boys will be, boys will be boys
> But girls will be women"
>
> *Boys Will Be Boys,* song by Dua Lipa (2020).

Many factors may contribute to the normalisation of VAWG; the prevalent discourse in the media is predominately portrayed via the male lens rather than the gaze of women (Mills, 2017). Research

highlights that biased news coverage around VAWG is common; it perpetuates rape culture and victim-blaming of women, portraying them as weak and instead reflecting traditional patriarchal values that silence women (Carll, 2003; Mardikantoro et al., 2022; Tranchese, 2014). For example, when participants read articles reporting on VAWG, they were unsurprised that the perpetrator was missing from the narrative, and when VAWG was normalised as part of everyday life, readers commented that women should not 'take risks', felt women could avoid violence and that preventing violence was 'common sense' (Tranchese, 2014). Many reports of VAWG offer this point of view of the perpetrator, often sympathising with why they committed violence, using language such as 'understandable' or 'of course' (Bates, 2016). This highlights how ingrained victim-blaming in news coverage is, further stressing how important objective, fact-based reporting and dissemination of information is for de-centring patriarchal norms that normalise VAWG as something inevitable and instead could be a powerful prevention tool (Carll, 2003; Tranchese, 2014). Thus, the narrative that permeates UK society, and arguably many other cultures, is one of passivity regarding VAWG (Eaves et al., 2012; EVAW, 2024). Even the phrase 'violence against women' does not signify who is conducting this violence – it explicitly removes the active participant, the perpetrator, and shifts the blame to women (Burrell, 2016; Lamb & Keon, 1995; True, 2020).

Jacqueline Rose (2021) comments on how Anna Burns showcases this in her novel 'Milkman' (2018). An older man stalks the female protagonist; her space is encroached upon, his sinister presence threatens her, she begins to find sexual pleasure repulsive and her sense of self, her world and her quality of life are negatively affected (Rose, 2021). She is "hemmed more and more tightly into a suffocating psychic and social world" where she is "thwarted into a carefully constructed

nothingness by that man" (Burns, 2018; Rose, 2021). Whilst nobody is named in the book, Rose (2021) highlights how the perpetrator uses the "ambient violence of the city" to continue encroaching upon the protagonist. However, she is met with disbelief and insults from others, including women. This story of surveillance highlights how harassment is a method of social control used against women and how normal the experience of encroachment is for women in a world that rewards patriarchal norms, showing how even without physical contact, it can harm your identity and wellbeing (Carretta, 2018; Rose, 2021). Ultimately, in the novel, the protagonist is saved by her playfulness, belief and resistance, highlighting how powerful resistance to perceived gender norms and being believed can be for women (Rose, 2021), as with belief, hope and recovery can prevail.

We can see the prevailing discourse around prevention on VAWG is centred around limitations on women and girls: limit how you dress, limit what time you go out, limit who you have sex with, only go out in daylight hours, the list could go on. These four following news headlines that all relate to the murder of Sarah Everard are an example of this discourse that limits and prevents, rather than seeks change.

> "Where is she? Sarah Everard missing: Cops warn women 'be careful going out alone' after 33-year-old vanishes off London streets" (Christodoulou et al., 2021)
>
> "'Always with keys out': Hundreds of women tell of fear of walking alone". (Marsh, 2021)
>
> "Sarah Everard missing: Women living in local area warned to 'not go out alone'" (Cole, 2021)
>
> "London police warn women to be wary of lone officers after Sarah Everard murder" (Goodwin, 2021).

Each article offers a warning to women, a minimisation of their freedom, rather than actively naming the perpetrator or attempting to tackle the root of violence. This trend in news reporting has been consistent long before the death of Sarah Everard, reducing women's experiences to passive victims of violence (Numanbayraktaroğlu, 2019). The choice of language reporters use in the media skews the portrayal of VAWG. A news headline, "Wife jibes about penis size and lesbian tryst 'drove hubby to murder'" (Smillie, 2018) centres the point of view of the murderer and favours salacious reporting. This style of reporting validates toxic masculinity and subordinates women, implicitly blaming women for their attacks (Bates, 2016). The compounding result is that this narrative becomes embedded into societal norms; the discourse around VAWG is sensationalised and normalises violence and, therefore, becomes internalised by women (Hamilton, 2021). This narrative has become so normalised that the true crime genre, which predominantly focuses on murders or attacks on women, has surged in popularity across TV, film and podcasts, as a widely acceptable form of entertainment and is rarely from the point of view of women. Therefore, the role of the media is crucial; this reporting style teaches women that they must adapt their lives to keep safe; it avoids allocating responsibility to men as the perpetrators and instead contributes to a wide acceptance in society that normalises women as responsible for the violence enacted on them (Burke, 2021; Lamb, 1991).

There are examples of alternative discourses platformed in the media. On the BBC's Graham Norton Show, Saoirse Ronan, when the other guests questioned who would use their phone if they were attacked, responded with the work women do to protect themselves from violence: "That's what girls have to think about all the time. Am I right ladies?" (Nanji, 2024). Saoirse silenced the

others with her response, which broadcasted the everyday actions women take to protect themselves from VAWG that they had not considered. She was met with support and praise from the public, and her fellow guest, Paul Mescal, praised Saoirse stating, "That's a conversation that we should absolutely be having on a daily basis" (Nanji, 2024). This highlights how this portrayal in the media can be a powerful tool in opening up the conversation around raising awareness of the gender imbalance around VAWG. Additionally, Hackney Council, Tower Hamlets Council and City of London Corporation launched a campaign aimed at tackling misogyny and VAWG called #DontCrossTheLine. This campaign encouraged men and boys to keep women and girls safe, placing the onus on men to behave appropriately, sending a clear message to perpetrators that misogyny and violence will not be tolerated (dontcrosstheline, 2024). Moreover, one study explored initiatives to prevent VAWG with men in a UK university, highlighting in focus groups that some men resisted patriarchal norms and challenged others around sexism and discourses around VAWG (Burrell, 2021).

Despite these positive attempts at recognising the gendered dynamics of VAWG, there is still a lack of recognition and a lack of engagement from all genders in helping to prevent and reduce VAWG (Burrell, 2021). For instance, the more prominent finding of Burrell's (2021) study was that many of the focus group attitudes were complicit; men were defensive in their responses when gendered norms or patriarchal privilege was questioned, disengaged as it was not 'their problem' or shifted the attention away from men as perpetrators of violence towards men as victims of violence. There are prolific ingrained discourses in society that excuse and celebrate violent behaviour, such as the phrase "boys will be boys", which suggests that men are primed and wired to be violent (Hamilton, 2021).

The multivariate model of IPV indicates that men's perpetration of VAWG is rooted in a culture of toxic masculinity and patriarchal norms and is enacted when the male identity is threatened; violence may serve as a way to retain a male perpetrator's sense of 'manhood', repair their sense of self-esteem and can transfer their negative feelings of shame and poor self-esteem in this act as a way to justify the violence and uphold their power and masculinity (Gruber et al., 2014; O'Neil & Harway, 1997). Thus, this indicates how perceived gender norms are damaging. Societal discourses around masculinity oppress all genders, including cishet men, who, when failing to meet societal expectations, experience negative affect and are not given the same grace as cishet women regarding emotions like sadness (Hamilton, 2021). This theory, coupled with prevalent misogynistic media reporting, perpetuates cishet men's socialisation into dominant and women's socialisation into subordinate positions (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021; Schippers, 2006), which in turn upholds and perpetuates discourses in society that normalises violence as appropriate. This highlights the need to critically explore how collective masculine norms and misogynistic reporting in UK discourse normalise men's VAWG and proposition it as an inevitable experience for women (Burrell, 2021; Hearn, 2012). Challenging these discourses is fundamental to the prevention of VAWG, as it contributes to change within gendered stereotypes around discourses regarding accountability and responsibility and can help prevent and reduce VAWG (Burrell, 2021).

Refuge (2024) reported in their survey that over half of women are not confident that the police have made progress tackling misogyny, whilst over a third had minimal to no trust that police can address VAWG crimes. Women reported that they felt the police were unsafe or that they have

had negative experiences where they were not believed or taken seriously (Refuge, 2024). Research indicates that women have more trust in the police, yet this research also highlights that of nine regions in England, in London women's trust in the police is lower than men's trust in the police (Pickering et al., 2024). This may be due to numerous factors, for instance the murder of Sarah Everard by a policeman in Clapham exacerbated fear of and further eroded trust in the police (End Violence against Women, 2021). Even if women do feel safe enough to report a crime, so often perpetrators do not get convicted. VAWG is a violation of women's human rights, yet there are minimal convictions concerning reported crimes of VAWG, notwithstanding unreported crimes and cases of sexual harassment are even less likely to result in convictions (EVAW, 2023; Franke, 1997; Hébert, 2020). Thus, it is vital to champion 'alternative visions of social justice' to frame laws that can effectively challenge patriarchal norms and centre women as the subject (Franke, 1997; Merry, 2005). Women do not need rescuing; they need to be believed and have safe spaces where they can exist. However, this is difficult to imagine when the prevailing discourses are skewed against women on a cultural, social, structural and institutional level, highlighting how important it is to challenge existing discourses and conduct research exploring the impact of this.

## The Shame of it all: The Intersect of Shame and Negative Psychological Outcomes in VAWG

"i am disappeared  like all the girls
before me  around me
all the girls to come"

Poem by Safia Elhillo (2022).

The experience of feeling shame is common for women; shame and 'womanhood' intersect in a patriarchal society (Bouson, 2009; Brown, 2004; Mann, 2018), and it is a common reaction to women's experience of violence (Anwar et al., 2022; Carretta, 2018; Kennedy & Prock, 2016). Shame has damaging effects; it impacts women who have experienced multiple kinds of violence, including IPV, sexual assault, physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and harassment (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Camp, 2022; Carretta, 2018; Weaver et al., 2019). For example, women who have experienced IPV report that the feeling of shame permeates their sense of self, inducing self-blame, a loss of identity and a fear of social judgment, as well as an increased likelihood of experiencing bodily shame, self-objectification and body surveillance (Camp, 2022; Weaver et al., 2019). The experience of stranger harassment also induces feelings of shame in women, including body shame and greater body surveillance, alongside other complicated feelings, such as anxiety and fear (Carretta, 2018; Davidson et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2016). Moreover, the more women experience stranger harassment, the greater the likelihood that shame and self-blame intensify and fear of rape increases (Carretta, 2018). Thus, the feeling of shame invades the experience of VAWG. Research highlights that there is a correlation between shame and PTSD symptoms among women who have experienced multiple forms of violence, including IPV, sexual assault, physical assault and harassment (Beck et al., 2011; Carretta, 2018; DeCou et al., 2017; La Bash & Papa, 2014).

At a policy level, women are not being served. Dworkin (1983) suggested that institutional power, which is largely protected by laws, religions, police, politics, and institutions in societies, is exercised by cishet men every day. She theorised that women have their fears exploited and are offered a remedy under the guise of "chivalrous protection", which distracts women from

challenging the status quo (Bindel, 2019; Fateman & Scholder, 2019). Faludi (1991) further expanded on this, suggesting that there is a historical 'backlash' that occurs when women make progress regarding equality; it is a strategy purported by the biased media to induce victim-blaming and shame in women. Thus, for women experiencing harassment, levels of shame may be higher due to negative appraisals in society like these media victim-blaming strategies or the internalisation of gendered beliefs. For example, if a woman enjoys sexual pleasure and is sexually victimised then she was "asking for it" and is responsible for the harassment, or women are more likely to perceive that they are a 'bad' or 'damaged' person and that it is their fault that it happened, which in turn induces these feelings of shame and guilt (Carretta, 2018; DeCou et al., 2017; Dunne, 2022; Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Weiss, 2010).

Shame is a consequence of violence and harassment. Research highlights that shame has an interactive quality; the more shame a person feels, then the more vulnerable they may be to more violence (Gruber et al., 2014). This is because the feeling of shame makes people more likely to isolate or blame themselves, which can prevent them from seeking support, as well as increasing their vulnerability to developing anxiety or other MH difficulties in response (Gruber et al., 2014). This shows that shame is an insidious experience of VAWG and that people are more vulnerable to developing negative global evaluations of self, self-doubt, poor self-esteem and poor MH as an outcome (Brown & Finkelor, 1986; Carretta, 2018). Moreover, the more violence and harassment women are exposed to, the more likely it is that they will experience greater levels of shame, fear, and self-blame, which exacerbate the likelihood of PTSD symptoms (Carretta, 2018; DeCou et al., 2017; La Bash & Papa, 2014). Therefore, understanding shame and its role in women's experiences of violence is essential. Shame can cause significant harm, and many women may

choose not to seek help as they are fearful of shame being reinforced by others or by institutions as a result of their feelings of self-blame or stigma, therefore targeting shame in prevention and intervention strategies should be a priority (Camp, 2022; Wessells & Kostelny, 2022).

# A Narrative Meta-synthesis exploring the Role of Shame in Help-seeking Behaviour for Women who have Experienced Intimate Partner Violence

## Overview

This review synthesises evidence from qualitative research exploring how shame may affect help-seeking behaviour in women who have experienced IPV. Feelings of shame are a common theme among VAWG research; violence can induce shame, which can cause long-term MH difficulties and can make people more vulnerable to repeated violence as they may isolate or blame themselves (Camp, 2022; Carretta, 2018; Renehan et al., 2023; Taccini & Mannarini, 2023). Various searches appraising how shame affects women who have experienced EVAWG produced too little literature, highlighting the paucity of research around EVAWG. Therefore, by reviewing the literature within the field of IPV, I could gather a richer insight into how shame may impede women from help-seeking and exacerbate a feeling of helplessness. The review aimed to identify gaps in existing literature and highlight current recommendations in policy and practice regarding support for VAWG. This was fruitful for the broader research as exploring how shame can serve as a barrier to support may be instrumental in providing further insight into the complexity of feelings that are evoked in women who have experienced multiple types of violence, including

EVAW. Thereby potentially increasing understanding within MH policy and care to inform gender-transformative specialist services.

## Rationale and Objective

There is a wealth of research exploring the deleterious impact of IPV (Ellsberg & Emmelin, 2014; Pallito et al., 2013; Women's Aid, 2021); however, the UK has a lack of reliable data regarding the prevalence of IPV (Women's Aid, 2021). Available information does not account for counts of unreported IPV, reported IPV that were unrecorded, or contextual or intersectional information, such as the effect of the feeling of fear, shame and other emotions that IPV may induce and how themes of power and control can inhibit a women's sense of agency (Cofie, 2018; Crenshaw, 2017). The feeling of shame is common in women's experiences of violence and can have a damaging impact on their MH (Camp, 2022; Carretta, 2018). Thus, it would be prudent to explore the intersection between shame, violence and how this may impede women's recovery. Previous reviews have not explicitly explored this affective background and context for the impacts of violence on women's MH; therefore, this review aimed to address this by summarising evidence from qualitative research on women who have experienced IPV, and how feelings of shame may have affected help-seeking behaviour. The objectives of the review were to explore:

1. The impact of shame as a barrier to help-seeking
2. Facilitators in breaking down feelings of shame.

There are many review types, and the methodology chosen depends on multiple factors, including the methodology type explored, the review research question, and the review analysis method (Grant & Booth, 2009). Following the review objectives, I deemed a qualitative narrative meta-synthesis methodology appropriate, as it offers an integrative process that can compare and synthesise qualitative research findings, providing a clear structure of the evidence (Grant & Booth, 2009). In conducting a qualitative narrative meta-synthesis, the aim was to explore the impact of shame on help-seeking behaviour and illuminate any facilitators in breaking down shame and supporting women in their recovery from their experiences of violence. This review, whilst not specifically centred on the experience of EVAWG, aimed to provide insight into the negative consequences of shame and how affective barriers, in this case, shame, can disable women from seeking support. This provides a rationale for undertaking further research that explores the role of shame in women who have experienced EVAWG.

## Method

### *Design*

Traditionally for qualitative data, meta-ethnography has been the gold standard when conducting systematic reviews (Borgnakke, 2019). However, research has shown that narrative synthesis may enable a richer insight into data from descriptive exploration towards more inductive exploration that accounts for themes, patterns, context, similarities and differences (Flemming et al., 2019; Lisy & Porritt, 2016). For example, qualitative synthesis can help address complex questions, help explain complexity by bringing together multiple perspectives and produce a nuanced and detailed

account of people's experiences (Carroll, 2017; Flemming et al., 2019). Thus, it moves beyond description and seeks to explain the evidence and address similarities and differences between studies rather than just offering descriptive detail or privileging certain studies (Lisy & Porritt, 2016).

In keeping with this ontological and epistemological position, a narrative meta-synthesis explores how stories are told in research (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). It is important to see who the stories are being told about, their content and the language used (Sim & Mengshoel, 2023; Smith & Monforte, 2020), which enables a more dynamic insight into current research, policy and practice. I chose to include qualitative papers rather than mixed methods. This review informs a qualitative piece of research, which is also consistent with the epistemological fit of my research; women's subjective accounts were explored and women's voices needed to remain central themes in the discursive accounts (Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, this qualitative narrative review attempted to address the research objective by synthesising the qualitative data of included reviews. To adhere to methodological rigour and quality standards in this review, I utilised the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist (Page et al., 2021).

### *Search Strategy*

Before continuing, I conducted a general search on the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) to see if there were any existing reviews within this field, of which there were none (Schiavo, 2019). PROSPERO is a health research tool, and its systematic process helps review literature, minimise the risk of bias, and enhance reliability, which is why I

chose to utilise it for this meta-synthesis (Booth et al., 2020). The search terms included truncation, phrase searching and Boolean operators search 'with AND' and 'with OR'. I used 'EBSCOHost' to search four relevant databases and identify relevant research. Table 1 outlines the electronic databases and search strategies used within this review. The search was restricted to English publications.

**Table 1.**
*Search Strategy.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Review type** | **Qualitative Narrative Meta-Synthesis**: Critically appraises qualitative findings by searching, appraising and synthesising research data. |
| **Databases** | CINAHL Complete; MEDLINE with Full Text; APA PsycArticles; APA PsycInfo |
| **Search terms** | intimate partner violence OR partner abuse OR domestic abuse OR domestic violence OR violence against women<br><br>shame* OR shaming<br><br>help-seeking behaviour OR help-seeking OR barrier* |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Other search strategies** | Individual searches of where included papers are cited and within reference lists of included studies. |

***Eligibility Criteria***

I used a 'SPIDER' (Sample; Phenomenon of Interest; Design; Evaluation; Research type) framework to inform the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 2 (Cooke et al., 2012).

**Table 2.**
*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

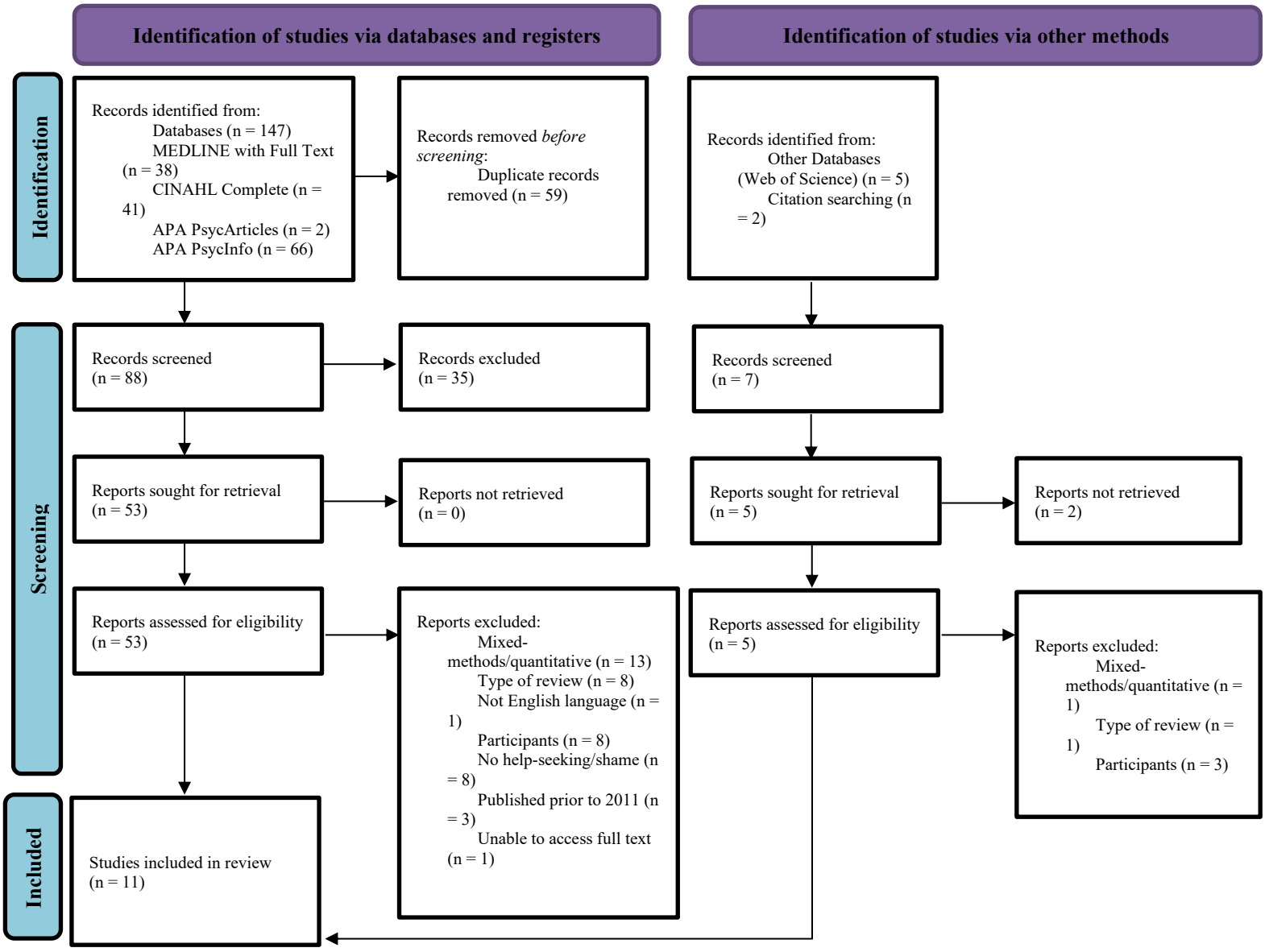
| **Inclusion Criteria** | **Exclusion Criteria** |
|---|---|
| Studies using qualitative data | Studies using quantitative or mixed-methods data |
| Primary research | Women under the age of eighteen |
| The primary focus of the research was in relation to women who have lived experience of IPV and explored their experience of shame and health-related help-seeking behaviour | Discussion of IPV without exploration of the feeling of shame or help-seeking behaviour |
| Studies of women (18 years and above) | Study population was male |

| Written in the English language | Not written in the English language |
|---|---|

***Study Selection***

I deemed these electronic databases to be the most suitable regarding the focus and discipline of the review (Bramer et al., 2017; Murdoch University, 2022). The studies selected underwent a selection protocol. Firstly, a systematic search strategy screened titles and abstracts and utilised the 'SPIDER' framework (Cooke et al., 2012). Research argues that the 'SPIDER' framework may be a superior search strategy tool for assessing qualitative research and rigour within research (Cooke et al., 2012). Despite 'PICo' (Population; Phenomena of Interest; Context) often being used as a framework for formulating a qualitative search strategy, it may not capture the 'experience' of the participants, whereas the 'SPIDER' framework does capture a participant's experience and views (Hosseini et al., 2024). The second screening round reviewed full-text manuscripts with the 'SPIDER' framework to ensure comprehensive analysis and record reasons for exclusion. The reference lists of included papers and where papers were cited were cross-searched as additional identifying methods. The PRISMA diagram outlines the search process in Figure 1 below (Page et al., 2021).

**Figure 1.**
*PRISMA flow diagram displaying the database searches for the qualitative narrative meta-synthesis.*




### *Data Extraction and Quality Assessments*

I produced a data extraction sheet that captured the key information from all papers that met the inclusion criteria; this included the publication authors, date of publication, demographic data,

study methodology, key findings and implications, and research quality. Critical appraisal is a key process in a review; for instance, if there is considerable heterogeneity, it may be challenging to gain insight into the quality of included studies (Shaheen et al., 2023). Critical appraisal tools can serve to facilitate this understanding (Haile, 2022); however, they must be used with caution as if used too prescriptively they may be too reductive and inhibit the development of rich and nuanced findings (Purssell, 2020). In this review, I used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative studies checklist as the quality assessment to appraise the data (CASP, 2018). CASP is the most common tool used for quality appraisal, particularly for novice researchers, and is highlighted as providing a good indication of a study's procedural details (Long et al., 2020). Reviewing research quality considers reliability and credibility, a crucial step for informing policy and practice (Windle et al., 2011). Research highlights that the CASP checklist produces good inter-rater reliability scores and can strengthen methodological rigour when used in qualitative reviews (Long et al., 2020).

The CASP tool has limitations, and exploring the ontology and epistemology of included studies can be an additional step in quality assessment (Long et al., 2020). There was limited time for this inclusion; however, I included reflexivity to address my positionality and consider my ontological and epistemological viewpoint (Bourke, 2014). Considering the interpretation of experiential data, I understand that despite being aware of my positionality concerning the research and my endeavours to 'bracket' my preconceptions, my interpretation of the data can never be bias-free (Willig, 2013). I initially assessed studies included in the review based on their qualitative design and then explored the methodological quality of the studies using the questions outlined in the CASP checklist. Table 3 summarises the quality appraisal ratings of the included studies.

**Table 3.**
*CASP Checklist of Included Studies*

| Study | Screening Questions | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Section A | | | | | | Section B | | | Section C |
| | **Q1** | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4** | **Q5** | **Q6** | **Q7** | **Q8** | **Q9** | **Q10** |
| 1. Li et al., 2021 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ |
| 2. Lewis, 2021 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3. Dichter et al., 2020 | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | X | ? | ? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 4. Thaggard & Montayre, 2019 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 5. Tonsing & Barn, 2017 | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ | X | ? | ? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 6. Mookerjee et al., 2015 | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ? | ? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 7. Reina et al., 2014 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8. Scordato, 2013 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. Kanuha, 2013 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 10. Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011 | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 11. Heron et al., 2021 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

**Notes:** CASP Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018) **Responses:** Yes (✓); No (**X**), Can't tell (**?**)

**Screening Questions**

**Section A: Are the results valid?**

Q1: Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

Q2: Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

Q3: Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

Q4: Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?

Q5: Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?

Q6: Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

**Section B: What are the results?**

Q7: Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Q8: Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

Q9: Is there a clear statement of findings?

**Section C: Will the results help locally?**

Q10: How valuable is the research?

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity is essential for acknowledging positionality in data interpretation (D'Silva et al., 2016). Reflecting upon my positionality allowed me to consider how any personal assumptions or biases I have may affect findings and improve validity and rigour of the review analysis (Finlay, 2002). Positionality also describes ontological and epistemological perspectives (Bourke, 2014). Therefore, I acknowledge that my stance can assist interpretation yet may also pose the risk of reconstructing narratives within the research.

### *Data Synthesis*

Due to the heterogeneity of demographic data, a meta-analysis was inappropriate. Thus, I utilised a narrative meta-synthesis for the data synthesis (Uphoff et al., 2021). Following the review objectives, I used three stages to produce a narrative synthesis of extracted data (Popay et al., 2006). This included describing the preliminary patterns across the studies, exploring the relationships in the studies, and finally using quality appraisal to establish how robust and rigorous included studies were (Popay et al., 2006). I described and analysed the data narratively, which was homogeneous regarding IPV experience and heterogeneous regarding demographic data. Thus, due to the heterogeneity of the demographic data this may be more generalisable (Leung, 2015).

## Findings

### *Search Results*

The search generated 147 results from four databases searched on EBSCOHost, with sixty duplicates removed before screening. I then screened ninety-three records via their titles and abstracts and examined against the inclusion/exclusion criteria, excluding forty further studies. The remaining fifty-three full texts of these studies and manual searching of references, where I retrieved five studies, were reviewed. After reading each paper in its entirety, forty-seven further studies did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g. mixed-methods or quantitative design, not English language, type or review, primary focus not on help-seeking or shame, unable to access full text). Therefore, eleven studies met the inclusion criteria for this qualitative narrative meta-synthesis.

Eleven studies were included for review (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020; Heron et al., 2021; Kanuha, 2013; Li et al., 2021; Mookerjee et al., 2015; Reina et al., 2014; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019; Tonsing & Barn, 2017), including two dissertation papers (Lewis, 2021; Scordato, 2013). I chose to include dissertation papers as grey literature as they include original, unpublished research, which may aid in the comprehensiveness of a systematic review and reduce publication bias (Paez, 2017). Grey literature is often situated in the present moment, as there is usually a lag period between research and publication, with some research never formally published, and it can provide a broader reflection around existing evidence bases, can help assess the impact of methodological variations or expose amplified effect sizes that arise out of publication bias (Conn et al., 2003; Godin et al., 2015; Hopewell et al., 2007). Moreover, the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions and the Institute of Medicine

Standard for Systematic Review recommend including grey literature (Higgens, 2011; Morton et al., 2011). Furthermore, this aligns with the use of polyvocality within this research design, which favours the use of multiple voices over traditional academic methods (McCarthy, 2023). Table 4 outlines a descriptive summary of reviewed studies. For consistency, I used the same descriptive demographic language in the studies within the summary.

**Table 4.**
*Summary of Included Studies*

| **Study** | **Sample Size (N)** | **Demographics**: Ethnicity; Sexuality | **Recruitment Method** | **Data Collection** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Li et al., 2021 | 20 | Chinese<br>Not identified | Convenience | Semi-structured telephone interviews |
| Lewis, 2021 | 15 | African American<br>Heterosexual | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |
| Dichter et al., 2020 | 50 | Black or African American; Other; White<br>Not identified | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |
| Thaggard & Montayre, 2019 | 15 | Asian; European; Maori; Mixed Maori & Pacific<br>Heterosexual; Lesbian | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |
| Tonsing & Barn, 2017 | 14 | Pakistani; Indian; Nepalese<br>Not identified | Purposive; Snowball | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mookerjee et al., 2015 | 22 | African American; Other; White<br>Not identified | Purposive | Focus groups |
| Reina et al., 2014 | 10 (Interviews)<br>4 (Focus Group) | Ecuadorian; Mexican; Salvadorian<br>Heterosexual | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews & one focus group |
| Scordato, 2013 | 16 (Interviews)<br>5 (Focus Groups) | African American; Caucasian<br>Heterosexual | Convenience | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews<br>In-person focus groups |
| Kanuha, 2013 | 24 | Filipina; Native Hawaiian; Other Pacific Islanders; Mixed Ethnicity<br>Asian, Pacific Islander & Native Hawaiian; South & West Asian<br>Lesbian/queer and/or in an intimate relationship with another woman | Snowball | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews (one telephone) |
| Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011 | 10 | Taiwanese<br>Not identified | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Heron et al., 2021 | 29 | Black British African; Black Caribbean; British Pakistani; Mixed Race; White British<br><br>Not identified (all women in the study experienced IPV from male partners) | Purposive | Semi-structured face-to-face interviews |

***Methodology of Included Papers***

Studies used convenience, snowball and purposive sampling methods. The majority collected data via semi-structured interviews. One (Mookerjee et al., 2015) used focus groups, whilst two (Reina et al., 2014; Scordato, 2013) utilised semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

The total sample size across the studies was 234 participants. There was a diverse sample of race/ethnicity, culture, geographical location, sexual orientation and age. Historically, research has recruited from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries) samples; this is unrepresentative as it only accounts for a proportion of the global population, does not account for cultural differences and limits the development of psychological theories as it only explores within Western experiences (Apicella et al., 2020), whereas this review has moved beyond WEIRD samples. As qualitative research generally has smaller sample sizes, it is more likely to include homogeneous data. Therefore, including additional demographic data like so, is

a strength of this review as it is more representative of the general public, thus is more likely to bolster ecological validity (Allmark, 2004).

### *Quality of Included Papers*

When conducting a literature review, critical appraisal tools help facilitate an in-depth understanding of the quality, research process and approaches of the included studies (Al-Jundi & Sakka, 2017; Long et al., 2020). However, critical appraisal tools are not a rigid process or something that should be overly prescriptive, as if used this way, it may hinder some of the creative processes involved in the appraisal of the data and synthesis of the findings (Barbour & Barbour, 2003; Dodgson, 2021).

In this review, the CASP Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018) reviewed and critically appraised the quality of the included studies. The CASP Qualitative Checklist consists of 10 questions used to systematically assess and appraise the quality of studies (CASP, 2018). Research has suggested that when used well, the CASP Qualitative Checklist can facilitate a more quality synthesis of findings (Long et al., 2020). Therefore, the CASP Qualitative Checklist may be useful for reviewing policy and practice when synthesising qualitative data, focusing on reviewing the methodological strengths and limitations (Kolaski et al., 2023; Long et al., 2020).

## Themes and Information from the Included Studies

Themes from the papers were categorised and presented regarding the research objective of exploring shame and its impact on help-seeking to facilitate a synthesised approach to analysis.

This included exploring "shame as a barrier to help-seeking" and "facilitators for breaking down shame". A factor not included in the review's objectives but that became apparent as significant was the different impacts shame and IPV may have regarding women's intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2017). Thus, I created a third theme of "Intersectionality and shame" to address this additional data and the diverse demographic information (see Table 5).

**Table 5.**
*Summary of study themes categorised in accordance with the research objective and additional illuminating information*

| Study | Shame as a barrier to help-seeking | Facilitators for breaking down shame | Intersectionality and Shame |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Reasons for not seeking help | Formal help-seeking experiences<br><br>Informal help-seeking experiences<br><br>Self-help | Not a specific theme, but this study explores survivor experiences of women who are Chinese immigrants |
| 2. | IPV & the closure of the microsystem | Connecting with providers opens the relationship microsystem<br><br>The Need for Belief and Acceptance | Cultural inhibitions and treatment costs are macrosystem barriers |
| 3. | Feelings of shame, stigma and embarrassment inhibit disclosure | Disclosure to a supportive and caring clinician can feel validating and empowering, | Not a specific theme, but this study explores the age of women |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Lack of comfort with and trust in the relationship with the provider inhibits disclosure | although feelings of shame and embarrassment may persist | |
| | Perceptions that questions are asked only to fulfil obligations inhibit disclosure | | |
| | Concerns about lack of privacy or safety inhibit disclosure | | |
| 4. | There was no-one I could turn to because I was ashamed | | Shame and selfhood |
| | | | Marginalised identities |
| | The shame of it all | | |
| | Creating the perfect illusion | | |
| | Shame and isolation | | |
| 5. | Shame and silence | | Shame of divorce/family break-up |
| | Shame, disclosure and help-seeking | | |
| 6. | Problem recognition and definition | Decision to act/seek help | Not a specific theme, but this study explores a comparison of Hispanic & Non-Hispanic similarities and differences |
| | | Support selection | |
| 7. | Isolation | | Immigration status |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Lack of knowledge of resources | | Inability to understand domestic violence given cultural norms |
| | Feeling ashamed | | Lack of language proficiency |
| 8. | History of abuse and help-seeking | Recommendations for services | IPV context |
| 9. | Control, intimidation, and instilling fear underlie intimate violence | | "Deep" emotional intimacy constructed in idealisation of coupling in the duality of same-sex and racial/ethnic identities |
| | First, early, or rebound relationship increased vulnerability for abuse | | Shame related to the duality of heterosexist societal norms and APINH racial/ethnic culture as barriers to help-seeking |
| | Sexual jealousy and possessiveness integral to abusive dynamics | | Crossing/intersecting gender in the "butch" as victim |
| | Limited social and potential partner networks as correlates for abuse | | |
| 10. | Secretive and sexual dating relationships | | Self-reliant culture |
| | Fear of negative reactions from others | | Personal and family shame |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Unfamiliarity with available resources | | |
| | Re-victimisation in seeking help | | |
| 11. | Emotional barriers | Interpersonal relations | Not a specific theme, but this study has specific findings from ethnic minority women |
| | Partner-related barriers | Safety | |
| | Organisational barrier | Validation | |

***Shame as a Barrier to Help-seeking***

The uniformity of experience across studies was the feeling of shame IPV produced and indicates that shame severely limits help-seeking behaviours.

I identified four factors: fear of judgement; isolation; self-blame; loss of identity.

*Fear of Judgment*

Feeling shame presented as a barrier to formal and informal help-seeking, such as difficulties with disclosing information to healthcare systems (Dichter et al., 2020), police (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011), peer support (Li et al., 2021), and the criminal justice system (Scordato, 2013) or social services (Reina et al., 2014). Help-seeking among friends or family was more likely but still uncommon due to worry of judgment and misunderstanding (Li et al., 2021; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). Participants were often highly educated (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Li et al., 2021)

and more likely to engage in self-help. Therefore, there could be additional barriers for less-educated women seeking help.

Shame was a persistent barrier for help-seeking, leaving some women feeling they had a "dirty little secret" (Dichter et al., 2020). Fear of judgement extended to worry about family shame, and disclosure was discouraged (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Li et al., 2021). Family shame could serve as social control, as cultural or familial gender norms may become embedded within women's identities (Tonsing & Barn, 2017). Thus, women may internalise both family and self-shame, including the shame of being a divorced woman, a single mother and not maintaining the family unit (Reina et al., 2014; Tonsing & Barn, 2017).

*Isolation*

From experiencing shame, women isolated themselves and their self-worth was negatively impacted (Lewis, 2021; Tonsing & Barn, 2017). Isolation perpetuates shame and could produce a cycle of inaction regarding help-seeking. Isolation had a significant impact on deterring women from help-seeking beyond their relationship microsystem, especially regarding emotional or verbal abuse (Lewis, 2021). Another impact shame had on isolation was to avoid exposing the illusion of a happy family unit (Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). Moreover, the severity of IPV having a correlative relationship with shame has been highlighted; as IPV escalated, survivors' shame persisted, thus continuing the cycle of isolation and abuse (Lewis, 2021).

*Self-blame*

Shame often generated feelings of self-blame, preventing help-seeking due to the belief they had done something deserving of IPV or the sense that they did not fit the category of 'abused' (Dichter et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021). Self-blame may create self-perpetuating cycles of blame, for example, "not sexy enough" (Lewis, 2021), thus intensifying feelings of shame and further preventing help-seeking.

Research indicated that internalised feelings of self-blame prevented women from disclosing IPV to healthcare services (Heron et al., 2021) or produced embarrassment or misbeliefs that no one would believe them or that their abuse was trivial (Reina et al., 2014). However, it is important not to generalise these findings as the narratives included are from women who have acknowledged their IPV or received support. Therefore, there could be additional barriers experienced by women who sought help, or who do not describe themselves as experiencing IPV (Heron et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014).

*Loss of identity*

The research highlighted how shame can corrosively affect a women's sense of self, which could lead to women disengaging from their needs and putting their abuser's needs and wants first (Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). The erosion of identity is related to the feeling of powerlessness, inadequacy and loss of agency shame can produce, inhibiting help-seeking (Tonsing & Barn, 2017). Whilst it is important not to generalise findings across multiple populations, the exploration of intersectionality and the complex additional barriers that may arise as a result of the stigma

attached to sexuality or racial/ethnic discrimination was as strenght (Kanuha, 2013). The intersection of such factors can further compound how women experience IPV-induced shame.

### *Facilitators in Breaking down Shame*

From the review, a variety of studies investigated facilitators of reducing shame and what aids help-seeking (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Mookerjee et al., 2015; Scordato, 2013). Some studies highlighted the barriers that can be present when women reach out for support. Barriers included cultural differences or barriers within the therapeutic relationship (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Li et al., 2021), concerns about their children being taken away, and not being believed by friends of family (Mookerjee et al., 2015; Scordato, 2013).

The overarching theme for facilitating help-seeking formally or informally was the need to be believed, accepted and listened to non-judgmentally, which induced feelings of safety, relief and hope, acting as a deterrent to shame (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020; Heron et al., 2021; Lewis, 2021; Li et al., 2021). Whilst the limited geographical scope presents a limitation (Heron et al., 2021), the consistency of this finding indicates its importance, and the exploration of data triangulation, depth, and rigour aid the strength of this finding (Scordato, 2013).

Whilst informal support was more common (Li et al., 2021), it was acknowledged that disclosure can be powerful, validating and empowering, however is difficult and met with many barriers. A caring and compassionate therapeutic relationship where the clinician builds rapport with a personal, genuine interest opposed to clinical patient-doctor interactions were highlighted as an important facilitator in reducing feelings of shame and stigma that act as barriers to help-seeking

(Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020). However, the small sample size makes the data non-generalisable, thus future research is needed to corroborate this finding (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011).

One strength was the recognition of the different support needs across different population groups. For instance, cultural competency within formal support to address cultural differences and recognise how cultural beliefs may reinforce shame and underpin IPV behaviour as acceptable (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011). Moreover, the therapeutic relationship was highlighted as being potentially more important for women who may not feel they fit the category of a survivor of IPV, such as older women (Dichter et al., 2020; Scordato, 2013). This highlights the importance of recognising cultural competency when considering implications for policy and practice.

### *'Intersectionality' and Shame*

A factor that emerged as important was the different impacts of shame and IPV on the different parts of a person's intersectional identity (Crenshaw, 2017). These included, cultural expectations (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Li et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014; Tonsing & Barn, 2017); immigration status (Li et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014; Tonsing & Barn, 2017); race/ethnicity (Lewis, 2021; Mookerjee et al., 2015; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019); age (Dichter et al., 2020; Scordato, 2013) and sexuality (Kanuha, 2013; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019).

*Cultural Expectations*

Feelings of shame or "losing face" (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Li et al., 2017; Tonsing & Barn, 2017), when put into context of different socio-cultural contexts, such as family honour, were highlighted as an additional coercive deterrent of help-seeking. The studies outlined how the adoption of cultural expectations can aid concealment of IPV and assign blame to the woman to prevent shame upon the family. Two studies indicated Chinese and Latina cultural proverbs of similar meaning:

> "Do not wash your dirty linen in public" (Li et al., 2021)
>
> "La ropa sucia se lava en casa," (dirty laundry is washed at home) (Reina et al., 2014).

Despite these proverbs originating from different cultures, they specify the same meaning: do not share beyond the family. This is an important comparison; whilst it is imperative to acknowledge different cultural features, it is also helpful to highlight similarities that may be present when looking at complex emotions, such as shame, when concerning help-seeking.

*Immigration Status*

It was identified that immigration status could increase vulnerability to IPV and act as an additional barrier to help-seeking (Li et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014; Tonsing & Barn, 2017). Immigrants with uncertainty over their legal rights feared deportation if they sought support, which could further compound feelings of shame, which was also coupled with fear, embarrassment, and social and familial shame. However, there was a small sample size and low saturation achieved within

the study. Thus, replicability of the finding is compromised (Reina et al., 2014; Tonsing & Barn, 2017).

*Race/Ethnicity*

Three studies identified relationships between shame and race/ethnicity, including barriers to treatment-seeking within African American communities as seeking support outside the family system was discouraged (Lewis, 2021) and shame as a universal experience within (Hispanic women Mookerjee et al., 2015). However, there was a small sample of African American women within the sample and a lack of description regarding the Hispanic group, which is a group with a lot of cultural diversity, thus the findings lack generalisability (Lewis, 2021; Mookerjee et al., 2015).

Shame and sense of self with marginalised identities were discovered as an additional obstacle, for instance, concerning experiences of colonisation or generational trauma (Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). This is an important finding, and a strength of this study was the exploration of IPV experience regarding different ethnic backgrounds and sexualities (Thaggard & Montayre, 2019).

*Age*

Two studies identified older women as experiencing shame and the belief they were undeserving of support, as they did not fit the category of IPV survivors (Dichter et al., 2020; Scordato, 2013). This highlights the need to break down inaccurate perceptions of who may experience IPV. However, only those who identified as women were included, thus the broad range of experiences

that may impact people beyond the gender norm, such as non-binary people are not explored (Dichter et al., 2020).

*Sexuality*

Two studies (Kanuha, 2013; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019) identified how the sense of shame women experienced from their abuse intersected with the marginalisation they felt from their sexuality when positioned within heteronormative values in society, thus enabling self-blame and compounded help-seeking.

## Discussion

This qualitative narrative meta-synthesis summarised enablers and minimisers of shame concerning help-seeking for IPV. Findings suggest shame is a significant barrier to help-seeking and report fear of judgment, isolation, self-blame, and loss of identity as nuanced components that enable and maintain shame. Many studies also indicated that belief, acceptance and non-judgemental listening were facilitators of shame reduction and help-seeking (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Mookerjee et al., 2015; Scordato, 2013). The findings from this meta-synthesis address the review's research objective, and the findings are supported by additional evidence highlighting the link between shame, fear, blame and sociocultural barriers (Femi-Ajao et al., 2020; Karakurt et al., 2014; McCleary-Sills et al., 2016).

Within all but one study (Heron et al., 2021), diverse demographic information and shame became an additional important component for review. Cultural expectations, immigration status,

race/ethnicity, age and sexuality were important supplementary factors to explore regarding shame and help-seeking. The importance of exploring a range of systemic factors when supporting survivors is imperative to ensure the quality of care; for example, immigration status and the intersect with race/ethnicity is a significant barrier to help-seeking, which is further corroborated as an important factor within a UK setting (Femi-Ajao et al., 2020).

Findings from this review highlight the importance of exploring barriers of help-seeking and shame, yet also address facilitators that can prevent shame. This is vital as it reframes shame from an unavoidable response and redirects power and agency to survivors. Furthermore, the intersect of findings within this review highlights the current failures within policy and practice to provide a range of care across women's intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2017). This indicates the need for a reformation of support available to survivors of IPV and a need for research to further explore the impact of such individualised support.

### *Contribution from the Review*

The review objective was to explore the impact of shame as a barrier to help-seeking. The analysis of research data and narrative synthesis of findings suggest that the review objectives were accomplished and that the review includes a variety of important findings.

Firstly, it addressed the different components that enable and maintain shame produced by experiencing IPV. These components included fear of judgment, isolation, self-blame and a loss of identity. Whilst it is important to indicate that the shame response may not always be limited to these particular nuances, it is useful to consider the relationship these factors may have in

maintaining shame. This could be helpful information for survivors, services and social support systems, to enhance knowledge on drivers of shame and barriers to help-seeking. For example, this may be particularly valuable for friends and family to understand how to facilitate help-seeking and disclosure among survivors of IPV, as informal support was the most common type of help-seeking (Li et al., 2021).

Secondly, the review revealed facilitators of minimising shame and promoting help-seeking. This is important for both formal and informal support; the importance of providing a non-judgemental space where someone feels heard, accepted and believed was highlighted. These findings may be useful for services to ensure person-centred, sensitive training is employed. In addition, these findings could inform future policy regarding disclosure caveating that to reduce shame and aid recovery survivors must first and foremost be believed and have a safe environment to disclose.

Thirdly, the review revealed a paucity of literature exploring the impact of IPV on queer women. Whilst the intersectionality of sexuality was explored within this review, future research would benefit from continuing to examine the spectrum of experience and impact of shame in more detail by exploring the experience of queer women and non-binary, trans or gender non-conforming people.

Finally, the review additionally explored the impact of shame and IPV regarding the intersectionality of demographic data. Features such as immigration status, race/ethnicity, sexuality, cultural norms and age were identified as significant barriers to help-seeking. These additional obstacles occur as a result of additional socio-contextual barriers, including but not

limited to discrimination, stigma, colonisation, patriarchal and heteronormative norms and fear. These systemic structures further compound the experience of shame, thus, to generalise further it would be fruitful to explore different beliefs and intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2017) within a variety of contexts.

The review findings also highlight further implications for policy and practice. Whilst COVID-19 has enabled VAWG and IPV (Hisham et al., 2021), it has also ignited resistance and a drive for change from people globally, such as the protests in response to Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa's deaths. Moreover, it has produced innovative working methods, such as the simple "signal for help" that can silently help a person indicate what they need during a video call (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021). Therefore, an increase in visibility of the harm of VAWG and IPV has implications for policy change, such as an increase in funding to services and refuges could increase the accessibility of support to women. With increased funding paired with the technical learning and advancements of the pandemic, innovative ways of working with women could enable cultural sensitivity, intersectionality and increased agency within women.

### *Limitations*

There was a lack of evidence that explored help-seeking within a UK context; shame is a social emotion that can arise when socially constructed expectations are unmet (Lyhne & Wagoner, 2022), meaning that it is culturally heterogeneous**,** and makes links to the empirical study presented here more challenging. Secondly, not all studies indicated the type of violence that they experienced, which may present as a weakness as there could be significant differences regarding help-seeking and additional barriers depending on how the person experienced their violence.

Finally, the heterogeneity of demographic data is a strength as it examines a broader range of experience and increases pragmatic validity. Yet, it also poses a weakness due to the small sample sizes and limited papers reviewed, thus it is hard to generalise these findings to a broader population (Leung, 2015) without additional research.

A considerable, limiting implication of this review is the generalisability of findings as a common experience for a UK-context and variety of women. Therefore, I suggest that future research explore the impact of violence and the impact this has on women within a UK-only context and with a wide range of diverse experiences.

### *Conclusion*

Evidence from this meta-synthesis suggests that shame is a significant barrier to help-seeking for survivors of IPV, maintained by fear of judgment, isolation, self-blame and loss of identity. It also highlights facilitators of shame reduction, indicating that belief, acceptance and non-judgemental listening are imperative to help enable help-seeking. Thus, it emphasises the need for services, survivors, friends and families to be aware of the complex impact of shame to enable help-seeking and recovery. Implications for policy and practice were highlighted.

The review highlighted the complex link between intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), IPV, and socio-contextual barriers that can further compound shame when experiencing IPV. Implications of this review's generalisability were questioned, thus the need for further research to provide further insight across a variety of experiences within a UK-setting was suggested.

## Reflections on Intersectionality

It was important to note here that I could have used a more contemporary framework of the 'Social Graces', which represents aspects of power, difference, and diversity that can influence personal and social identity and can be helpful to look at intersectionality and the impact of different experiences (Burnham, 2013). However, firstly, it was important for me that a diverse range of voices be included in the literature throughout this piece of research. There are documented gender disparities in academia; women's papers receive less citation and are under-represented in prestigious journals (Lerman et al., 2022). One could argue that the 'Social Graces' is an alternative presentation of intersectionality, which was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black woman. Further to this the 'Social Graces' often fails to give attention to Alison Roper-Hall a woman who, among other colleagues, co-created the theory.

> "The point of feminism is you shouldn't have to be a man to be treated with equal respect". (Kimberlé Crenshaw in Dastagir, 2024).

Moreover, the discipline of family therapy, where the framework of 'Social Graces' emerged, is traditionally a white, Eurocentric and male-dominated discipline (McDowell, 2015). Using 'Social Graces' as a framework felt as though it was centring whiteness, something that clinical psychology has traditionally done, stripping away marginalised voices via colonialism (Wood & Patel, 2017). Thus, choosing to use intersectionality as a framework, alongside quotes, poems, prose and lyrics, felt like one way to work towards decolonising research within the field of clinical psychology, and the use of polyvocality offers a remedy to the silencing of oppressed and

marginalised voices (McCarthy, 2023). Finally, it could be argued that the 'Social Graces' is too simplistic or restrictive as a framework; it disperses aspects of identity in a binary fashion and may not address the complexities of oppression (Burnham et al., 2008; Nolte, 2017). This linear separation could create a false hierarchy of oppression that positions one marker of identity as more important than the other, for example, gender over sexuality, or it could risk positioning an either/or position, such as gender or sexuality (Butler, 1990; Chantler, 2005). Rather than the both/and position of gender and sexuality that the intersectionality framework promotes (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, to engage with patterns of power and oppression, which are central themes within this research, I chose to use intersectionality as a framework to explore and understand differences, as it is important to see identity as multi-dimensional and intersecting to understand how power operates in women's lives (Esposito, 2023).

## Rationale for the Current Study

Whilst this review focused on IPV, it highlighted various important factors to explore in more detail. The studies indicated that shame can serve as a form of social control, which may become internalised and embedded into women's sense of self. The review indicated that shame might engender isolation and feelings of low self-worth, which is exacerbated in women who experienced emotional and verbal abuse. Moreover, women who felt that they did not fit into the category of experiencing violence or abuse, or who viewed their abuse as trivial, were less likely to seek help. The review highlighted that help-seeking and reducing shame was facilitated by feelings of acceptance, being believed and a non-judgmental stance. Future recommendations

highlighted that the impact of intersectionality should be explored further. Finally, the review explored diverse women's experiences, with only two being UK-specific contexts.

Research within the review indicated that women appreciated when professionals validated emotional abuse as a legitimate form of abuse and recommendations included that professionals should reflect upon different types of abuse and violence so that all forms are recognised, validated and deemed unacceptable (Heron et al., 2021). Additionally, papers recommended that future research should be conducted with women who did not contact professional servicea and should explore multi-level prevention strategies to target VAWG (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Reina et al., 2014). This is fruitful for the present research, as everyday violence may be broader and harder to define. The review highlighted that self-blame and shame prevented women from disclosing and those who perceived their experiences as trivial are less likely to seek help and experience negative consequences (Heron et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014). This is reflective of present research that highlights that women did not report abusive behaviour to the police as their experiences were normalised as part of everyday life (Miles & Broad, 2024). Considering this research, it is hypothesised that women may be less likely to seek support with their experience of EVAWG, despite feeling shame and negative consequences to their wellbeing and sense of self, as it is an experience embedded within UK culture. Thus, the experience of shame may be more covert and insidious and may be both a source and a cause of poor MH.

This narrative synthesis review has highlighted the necessity for future research exploring women's experiences of violence within a UK context. The current research will explore the impact of EVAWG, the impact of discourses around violence in UK media and how these

experiences may negatively affect women's wellbeing and sense of self. This research was conducted by a researcher with shared lived experience within a UK context and endeavoured to place an intersectional lens within the research and interview questions. Finally, Women's Aid (2020) indicates the importance of research with a social justice framework incorporating survivor voices and co-production. None of the papers in the review included this methodological consideration. Therefore, this research will include consultation from a women's refuge to address this gap and seek to centre women's voices.

## Research Aims

The goal of this research was to explore the overt and covert ways women experience EVAWG in a UK society that is still dominated by patriarchal power structures (Freeman & Freeman, 2013; Olufemi, 2020), and favours femininity as viewed via the male gaze (Mills, 2017; Mulvey, 1975; Oliver, 2017). Furthermore, I was interested in how women navigate these dominant societal discourses of womanhood and violence and how this may impact them. For this research, I contextualised different experiences of encroachment, harassment and violence within the overarching term EVAWG and specify when I am talking about experiences of actioned violence.

I will provide justifications of the chosen methodology to answer the following research questions:

1. How do acts of everyday violence affect women?
2. In what way do dominant discourses present in UK society shape women's views of their experiences and themselves?

# CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

This chapter introduces the philosophical orientation, rationale for methodological theory and analysis, and study procedure. I outline the chosen analytic method, detail the procedure, data collection, participant recruitment, and ethical approval. I present the ontological and epistemological stance of the research and discuss my positionality and reflections regarding the research process.

This study utilised a qualitative design and recruited eight women for interviews. A Citizen Participation approach (Arnstein, 1969) was included in the research, where I sought consultation with staff (N=5) from Next Chapter, a DV refuge and this included consultation prior to the interviews. The method of analysis was Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis (Thompson et al., 2018).

## Qualitative Methodology

This project utilised a qualitative research design to explore how women's experiences of EVAWG may affect their sense of self, wellbeing and recovery, alongside scrutinising how the societal discourses of VAWG may influence women. I chose a qualitative method as this allowed for an open-ended enquiry of living experiences (Willig, 2013; Watters, 2022) and encouraged exploration of women's experiences whilst also considering the multiple contexts that women live

in (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Utilising a qualitative methodology was advantageous as it contextualised a rich, comprehensive understanding of the research process (Ruark & Fielding-Miller, 2016).

A qualitative design aligns with the theoretical underpinnings and assumptions of the research as it attempts to interpret phenomena parallel to women's meaning-making of their experiences of EVAWG. Previous qualitative research that has explored women's experiences of violence has provided insights into women's subjective experiences of violence and has captured a greater understanding of context, risk factors and meaning associated with violence (Testa et al., 2011; Weil, 2017). With this considered, there would be disadvantages to using a quantitative design. While it can explore specific aspects of experience, like locus of control, it lacks focus on the individual nuances of experience that women discuss, like how women describe experiences in their own words, thus it would have been difficult to quantify their experiences (Nunn, 2010). There is a wealth of research exploring the impact of VAWG. Yet, there is a paucity of health research exploring the impact of experiences of EVAWG, such as threatened violence, fear, harassment and encroachment, which the research aims to explore. Moreover, within this research, I also thought it prudent to review the narrative around gender and VAWG present in UK society, as this has been lacking in existing research. The aim of this was to explore how this patriarchal discourse may perpetuate gender norms and consequently may affect women who have experienced EVAWG and is an important addition to considering systemic factors. Therefore, adopting a qualitative design allowed a more detailed and thoughtful emergence of themes and scrutiny of this phenomenon that a quantitative design may have lacked (Barker et al., 2002; Nikupeteri et al., 2022).

We interpret qualitative research to expand our knowledge of the underlying systems and structures that form people's experiences (Willig, 2013); therefore, it is important to consider the ontological, epistemological and theoretical underpinnings. This means exploring the ontological stance; what framework informs the research's understanding of 'what exists', the epistemological stance; what framework informs the research's understanding of 'how do we know what exists', and the theoretical stance; what theories inform the research's understanding of how we are understanding the phenomena and what is informing our interpretation of knowledge.

### *Ontological Stance*

The ontological position of this research aligns with critical realism (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 2008), which assumes that a 'real world exists', however this 'real' world is independent of, but relates to, knowledge and discourse (Koopmans & Schiller, 2022; Sayer, 2010). Critical realism understands that a person's 'being' in the world is positioned within 'the real' world, 'the actual' world, and 'the empirical or observable' world (Parr, 2015). For example, we could view 'the real', 'the actual' and 'the observable' worlds like an iceberg (Fletcher, 2017). The deeply submerged invisible layer of the iceberg is 'the real' world. This is where the deep-rooted underlying causal mechanisms, structures and processes happen that may influence and shape people's 'actual' and 'empirical' world. The partially submerged invisible layer is 'the actual' world. This is where processes, events and real-life interactions happen with people and social systems even if they are not directly observed. The visible iceberg above water is 'the observable' world. This is where things are directly observed or experienced, like events, actions and words we directly perceive.

Regarding this thesis, ‘the real’ world would be underlying causal mechanisms and structures such as, patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, socio-economic factors and the normalisation of violence. ‘The actual’ world would be acts of violence, such as IPV, rape, everyday violence, stalking, and sexual assault. These events are observable, however they are not isolated incidents but rather products of underlying causal power. Then ‘the observable world’ would be people’s subjective experience of these acts of violence and how they have made sense of their lived experience. This means there is a distinction between the worlds; the ‘real’ world exists independently from a person’s constructions and theories of their ‘observable world’. People’s perspectives and interpretations play a role in how we comprehend what we observe as there is a complex interplay of factors at different levels of reality. This means that people have layered conceptualisations of reality (Bhaskar, 2016; Stavrianos, 2025); people’s existence is not a single reality, rather it consists of multiple stories and interconnected levels, which are shaped by structures, like the patriarchy. In other words, people’s realities differ.

Critical realism highlights the importance of language in constructing or ‘describing’ reality, yet also understands that structural and systemic power shapes this knowledge by how it imprints on the world and the possibilities or oppression it produces. In other words, language and discourse hold much power; this highlights the importance of language and demonstrates how words can become loaded and may lead to a person benefitting or disadvantaging from the use of words. For instance, victim-blaming benefits the perpetrator yet subjugates the person who has been subject to violence. Thus, critical realism suggests that language, ideas and concepts mediate our external and internal world. A person’s experience of ‘being in the world’ is shaped by discourse, structural power and the events they engage in (Pilgrim, 2020).

Critical realism (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 2008) emphasises a causal explanation of this world that one 'knows', or the 'observable' world, in that it is constructed from a person's experiences, perspectives, structures and relationships, mediated by factors including society, culture, and context (Wynn & Williams, 2012). Critical realism (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 2008) questions what is meant by realism in a social structure by exploring the nature of agency, structure, systemic considerations and implicit or explicit ontologies that people operate within, or to put simply a person's understanding of reality (Archer et al., 2016; Sorrell, 2018). Therefore, critical realism posits that in a social world, 'reality' can only be understood within the structures and events of people and their presuppositions of the world and how people understand this. Thus, determining knowledge in a critical realist paradigm must be critically attended to in a suitably ontologically reflexive manner regarding what is being claimed about the world from the research (Rutzou, 2016).

Pilgrim (2020) highlights the importance of working in an ontologically reflexive manner and suggests three implications to working with a sense of reflective integrity. Firstly, he highlights that we must be continuously reflective to try to understand structures and be constantly aware of our personal context, as well as the broader systemic context. Secondly, he stresses the need for critical reflection, as our interests and values will govern our field of inquiry in research. For instance, I am aware that this research holds personal meaning for me, and I chose this field of inquiry partly due to my own experiences of womanhood, violence and oppression within dominant patriarchal structures and societal discourses that enable violence. Thus, to hold some confidence in my interpretations, I must be aware of my positionality in relation to my claims. Finally, Pilgrim (2020) highlights that researchers are prone to commit both ontic and epistemic

fallacies. The former is our tendency to accept what we see without being aware of our acculturated biases, which may look like me not being aware of how women's racialized identities may impact their experience of violence. For instance, the disparity in press coverage between Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa (Bleakley, 2022) or not being aware of how a white woman's willingness to go to the police may differ from a Brown or Black woman's willingness to report a crime of violence. Taking this into consideration, we may confuse reality with our chosen reality, which may present as presuming somebody else's reaction towards their experiences of womanhood and violence will be the same as my own.

This awareness of ontic and epistemic fallacies links back to the need to be critically reflective and commit to epistemic relativity by understanding that a person's experience of reality is a social production, transient and fallible, yet rejects judgmental relativity that assumes that all experiences are equally valid (Parr, 2015). This rejection of judgmental relativity is important as to presume that all experiences are equally valid diminishes people's intersectional identities. For instance, if I was to presume that my experience is the only truth, this would contribute to rather than mitigate against colonial, white and heteronormative frameworks of knowledge. My interpretation and experience of being a white, cis-gendered woman will differ from that of a Black or Brown or trans woman, as women's experiences will differ depending on the spectrum of gender inequality, hierarchical structures and discrimination. Therefore, the personal reflections I present are my interpretation of reality, which holds some subjective knowledge but does not present itself as objective truth. Thus, a person's experience of reality shapes their 'being' in the world; Archer et al. (2016) refers to the criteria of accounts of reality that may be more conceivable than others, due to causal power structures (Parr, 2015). Therefore, it is plausible that presenting women's

experiences offers a contradictory account of reality due to the maintenance of gender inequality informed by the patriarchal power that is dominant in our society (Silvestri, 2017).

Critical realist researchers suggest that social research aims to reduce oppression and inequality, yet many attempts at emancipation in post-modern era often re-establish oppressive structures (Price, 2015). For instance, within academia, there is still an absence of women's voices, in particular women of colour, thus as previously stated, does not help to dismantle oppressive patriarchal and colonial structures (Gibney, 2022; Fox Tree & Vaid, 2021; Tanne, 2022; Woolston, 2020). Moreover, social or gender inequality is not removed solely through laws, policy or legislation; gender equality is legally enforced in the UK, however there are still many structural and systemic factors that undermine this (Price, 2015). For instance, we witness this in the narrative around VAWG, which is passive and blaming (Hancock, 2021). Therefore, critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008) creates a space that analyses these individual and structural factors (Ghafournia, 2014).

I deduced critical realism (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 2008) as a good ontological fit for this research. Relativism posits that there is no 'reality' without perspective; knowledge exists about context, culture and society, which acknowledges the impact of socio-cultural systemic factors that this research explored (Pessu, 2019). However, relativism has been criticised because of its principles of equality; it does not allow for critique of differing attitudes, which can lead to apathy and a lack of progress as it does not consider the importance of equity with equality (Baghramian, 2004). Therefore, concerning gender equality, which was one of the tenets of this research topic, relativism, or more accurately, cultural relativism, may have the tendency to overlook important

factors that affect women, such as sexism, misogyny and patriarchal structures present in society (Ghafournia, 2014).

Critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008) permitted a critical lens that understood that reality is created within relationships and structures. Yet, it also included a layer of objectivity that allowed for criticism of individual and structural factors present in today's society that may impact women's wellbeing and identity (Price, 2015). Moreover, intersectional theory can underpin critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008); highlighting how important agency is within the multi-layered identities of women that have been shaped by their different experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 2017; Ghafournia, 2014). Thus, this aligns with the research objectives that attempted to ensure the research data was rooted reflexively in women's narratives of their experiences.

### *Epistemological Stance*

This study aligns with the epistemological principles of Feminist Relational (E)pistemology (FRP) theory (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). FRP posits that 'knowledge' is socially constructed, yet acknowledges that people and the knowledge they construct are fallible. Thus, the construction of knowledge needs continuous critique and reconstruction. Akin to social constructionism, it focuses on people's interpretations of their experiences and the world (Willig, 2013). Research aligning with social constructionism is interested with how knowledge is constructed, and attempts to identify and understand the context-specific and localised productions of 'knowledge' within different contexts (Willig, 2013). Thus, this could suggest that social constructionism aligns with the phenomenological considerations of the research. Social constructionism would consider how women construct their social reality within the context of their encounters of violence and their

interaction with discourses of VAWG, and how this may have shaped the meaning-making of their experiences (Andrews, 2012; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). FRP is concerned with this, yet differs as it suggests that knowledge is relational; knowledge is discovered in unison with other people, social environments, cultures and intergenerational ideals (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). Thus, it considers that 'knowledge' is socially constructed, yet 'knowing' develops as people relate to one another and have experiences with others and the world. From this, 'knowledge' updates and evolves, and understanding develops by different perspectives and meaning-making (Thayer-Bacon, 2010).

Utilising FRP (Thayer-Bacon, 2010), therefore, allows me to consider the influence of how I analyse the data, considering I have my own experiences and biases. It indicates the importance of reflecting dynamically throughout the research instead of a singular standalone section. As my proposed 'knowledge' is one interpretation, it is fallible, yet fallibility does not mean that it is not helpful or informative. My inquiry process is open-ended and research can benefit from the occupation of different epistemic positions as this encourages critical thinking and difference, thus may ultimately may be a way to meet a more diverse range of needs (Hannon, 2019).

FRP offers a social feminist lens and a reflective theory that endeavours to be adaptable as we gain further insight into people's experiences and different phenomena (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). FRP aligns with the phenomenological principles of the research; it is inclusive, and it is of imperative importance that people's meaning-making of their experiences is at the forefront of analysis. This highlights the importance of centring women's insights into their own experiences in the analysis of the interview data to explore the potential impact that VAWG discourses may have on women.

For example, traditional gender stereotypes can poignantly impact individuals' construction of their social and personal reality (Hentschel et al., 2019). We have all likely had others interpret us via these stereotypical lenses; I am a ciswoman who dresses quite 'femme' and because of this people sometimes presume that I am heterosexual. Whilst I can appreciate the privilege of this assumption reduces my threat of homophobia and violence, this preconception misses a core part of my queer identity and can pose a threat to my perception of self. For example, in the past, I have perceived myself as 'not queer enough', something also heightened by the erasure of queer role models in discourse (Stewart, 2021; Taylor & Moreira, 2024). Traditional gender stereotypes can also lead to a negative appraisal of self in relation to VAWG. The impact of these dominant narratives may, for example, lead women to perceive themselves as to blame, or as undeserving of support. Thus, highlighting the importance of scrutinising existing discourses around VAWG and the impact these discourses may have upon people.

Adopting FRP as the epistemological framework for this research allows for the consideration of language choice in the research write up. This was an important factor for me; I wanted this research to be accessible to women not just in academia but also to the women who participated. One may suggest that this is by the principles of FRP for 'knowledge' to be inclusive to the women who helped to construct the knowledge, thus, this allows a degree of flexibility of moving away from traditional 'academic' language. FRP also offers an interesting lens to consider why the fear or threat of violence and the impact this may have upon women has received less attention in research and will help contextualise the impact of this experience. The chosen analytic method is suitable for the focus on women's understanding and the meaning they ascribe to their subjective experiences (Davidsen, 2013; Galbin, 2014). The theoretical structures of critical realism and FRP

influence this study and aim to produce an accurate and critical analysis of women's experiences, alongside the understanding that analysis is an interpretative and conceptual account (Sayer, 2010; Thayer-Bacon, 2010).

This was salient for the current research, as how women interpreted their experience of EVAWG and what their potential impact from society's narrative was, differed. Thus, it was important to adopt ontological and epistemological underpinnings that valued the construction and meaning-making of their individual experiences. Moreover, it was important to clarify the ontological and epistemological position of the research to begin addressing the power structures regarding social conceptions of gender that may have maintained these power imbalances (Bartky, 2020; Brickell & Chant, 2010; Lukes, 1974, 2005). The ontological and epistemological stance of the research underpin the chosen analytic method.

## Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis

The rationale for selecting Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis (FRDA) (Thompson et al., 2018) as the most suitable analysis method and consideration of the suitability of other analysis methods are outlined.

The overarching method of analysis used within this research was Discourse Analysis (DA) (Brown et al., 1983), which explores and understands the underlying meaning of words and takes a particular focus on interpreting the power structures underpinning people's words (Yazzdannik et al., 2017). There are many forms of DA (Shaw & Bailey, 2009), thus I considered a variety of

methods of DA. One method considered was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Mullet, 2018), as previous research highlights that within traditional DA people's experiences can be minimised, ergo this can affect power and agency within the research (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; Saukko, 2008). CDA (Mullet, 2018) is more accessible and flexible than traditional DA as it considers more perspectives and individual interpretations in the analysis due to its interdisciplinary nature (Johnson & McLean, 2020). The interdisciplinary nature of CDA posed as a strength for this research as the focus of the study intersects with psychology, social justice, and sociology; therefore, CDA would have enabled the ideas from these different disciplines to combine when developing themes and explanations (Williamson & Johanson, 2018). However, CDA has been criticised as the analysis process may fall party to bias due to the individual interpretation and analysis of the studied narrative (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017).

Another deliberated method was Narrative Analysis (NA) (Riessman, 1993) as it considers people's stories by exploring both how, and the order in which people tell us their stories. This information can then tell us about how people make sense of their life experiences. NA (Riessman, 1993) has a social constructionist stance, it focuses on individuals' meaning-making of their experiences and would have systematically, clearly, interpreted and deciphered insights into how people would have structured their narrative, what the function of their story was and determine any implications gathered from women's interviews, which aligns with the current research (Brown, 2017; Willig, 2013). Despite these advantages, DA was deemed more suitable as it explores and understands the underlying meaning of words and focuses on interpreting the power structures underpinning people's words (Shaw & Bailey, 2009).

After considering DA (Brown et al., 1983), CDA (Mullet, 2018) and NA (Riessman, 1993), it was decided that FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) would be the most suitable approach for this research, as it focuses upon identity, experience and power structures and is advantageous in keeping people's voices as central themes within the discursive account. Moreover, I deemed FRDA more flexible; it was more considerate of women's discourse by valuing their living experience, and positions the larger cultural, psychological and social contexts of women's experiences (Fletcher, 1998; Gillborn et al., 2022). This research aimed to consider the ways women make sense of how EVAWG impacts them. Therefore, FRDA's 'voice-centred analytical approach' aligned with the research aims and considers the individualism of distress, emotion, identity and experience, rather than restricting experiences to predetermined categories (Thomspon et al., 2018).

DA is a valuable method for exploring power and identity (Parker, 2013), which is important for the current study, exploring how EVAWG may affect and diminish women's identity and sense of power. Yet, feminist concerns regarding power relations and agency highlighted the lack of living experiences within the broader discursive accounts of DA, ergo the absence of first-hand experience makes the feelings and meaning-making behind the discourse invisible (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Therefore, FRDA, which puts the 'personal in the political' accounts for identity and voice explicitly and captures the rich context of women's voice and the interplay of their experience and identity (Thompson et al., 2018). I considered IPA, an interpretative method that employs a 'double hermeneutic' approach that allows researchers to stay close to data and maintain an ideographic focus that refrains from generalising (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Yet, FRDA ensures that women's voices remain central to the discursive accounts and interpretation is not just dependent on the researcher's perspectives (Thompson et al., 2018).

Therefore, a ‘double hermeneutic’ approach may have muddied the meaning taken from women’s discourse, which can be a particular issue with research exploring power, as marginalised voices have the potential to become more obscured in the researcher’s process of understanding. FRDA tries to counter this and magnify voices in structures of power and privilege (Thompson et al., 2018).

Criticisms of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) may outline it as akin to traditional thematic analysis or reflexive journaling if concrete reflecting processes are not in place (Vaandering & Reimer, 2021). To counter this, I incorporated reflexivity throughout the research process, keeping a reflexive journal to reflect upon the impact the research had on me, and how this might subsequently affect my interpretation when analysing data (McGrath, 2021); this reflexivity is embedded throughout the written research. Therefore, the inclusion of this process should help the research to remain faithful to women’s voices, and explore how they have been mediated by societal discourse centred around VAWG, thus, remaining cognizant with the voiced experiences that are a central component of FRDA (Saukko, 2008; Thompson et al., 2018).

Ahmed (2017, p. 30) states “an individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. A girl is made responsible for his violence: that is structure”. This highlights how voice cannot be heard without context, it is important to put ‘the personal in the political’ and liberate oppressed voices (Martín-Baró, 1994; Thompson et al., 2018). FRDA acknowledges that the interaction between structural context, discourse and individual experience is complementary, rather than mutually exclusive (Gavey, 2011; Thompson et al., 2018; Ward, 2021). This framework is characterised by ‘theoretical impurity’, which understands that no single theoretical

framework can fully capture the complexity of phenomena; which in this instance refers to EVAWG (Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, as FRDA acknowledges multiple perspectives, it may highlight and integrate different aspects of what contributes to EVAWG, which therefore allows for a more comprehensive, holistic and nuanced understanding of EVAWG (Gavey, 2011; Thompson et al., 2018).

### *Creative Methodology*

The interviews utilised the use of visual creative methods (Reavey, 2011; Willig, 2013) by asking women to bring three photographs. The first photograph represented them feeling empowered, the second represented what womanhood means to them, and the final photograph represented anything of their choosing, and why they chose to share it. The use of photographs within qualitative research, such as Photovoice, can potentially empower women to reclaim their experience (Christensen, 2019). The use of visual methods also enables women to express themselves in a non-verbal manner, which has shown the potential to reduce power inequalities that can be present in research (Reavey, 2011; Thomas et al., 2022). Hypothesised scenarios created from discussion in the pilot interview and consultation with Next Chapter were also utilised. I perceived the inclusion of two everyday scenarios that women face, catcalling and experiencing unwanted touch and stares at a bar, to be a helpful addition in guiding heuristic inquiry, considering how women would think, feel and act in these everyday situations (Ramirez et al., 2015).

Interviews began with a general discussion and sharing of their three photographs, creating an informal space with a sense of ease where the women could author their experiences. This may

have enabled women to retain a sense of ownership and agency, empowering them to guide the discussion, therefore potentially reducing the power imbalances that are present in interviews (Hill, 2013; Richard & Lahman, 2015; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023). Photographs can offer another dimension to the exploration of women's embodied and personal experiences, as they may evoke hidden feelings or emotions (Richard & Lahman, 2015). Previous research highlights photographs in interviews can uncover memories and emotional reactions, which may offer a richer account of their experience (McGowan, 2016; Pyle & Alaca, 2018; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023). Moreover, using photographs and scenarios within interviews has the potential to open up a more multi-dimensional discussion and facilitate the expression of a person's storytelling of their own experiences (Hockings et al., 2014; Richard & Lahman, 2015; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023).

### *Consultation*

The research used a Citizen Participation approach (Arnstein, 1969) via consultation with staff from Next Chapter, a women's refuge, in the research process, such as consultation regarding the interview questions and research objectives. This is to ensure the research is grounded in women's voices, which have been shown to be missing in current research (Oram et al., 2022), and so that the research can be inclusive and accessible to all women, with the aim of empowerment.

### *Survivor Framework*

It would have been inauthentic if this research did not consider my positionality concerning the research questions. I am a woman with experiences of various forms of violence and I am aware that this forms some of the reasoning towards why I gravitated towards conducting a piece of

research within this area. Therefore, it was important that this research transcended traditional clinical and academic research methods, placing value and ontological legitimacy on bridging first-person experience and research credibility (Alyce et al., 2023; Russo, 2012). Thus, a survivor framework informs this research, I utilised non-traditional and creative methods throughout, focusing on multiple forms of knowledge and reflexivity throughout each section of the thesis in an attempt to provide a remedy to the inaccessibility of traditional research (Alyce et al., 2023; McCarthy, 2023). This polyvocality, which means multiple voices, is central and aligns with the epistemological framework of FRP (Thayer-Bacon, 2010), which underpins this study. It is an attempt to subvert the traditional academic style and move towards a holistic approach that celebrates rather than condemning 'otherness' (Cooke, 2020; McCarthy, 2023; Ortega et al., 2023), which was important, as I wanted this research to be accessible and also read by women who are not academic or clinical researchers.

### *Feminist Theory*

Considering the topic, feminist theory underpins this research. Primarily I wanted the research to adopt an intersectional feminist lens; it was important to me that the theoretical underpinning of this research was not informed by white feminism (Moon & Holling, 2020). I value the importance of how a person's intersectional identity mediates their experience and used of polyvocality to gather multiple different narratives to share experiences. I have attempted, where possible, to deviate away from traditionally referenced theory when considering power, such as Foucault (1982), in lieu of women, such as Bartky (2020), who also theorise on the subject matter. Moreover, considering the research objectives and the chosen analysis method, it was important to consider poststructuralist feminist theory, too, as this generated critical awareness on what it

means to ‘be’ a woman, and the ways we act in society whilst offering critique of the dominant discourses of how we view women (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Therefore, I chose to adopt an intersectional and a poststructuralist feminist framework to underpin this research.

Feminist theory aligns with the ontological positioning of critical realism; they both offer a critical and emancipatory framework, as they understand that power relations transfers via communication, context and language (Gunnarsson et al., 2016; Machin & Mayr, 2012). An intersectional feminist poststructuralist framework contributes to a deeper and richer analysis of these power relations and discourses mediated by women’s disparate experiences (Willett & Etowa, 2023). It is informed by an understanding that the everyday empirical world umpires complex phenomena and offers an avenue for advocacy, agency and political praxis, which means doing what you believe by putting the theory, skill or value into practice (Parr, 2015; Willett & Etowa, 2023). By utilising an intersectional poststructuralist feminist framework, I can analyse the social phenomenon of EVAWG on both an individual and a systemic level, considering both privilege and oppression and how these power relations produce social injustices, inequalities and disparities (Willett & Etowa, 2023).

## Design

This research uses a cross-sectional, qualitative design to examine the impact of threatened violence on women’s sense of self and wellbeing. Due to the research topic, a homogenous sample was required; therefore, I interviewed a purposive sample of women. When considering collection methods for the data, it was important to choose a method sensitive and attuned to a person

speaking about their personal experiences, and important that the interviews allowed for open-ended and empathetic dialogue when exploring their living experience (Watters, 2022; Willig, 2013). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018).

### *Participants*

This study reflects the homogeneity required per the research objectives, the sample consists of eight participants, all of whom are women, between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-seven, with a mean age of 30 years (see Table 6). Whilst eight participants is a small sample, research highlights that saturation can be achieved with this number of participants (Kuzel, 1992; Morse, 1995; Namey et al., 2016). Inclusion criteria included women between the ages of eighteen to forty who have had an experience of EVAWG. I chose this age range as research highlights this age group as a high-risk for VAWG (Oram et al., 2022).

As the research focused on women's living experience of violence, men and any individual who is currently experiencing significant distress when the study was conducted were excluded. Exclusion criteria are necessary as they assist with recruitment and help to avoid coercion and unnecessary distress of participants. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, and characteristics that adhered to the research focus were considered (Coyne, 1997). I utilised many platforms for recruitment, including Next Chapter, and Instagram. I recruited further participants using snowball sampling, whereby existing participants contacted subsequent participants from people they knew (Goodman, 1961).

I have outlined the demographic data of the women interviewed in Table Six below. It is important to note that I have used the language women used to describe themselves. I have included pronouns because despite the research centring on women's experience, gender is political; she/her, he/him and they/them pronouns, to name a few, are associated unequally due to institutional power and gender norms (Cooper, 2020). Therefore, by not assuming pronoun use, this research offers a stance that attempts to move away from gender-normative ideals and move towards a stance that affirms gender identities (Sevelius et al., 2020). Historically, research rarely considers context and identity and predominately recruits WEIRD samples, therefore I included a wealth of demographic data as an attempt to counter this and to align with the intersectional feminist lens of this research (Sabik et al., 2021). It is important to consider how these women's different intersectional identities shape their interactions and experiences and consider processes of oppression and privilege (Bauer, 2014).

**Table 6.**
*Participant Information*

| Pseudonym & Pronouns | Age | Ethnicity | Sexuality | Class | Employment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Florence (she/her) | 33 | White British | Queer | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Mia (she/her) | 30 | White British | Straight | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Eleanor (she/her | 27 | White British | Bisexual | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Nora (she/her) | 22 | Black/White African/British | Straight | Middle-class | Student |
| Violet (she/her) | 30 | White British | Queer | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Sylvia (she/her) | 31 | White British/Swedish | Straight | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Ruth (she/her) | 27 | White British | Straight | Middle-class | Full-time |
| Hazel (she/her) | 37 | White British | Straight | Middle-class | Mat leave |

### *Data Collection*

This research conducted semi-structured interviews, which research highlights as a successful method when discussing sensitive phenomena (Willig, 2013). Interviews adopted a relaxed approach that allowed for flexibility to consider women's different experiences (Brinkmann, 2014; Krueger, 1994). Rapport is important to build in any research and semi-structured interviews facilitate this, as well as the potential to gather rich data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Krueger, 1994). However, given the sensitive nature of the research and within the context of voices that have been traditionally silenced and marginalised, good rapport must be built so that the research data does more than 'give voice' (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2009; Thompson et al., 2018). Research exploring power runs the risk of disingenuously allocating power from

marginalised groups; for example, I could 'give voice' to the women I interview, yet if I do not build a good rapport, they may feel as though they cannot trust me to share their living experience or I may miss nuances within their narrative. Ergo, 'giving voice' then becomes false as it is only a temporary allocation of power, which does not centre meaning-making of women's experiences (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2009; Thompson et al., 2018).

Many feminist researchers emphasise that by providing women with a platform to speak about their experiences, can help empower them, and provide insights into their experiences rather than keeping them silenced (Edwards & Holland, 2013; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Jankowski, 2017). Furthermore, I chose interviews as the data collection method, as it was important to me that women's voices were centred within the work and that the women who participated felt a sense of agency in the research (Ritchie & Barker, 2005).

Produced via consultation with Next Chapter and guided by relevant literature, I developed a semi-structured interview schedule, which included non-directive and open-ended questions (Appendix A). Following a semi-structured interview schedule creates space for participants to be the storyteller of their own experiences. Rather than following a structured interview schedule that does not allow for the natural patter and flow of a conversation, a semi-structured interview schedule has a more conversational dynamic that creates a sense of ease between the interviewer and participants, which allowed for more in-depth exploration (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Valentine, 2005). Consultation from Next Chapter played a key role in the construction of these guides; it helped to ensure that language was accessible, topic areas were salient and that the research remained grounded in the voices of women who have experienced violence. Moreover,

consultation is missing in current VAWG research (Oram et al., 2022) therefore it was deemed important to include this within the current study so that women's voices can be seen and heard throughout the research (Ritcher & Barker, 2005). Prior to the interviews, I conducted a pilot interview; this was a helpful process as it informed the inclusion of hypothetical scenarios as part of the interview schedule, removed confusing jargon, ensured language was inclusive and straightforward and allowed me to practice the questions in a genuine, yet informal setting (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

I conducted interviews primarily on Zoom and one in-person between August and November 2023. Interviews took between one hour and fifteen minutes and three hours and thirty-two minutes; this was dependent on the level of information that participants wanted to share and constraints such as childcare or work. I audio and video-recorded interviews using the Zoom recording software and I audio-recorded the in-person interview with a Dictaphone. I transcribed interviews verbatim for the data analysis. I began interviews by asking participants to share demographic information if they were happy to, and I shared my details with them, too. By sharing my details, I tried to disable some of the power imbalances present when interviewing. I asked participants about life growing up and now, which enabled the interview to start with a conversational nature and generated a sense of ease. We discussed the three photographs, representing empowerment, womanhood and a representation of their choosing. We discussed their context and the different emotions and experiences in the images and revisited photographs throughout the interview to help generate reflection and discussion. I asked participants to imagine themselves in two scenarios, aiding heuristic inquiry and drawing on how participants would feel in everyday scenarios.

***Data Analysis***

FRDA is an interpretative method that advocates for the 'personal in the political' within research (Thompson et al., 2018). A focal point of FRDA is the voice analysis of women's sense-making of their experiences, alongside locating this within the broader social discourse (Thompson et al., 2018). Thompson et al. (2018) outlined an analytical and heuristic framework for structuring and facilitating analysis. The process is iterative and inductive, it focuses first on individual accounts, and then assesses them collectively by moving back and forth between the accounts (Thompson et al., 2018). The process is twofold, encompassing two analytical phases. The first phase comprises a poststructuralist DA and includes seven steps to establish discourses, discursive accounts and discursive realms from the data (Thompson et al., 2018; Willott & Griffin, 1997; Woolhouse et al., 2012). The second phase: 'analysing emergent voices in relation to discourses', comprises four steps (Thompson et al., 2018).

I transcribed interviews and consistently approached them following these two analytical phases. The first phase comprises a poststructuralist discourse analysis encompassing seven steps (Thompson et al., 2018). *First:* build familiarity with the talk by reading, re-reading and multiple listening to establish meaning and note any emerging themes. *Second:* 'chunking' talk to identify systematic patterns of meaning and changes in topic. *Third:* labelling a chunk of talk with descriptive codes to reflect the general topic of discussion. *Four:* identifying 'in-vivo themes', or recurring patterns of meaning by establishing chunks of talk labelled under similar or the same code into named 'theme' files that represent the discussed topic. *Five:* recognise the construction of each theme and identify the different ways of talking about the identified discourses. Once each theme established different discourses, I repeated the process until I identified all discourses

around each theme. *Six:* analyse the different discourses to identify any that 'fit' together to tell an overarching story that represents discursive patterns in the data. *Seven:* this step considers theory by considering power, genealogy, and previous research to understand how the discursive patterns may occupy broader social, ideological and historical contexts (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). In this stage, I consider the different 'discursive realms' or conclusions regarding the data; they provide a starting point to consider how the data may define or obscure the stories told and should be traced back to the voices interviewed. Examples of in-vivo themes identified in the data can be found in Appendix B.

The second phase analysed participants voices concerning the discursive patterns, by identifying the first-person accounts of each discursive pattern within the original video extracts (Thompson et al., 2018). This formed the basis of the second phase and utilises the analytical approach of Gilligan et al.'s (2006) 'Listening Guide' method, which emphasises multiple listening to a text. This voice-centred analysis considers the personal and political account, and the multiple voices and layers, that underpin a person's individual experience (Saukko, 2008; Thompson et al., 2018). The analysis consists of four steps. *One:* multiple listening to the first-person account to establish the plot, identify the present themes and reflect on the research process. *Two:* generate 'I Poems' by identifying statements made in first-person, including each 'I' statement with their accompanying verbs and place each statement in sequential order to present lines of a poem. This allows the first-person voice to shine through and considers how each person speaks about their experience. *Three:* listen for 'contrapuntal voices', or contrasting voices, within the individual accounts. This step seeks to identify the multiple layers to the story and 'capture the personal in relation to the political', as FRDA considers the self as mediated by experience and discourse and

as a ‘central site of meaning’ (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 19). *Four:* The final step of analysis puts the personal in the political by composing a theoretical account of the analysis by joining the individual findings concerning the research objectives. This step magnifies women’s voices within the dominant discourses rather than obscuring the personal experience (Thompson et al., 2018). See Appendix C for additional ‘I poems’.

## Ethical Considerations

Matching guidance from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018), ethical approval was requested before the study, sought and gained from the Ethics Committee at the University of Essex (Appendix D). VAWG is a highly sensitive topic to discuss, which I approached cautiously. Moreover, the safety of participants is paramount and is at forefront of all research decisions (WHO, 2016). I considered this within the ethics application, with supervisors, from consultation with the refuge Next Chapter and through personal reflexivity.

Another important component of the research is that participants felt empowered, that the research was affirming and did not cause harm or distress (Elcioglu, Oncel & Unluoglu, 2004) and that I obtained their full informed consent. The WHO (2016) put together guidelines for ethical and safety considerations when conducting research with women who have experienced violence, which I considered throughout the research. I gave participants an information sheet (Appendix E), informing them fully about the research, methodology, rationale and potential benefits and risks before interviews. Participants gave written consent for their involvement and the recording and storage of the interview (Appendix F). The consent forms also reminded participants of their

rights, including the right to end the interview and withdraw their data. Following the interview, I gave participants a debrief sheet containing my contact details, so they could contact me if they had further questions about the research. The debrief sheet also contained details of Next Chapter and a list of women-focused charities they could contact in case of subsequent distress (Appendix G).

I assured participants of their confidentiality and anonymity within the research by ascribing them pseudonyms, anonymising personal data in their transcripts, which I labelled under their ascribed pseudonym. With participants' permission, I included demographic data of participants' age, class, employment, ethnicity, gender, pronouns, location, and sexuality, and I included this information as a person's intersectional identity may shape their personal experiences. Only I had access to the raw data, which I stored in password-protected files on the cloud service Box; after I completed the transcripts, I destroyed the audio and video-recordings. Upon completion of the DClinPsy course, I will destroy the transcripts too.

With their consent, I asked participants to bring three photographs to the interview. I reminded participants that their photographs would not be included in the written paper and any identifying details from the photographs discussed would be changed or removed in the write-up. I reminded participants that quotations would be included in the research write-up, but anonymised, that they did not have to answer any questions, that we could skip questions, and that we could pause or terminate the interview at any time.

Violence can have a profound impact on distress, such as depression, eating difficulties, anxiety and PTSD (Ellsberg & Emmelin, 2014; Ludermir et al., 2008). Talking about their experiences may cause women to relive their experience, cause dissociation and could trigger feelings of distress, and the women may feel vulnerable after discussing their experiences. Moreover, rape culture (Attenborough, 2014) and gendered media (Wood, 1994) can cause labelling, discrimination and distress in women. I minimised risks of distress during the interviews by using methods such as active listening skills, a conversational approach, and creative methods that gave participants agency to author their own experience. I encouraged women to only talk about what they felt comfortable discussing. I engaged empathically and, considering my own experiences of violence and womanhood, offered a relational perspective and joined with each woman in a shared experience, which can enable a sense of ease and trust within interviews (Alyce et al., 2023). Furthermore, talking about their experiences of EVAWG may lead to elevated levels of shame or distress. Therefore, it is imperative to have a support system for the women who participated during the research process and upon completion of the interviews. Partnership with Next Chapter was essential, as they provided consultation and offered support to women who participated, even if they chose to withdraw from the study. I also provided a list of alternative charities and helplines that the women could use during and once the research was completed. I reminded the women that they had my contact details and that they could get in contact if they had any concerns or needed additional signposting or support.

The research used Citizen Participation in the form of consultation; it was important to ensure that this did not fall party to tokenism and was a positive experience for the women involved. To ensure this, I sought supervision, and I considered reflexivity throughout by keeping a reflective account

during the research process by keeping a reflexive journal (McGrath, 2021). To ensure safety, welfare and comfort of participants, I adhered to the ethical principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity throughout the research (BPS, 2018). I was aware of my positionality and potential power differentials; thus, I conducted the interviews with women as the focus and explored sensitive themes only if was guided by them. Moreover, I asked women to consider their MH prior to taking part and I reminded them of the risks that may arise from speaking about their experiences, such as feeling vulnerable or evoking feelings of distress.

## Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an essential process in qualitative research; I must consider how my assumptions may affect my interpretation of the data (Andrews, 2012). Personal reflexivity also helps to improve the rigour and validity of analysis as it permits an insight into the exploration of the subjective, intersubjective and objective methods of analysis and interpretations (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity can act as an ethical tool; it can help to critically review how a person's positionality can influence analysis, and can help reduce bias, address power dynamics and facilitate social justice (Alyce et al., 2023; Deblasio, 2022; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Therefore, I have included personal reflexivity throughout the research that explores my positionality towards the research and my reflections (D'Silva et al., 2016). Positionality includes considering my ontological and epistemological assumptions, alongside any beliefs or presumptions I may have surrounding the data, personal agency and human nature (Bourke, 2014).

I attempted to assume a critical and self-aware approach that recognised my role as the researcher, the interpretation of data, power differentials and the role of consultation within the research (Hammersley, 2012). I have outlined my personal interest in the research, presuppositions I had, considerations regarding the research and consultation process, alongside what I learnt. I reflected upon my ontological and epistemological considerations and my positionality during this process. One measure I used was keeping a reflexive journal, which provided a space to consider different emotions that the research process evoked and facilitated more potential for me to engage with participants and my emotional depth (McGrath, 2021). This process facilitated more potential for emotional depth as it helped me gain more insight into the living and possible shared experiences of the women who shared their stories, alongside what it was like being a participant and consultant involved in the research (McGrath, 2021).

# CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

## Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present an overview of the findings from the Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis (FRDA) (Thompson et al., 2018). Each interview was analysed and informed the production of four discursive themes and 'I poems' for each participant, which helped keep the women and their voices central to the research. I have outlined women's emergent voices and discursive patterns in women's talk by using 'I poems' and extracts from their interviews. This demonstrates how patterns appeared across their accounts and exhibits the individual ways women discussed their experiences of everyday violence against women and girls (EVAWG).

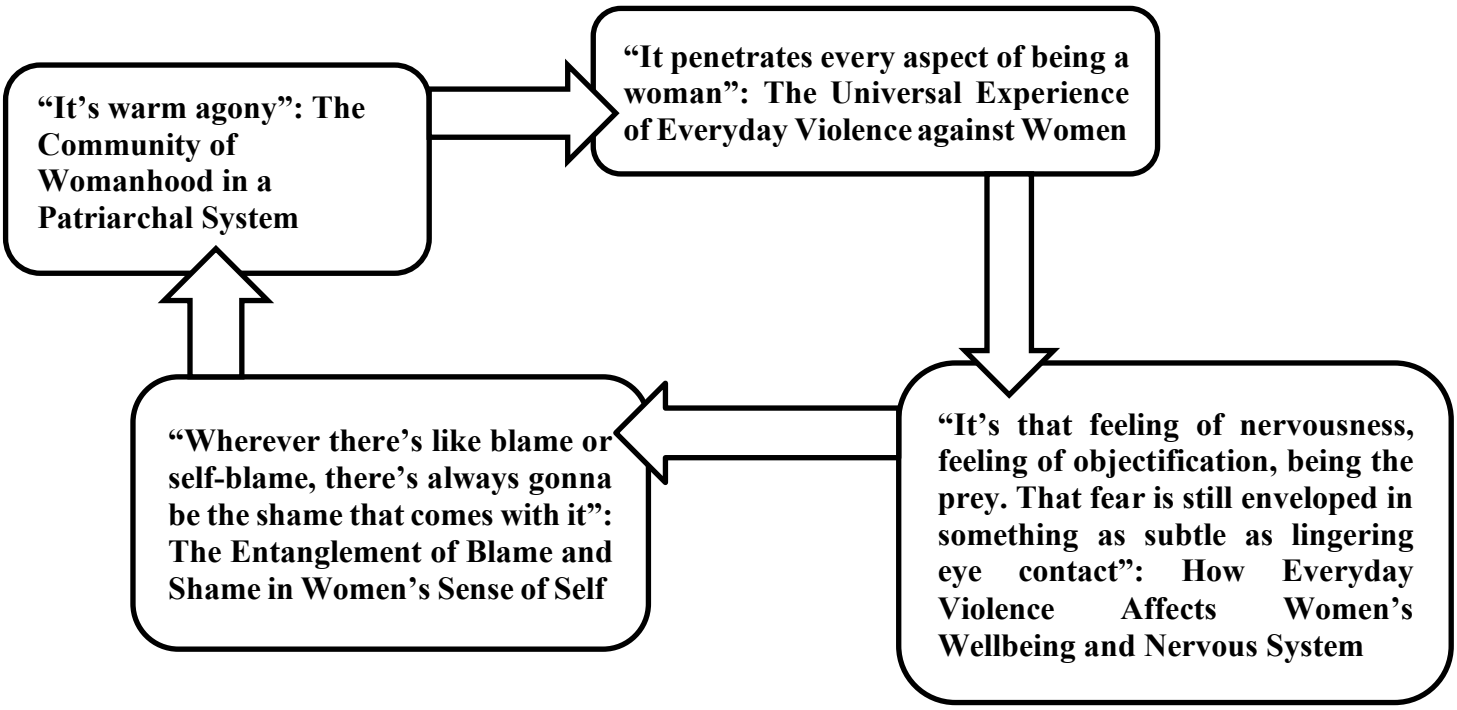
## The Use of Photographs

As part of the interview process, the women brought three photographs to each represent womanhood, empowerment and a representation of their choosing. Whilst the photographs are not shared for confidentiality purposes, they enabled the women to express themselves non-verbally. The hope was that this would help empower them and help reduce power inequalities present in research (Christensen, 2019; Thompson et al., 2022). Moreover, the use of photographs highlighted some of the contrapuntal voices that were present in women's discourses and often evoked a more emotional delivery in their discourse. Thus, this enabled women to retain ownership of their stories, which filtered into the discursive themes and enabled women's voices to be amplified in the research.

## The Discursive Patterns and 'I poems'

The FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) produced four overarching discursive patterns, which I have displayed in Figure 2. These are displayed as a cycle, as each theme interconnects, compounds and affect the overall experience of EVAWG.

**Figure 2.**
*Discursive Patterns: Themes from the Analysis*




There was a broad range of ideas that informed women's discourses in their interviews, they shared similar and contrasting emotions, felt trapped by cultural ideals and the normalisation of violence, had their sense of safety threatened and experienced a negative impact on their MH, yet also experienced joy and experienced the community of womanhood. There was a familiarity across accounts regarding EVAWG; all indicated the ubiquity of EVAWG; they had countless

experiences, which began in childhood, all experienced a negative impact on their wellbeing, and experienced shame, self-blame or fear from attempting to keep themselves safe whilst navigating the world around them. There were differences in their accounts too, such as additional experiences of actioned violence, different reactions to their experiences, and a range of emotions.

As per the analysis protocol of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018), the second analysis stage included the production of 'I poems'. Thus, following the discursive patterns that emerged from women's talk about their experiences of EVAWG, I identified contrapuntal voices and tones related to the discourses to demonstrate the vast expanse of experience among the women, presented in their 'I poems'. This showcased the similarities and conflictions both among the participants and within the own realms of their discourses. I have presented women's 'I poems' throughout the themes, with the final theme ending with an 'I poem' from each woman. This sought to keep the 'personal in the political' and the women's voices and accounts central by presenting their voices within each theme.

## "It penetrates every aspect of being a woman": The Universal Experience of Everyday Violence against Women

This theme opens with Eleanor's 'I poem'; her voice is one of disempowerment and she speaks to the discourse around how normalised EVAWG is for women in UK society. Eleanor talks about how pervasive the experience of EVAWG is and the toll this takes on her to survive in a patriarchal society.

**Eleanor**

I am so fucking used to it

We're just so used to those acts

[How many times you think] I had to deal with this in my life?

I was crying because this world is a place where he can grab my tit with no consequences

I came back and I just felt like I should be fine with it

I'm so used to it.

A prominent discourse that emerged was the pervasiveness of EVAWG; all the woman had different stories about the unrelenting and incessant incidents of EVAWG that they had experienced:

"Everyone's experienced that kind of unwanted physical attention or touch" (Mia)

"Somebody leering at you and making you feel uncomfortable and threatened" (Ruth)

"I've never really felt as a woman, safe walking around" (Hazel)

"Multiple occasions of being, particularly, sort of out in a bar somewhere late at night or on the tube you know something like that, and there's a familiar scene of a man kind of being persistent or not being welcome and sort of over staying" (Sylvia)

> "I mean, yeah being in a club like, having my tit or my ass grabbed, I don't know, or my body touched in anyway without my consent" (Eleanor)

> "Walking down the street and feeling like a man's gonna harm you" (Violet)

> "They're like cat calling or harassing you" (Florence)

> "You get a lot of it in like nightclubs. You'll have a guy approach someone. There definitely have been times where, like I've seen an extremely drunk girl, I mean I've had this too, with a guy who's just kind of like gone over and inserted himself in her space, cracking on to her" (Nora)

All reflected on their multiple stories of EVAWG, however Mia emphasised her experience of speaking about this with close friends and the realisation they were having similar experiences if feeling afraid, of encroachment and of violence.

> "It was like seven girls or something. We are all sat on the bed, and one person was like 'oh, I had this experience.' And like we literally just went 'round the group like everyone sharing, having, like a violent, horrible experience that had happened to them. And it was like it was just one of those moments where the penny just drops, like everyone's had something where it hasn't been like right? We'd all had a horrible threatening experience. Multiple times!"

Mia highlights here the ubiquity of EVAWG and how pervasive this experience is for women. Mia's discourse is conflicting; she is appalled that her friends share the same experiences, yet her tone also indicates that she experienced a sense of camaraderie, too. However, alongside Mia's reflection was also a lack of shock that others had this shared experience: "we've all experienced it". A feeling seconded by Hazel, who reflected "I think a woman wouldn't be surprised as well, that's just kind of standard. You know. Standard experience that you have as a woman in this country". Nora offered a different narrative, discussing how EVAWG is "something that gets dismissed" and is "not taken seriously". Nora reflects on how the message she received was not one that encouraged her to put her own needs first, but rather a silencing of them:

> "Nobody actually kind of said, you know, you don't actually need to have sex, or you don't actually need to do this, or you don't need to fancy them back or talk back or like their comments."

Mia and Hazel's reflections highlight the importance of speaking about these everyday experiences, as even if women know that others experience it too, it may still create a sense of otherness if it is not spoken about openly, as it has become so normalised as an experience. Nora's reflection, whilst different to Mia and Hazel's, also highlights the importance of talking about EVAWG. Nora highlights how in a society that favours patriarchal power that for those who benefit from the system EVAWG is a shock and how "it's disgusting that it's such a shock". Creating more space for women's experiences of unwanted attention, objectification, street harassment and violation of their boundaries to be spoken about and challenged can help to de-normalise EVAWG as an expected experience. Thus, this may help shine a light on how

devastating EVAWG is as an experience, particularly for people who may not realise how pervasive EVAWG is.

The women spoke about how these constant and sometimes subtle forms of violence encroached upon their physical and mental space, taking on many different guises. Nora reflected on how the pervasive impact of EVAWG "penetrates every aspect of being a woman" and that women endure these everyday experiences of violence, which evokes feelings of unsafety due to this constant threat of violence. Moreover, Hazel's 'I poem' speaks to the need for EVAWG to be addressed as a systemic issue. Hazel discusses her relationship with the male gaze and the discourse present in UK society around violence, particularly around the blame placed on women.

**Hazel**

I don't think lots of men would always consider, as they don't have the same experience

I think and certainly the responsibility still often lies with the victim rather than the perpetrator

Your sense of self feels quite attacked and there's been times when you might feel kind of blamed

I think the media kind of, in some ways probably makes it worse

I don't think the media helps

I think it has a huge impact on your day-to-day

I don't think it's taken as seriously as other offences.

Hazel describes here how media messaging is negatively skewed regarding VAWG, informed by the patriarchy and societal norms, which then shapes women's sense of self, evokes self-blame and shame and plays a significant role to why women have "Been made to think it's normal." (Ruth) as "In the media it is sort of becoming normalised." (Hazel). Ruth and Hazel discuss how the discourse present in society is passive, it does not name the perpetrator and instead reinforces discourses that make it "Very much woman blaming." (Nora). The women's discussion highlight their acceptance towards the inevitability of EVAWG, and they reflect on violence as a normal experience:

> "We all of us are so like it's so ingrained, and it's so normalised that we're kind of stuck in this cycle of it now." (Violet)

> "You wouldn't think anything of it. You wouldn't think that's kind of gross. Why would you? Because you think that's normal." (Ruth)

> "As women, we normalise it because we just we're kind of used to trying to be strong about these kind of things." (Mia)

They speak to how incidents of EVAWG have become so normalised that they are not surprised when they occur or that they occur for other women. They describe an overwhelming sense of acceptance around "how normal it is" (Florence); EVAWG is "just so a part of life" (Violet) as something that happens to women regardless of who they are or where they are. From their narratives, we can deduce that this creates an ongoing, underlying threat for women in their

everyday lives, limiting freedom and autonomy and influencing how women can navigate public spaces. Violet speaks to this threat, outlining how normal it is to expect EVAWG to occur:

> "Like being touched up in a bar. I'm like, yeah. It's just so normal and that's happened like hundreds of times, or like being followed home, or anything like that. Where you feel someone following you for a bit. And you're just like, oh I'm really scared now, but it's fine. This is normal".

Violet describes how these everyday incidents induced fear and limited her movements. Incidents such as groping, as Violet implies, are sexual assault, which Hazel clarifies, "so many things that become like, normalised experiences that are like criminal offences", but because this has become normal and expected behaviour, it is not reported this way. Sylvia's voice, whilst she too spoke of her, and the women she knows, many experiences of EVAWG, also differed. Sylvia spoke of her desire to want to fight back and expressed her anger at the injustice of EVAWG:

> "It gives you a reason to be angry about it, or a reason to associate with it, or kind of a cause to sort of not accept that in your own life or have a discussion about it with others".

Sylvia expressed anger and highlighted how her anger is a powerful tool and "very important" as it is "a communicator, something that's not fair, and something that needs to change.". Whilst Sylvia's tone and expression is different to that of Violet, Hazel, Florence, Ruth and Mia, she also agreed that EVAWG was too normalised, highlighting how important it is to not accept it, but

resist and fight back. Sylvia stressed that "A painful, but important part of it is at least making it *[EVAWG]* more visible.", and similarly Nora expressed her anger with the perpetrator:

> "That's what's fucking us all up really, men, women, all the genders, pretty much is the fucking patriarchy."

These voices reminds us of the power of resistance. It offers an alternative narrative, to not accept EVAWG and highlights the power of the patriarchy and how it is used as a tool to normalise violence, so to resist is a powerful and subversive act.

Another narrative that was discussed by all women was when their experiences of EVAWG began:

> "[*Cat calling*] you're like, literally in school uniform" (Mia)

> "Thinking back to when I was at school, we got sexually assaulted all the time as like teenagers by the other boys in the class. And that was like normal. [...] That was just part and parcel of being at school and being a teenager." (Hazel)

> "When I was 14 that time [*catcalling*] I was in my school uniform. I screamed. I was like 'I'm going to school!'" (Eleanor)

> "I even had a man actually know my dad when I went to school. Told me that he'd leave his wife for me." (Nora)

"[*Catcalling*] at first when I was a teenager" (Ruth).

"Most men don't know what it's like being a child and a young woman growing up and having the male gaze." (Florence)

"We've had to deal with this like every day. Since I was probably what like 11 and maybe younger." (Violet)

"*[Encroachment]* I think a lot more of it was, was when I was much younger, and you know when you were sort of teenagers." (Sylvia).

For all, their experiences of EVAWG began in childhood. Florence reflects on how "Power and patriarchy, men's power and patriarchy relies on a system of women having low self-worth". Similarly, Eleanor reflects on how, "It all comes down to self-worth at the end of the day. And I think, since yourself is being built when you're so small and it's interrupted by that encroachment and violence like that. Yeah, it gets skewed". Florence and Eleanor speak to how societal power dynamics likely inform the acceptability of EVAWG, as women are subjected to the male gaze, patriarchy, and perceived ownership over themselves by men during everyday encounters. Florence and Eleanor highlight here how EVAWG is one of the social mechanisms used by the patriarchy to force and keep women in subordinate positions in society. EVAWG infiltrates women's sense of self from a young age, eroding their self-worth and normalising it as a part of everyday life. From Florence, Eleanor, and the other women's previous reflections, we can infer

that these early occurrences of EVAWG and the social environment women grew up in played a foundational and formative role in shaping their experiences, infiltrating women's sense of self from a young age and normalising it as a part of everyday life.

Additionally, Violet spoke about an experience she had as an adult whilst she was at work, where her male boss said to her "paedophiles must love you". Violet went on to reflect on the impact this comment had on her:

> "I've never been able to shake it. And I think that's the power of language, isn't it? It's like people, especially men, probably say these things, but they don't actually realise that like people have been, women have been dealing with these issues, for, like our whole life. So that's where we're at. That comment is actually really hurtful".

Similarly, Ruth also received a comment sexualising her as a child when she was an adult, where an old friend told her "You look eleven with boobs". Violet and Ruth's discourse highlight how prevalent the sexualisation of young women and girls in the mainstream has become, thus deeming it appropriate by those who make such comments without understanding the harm those comments cause. Their discourse is illustrative of the 'Lolita effect' phenomenon, highlighting how young girls are viewed as sexual objects, and if they do not conform, then they, instead of the perpetrator of the harmful comments, receive blame and shame. This links to the "whole Madonna/whore thing", which Hazel reflects on that she is "protected because I've done my duty as a woman" by becoming a mother. She critiques this narrative, comparing how before she was a mother, she was depicted as a 'whore', whereas now she is a 'saint'. She reflected some positives on this as "no

one's looking at me in that sexual way that they looked at me before" (Hazel). However, she also highlights how society continues to set up double standards for women that are created by the male gaze and the male entitlement to the female body, alongside the perception that you have failed as a woman if you do not become a mother, as this is an expected gender norm.

There were many reflections made by women, with experiences and feelings that were both shared and different from one another. From all interviews, a prominent discourse was made about how EVAWG is a universal experience, but that each woman had their own different experiences. All women's experiences of EVAWG began in childhood and it is likely that this played a formative role in normalising EVAWG as a part of everyday life. Furthermore, there were reflections on how on one end of the spectrum there is the sexualisation of women and girls, which perpetuates gender norms of women being small, vulnerable and less authoritative and worthy. Whilst on the other end of the spectrum you have the sanctity of motherhood, which again perpetuates gender norms, as when women are doing their expected role, such as child rearing, then they are no longer deemed a sexual object and have earned their worth.

Cultural norms assailed through women's narratives; their accounts highlighted how EVAWG was not only pervasive but also had become expected because of how normalised VAWG is in society. Prominent discourses were entwined with cultural and gender norms in society and the influence of patriarchal power, and the women's accounts reflected on how this normalises EVAWG and how it is used as a tool to subjugate women. The influence of language was reflected on regarding the negative impact of the patriarchy for those who do not benefit from it, and for those who do, how EVAWG is a shock and not an issue that is taken seriously. In contrast, women reflected on

how it was not a shock that other women experienced EVAWG. Yet, women's narratives also considered how the power of sharing their experiences and listening to other women's experiences of EVAWG left them feeling less othered. Finally, in women's accounts there was both an acceptance of EVAWG as a normal part of everyday life, but also a resistance to it and a desire to fight back. This alternative voice, one of resistance, highlighted how the power of a different narrative can serve to de-normalise violence and challenge its existence as a part of everyday life.

This theme ends with Sylvia's 'I poem'; her account holds a sense of rebellion. She acknowledges the universality of EVAWG and voiced her frustration at the endless violations that women have to endure. Her discourse was also peppered with her felt anger around gender norms and her desire to be her own protector, yet also a sense of disempowerment around these prevalent experiences.

**Sylvia**

I sort of sense something

We all know that feeling

I think that is it's learned behaviour in women

I hate the notion that I need to be protected by someone else

I kind of reject that

I want to be able to protect myself

I can't do anything about it.

## "It's that feeling of nervousness, feeling of objectification, being the prey. That fear is still enveloped in something as subtle as lingering eye contact": How Everyday Violence Affects Women's Wellbeing and Nervous System

Florence's 'I poem' introduces this theme; her voice indicates how EVAWG has negatively affected her. She stresses that she feels under threat, violated, and has difficulties with the relationship with her body, ending with a powerful statement around safety.

**Florence**

I wasn't asking for you to assess me, and now I feel frightened

I felt so encroached upon, he didn't have to touch me, so violated

I think that's why, like I have a hyper-vigilance to things

I think the body thing has been a real journey for me

[Maybe] I never feel safe.

In response to the constant threat of EVAWG, all women reported that they had experienced a negative impact on their MH. In particular, all referred to being in a fight/flight/freeze state of hyperarousal:

"I think that's why, like, I have a hyper-vigilance to things." (Florence)

"I also like have been hyper-aware." (Eleanor)

"I remember feeling hyper-active? Stiff as a board." (Ruth)

"You know that kind of hyper-vigilance and feelings of fear." (Hazel)

"I like ran away, and like it was so weird I just like my whole entire body went into like, I want to just like run away." (Violet)

"The perceived danger, it makes me feel nervous." (Sylvia)

"When I was younger, I would have just, like probably frozen or shut down myself, and like now I'd probably like scream at like them and run." (Mia)

"I can have days where I really feel nothing, highly numb." (Nora).

The women's accounts highlight that they feel hyper-vigilant or constantly under threat or surveillance. Their reflections indicate the imbalance women experience of felt power in society. Women are subject to policing by the male gaze and oppressed by patriarchal and gender norms, which limits their agency and seeks to control their sense of self and physical whereabouts. Consequently, EVAWG has emotional and physical impacts on women, with this constant state of vigilance creating tension in their bodies. Ruth spoke of the thoughts running through her head

following an incident of encroachment. Ruth was harassed at work, and the aftermath of this experience led to a decline in her MH and a constant state of hyper-vigilance and alertness:

> "Who's there? Who's there? Who's that? Who's there? Who's outside the shop? Where could he be? Who's there? Where's security? Where's the panic button? What?"

Here, Ruth's state of mind demonstrates the long-term impact that encroachment can have. She felt unsafe in her workplace and, as a result, is tense, which, for her, also manifested as physical pain:

> "Sometimes I would get into bed at the end of the day and actually relax. And then I'd feel the pain of being so tense, so alert, and I just sometimes it just made me cry. I just like lay there and be like, oh, my god! That hurts so much!".

Ruth highlights how the experience of EVAWG can have a severe physical impact on women's bodies. Yet, how these states of vigilance on the body and the effect of these everyday incidents remain unchecked by women, highlighting the damaging consequence of the normalisation of violence. Another state of hyperarousal acknowledged as a way they keep themselves safe was the 'fawn' response:

> "I think it's like super common for women to use their sexuality or their femininity in those situations to diffuse a situation like when they don't feel safe" (Nora)

> "What I actually often do is that I will defer and like, become smaller, and try and be like sweeter and more agreeable and more feminine, so that I can get away" (Florence)

> "Trying to be the peacekeeper 100%." (Eleanor).

Here, Nora, Florence and Eleanor speak about an alternative trauma response that gets ignited when they feel unsafe. This may suggest that the women have internalised perceived societal gender roles as a safety strategy; they "change our behaviours" (Hazel) and are submissive, appeasing and placating. Violet "make*[s]* myself smaller" and "less remarkable", Florence becomes "really sweet and small", and Sylvia does "more blending in by not standing out". This strategy keeps women safe yet limits them. They have to conform to gender norms to keep themselves safe and, as a result, cannot fully express themselves, which leaves them feeling inferior. Eleanor attests to this, reflecting on how her experiences of EVAWG were a "really relevant part of why I feel dysregulated a lot of the time", highlighting how hyper-vigilance, a fear state and hyperarousal can become a significant emotional burden for women. Mia and Violet added to the discussion around dysregulation, reflecting on how they exist in states of being "fear-driven" and experience dissociation where they are "trapped by confusion" (Mia) or "don't know where I am? And I'm just like, get very confused" (Violet). Their accounts indicate that hypervigilance and dysregulation are a response to the threat of and experience of everyday violence that women endure and consequently elicits symptoms of panic, fear, and exhaustion, which can have long-lasting emotional and physical effects.

Further to experiences of individual fear, Hazel, Nora and Ruth reflected on how EVAWG evoked this constant state of threat and fear in women, and not just individually, but also as a collective fear. They spoke of the protocol they have as women, to check in with their friends when they have been out:

> "Saying to my female friends, text me when you get home." (Hazel)

> "Please just make sure that you text me, because you know, you never know what could happen." (Nora)

> "We actually have a code within my friend group." (Ruth).

Hazel, Nora and Ruth's account emphasise the emotional toil of EVAWG, as women are fearful not only for themselves but for other women too. Moreover, some of the women's accounts also expressed further fear and mistrust of the police:

> "Just like the lack of action from the police." (Mia)

> "Most of the time the police can't do anything about it, because it doesn't fit into a crime." (Ruth)

> "Bit of a difficult feeling towards like police." (Nora)

> "Never really been particularly proud to be a police officer"[2].

These women's accounts, including a participant who works in the police, are imbued with negative feelings towards the police and stress how misogyny and the normalisation of violence is a threat even in institutions like the police, a service that is supposed to serve and protect, not harm. These women's accounts spotlight how a lack of awareness in the police may increasingly limit women; they may be less likely to report crimes or seek support, which can further compound isolation. Furthermore, Sylvia reflects on 'stranger danger' discourse and the power that comes with not naming the perpetrator:

> "The fact that they don't name the attacker, or abuser, or or something, makes them less scary, doesn't it? Makes them more anonymous, and it sort of makes it more sort of acceptable cause you don't, you don't know them in the same way."

Sylvia acknowledges how 'stranger danger' discourses shift blame away from the systemic issues of VAWG by targeting unknown or invisible perpetrators. Thus, Sylvia recognises that passive language, in not explicitly naming perpetrators, VAWG remains a phenomenon that is actioned by strangers, so it keeps the perpetrator passive and shrouded in mystery and elevates feelings of fear for women, as they do not know by who, or where, they could experience violence. This highlights the importance of language and its impact on people as prevalent discourses may harm women, engender self-blame, limit their daily lives and induce fear and a lack of freedom:

[2] Despite all the women's accounts being presented under their pseudonyms, I have not referenced this quote under any of the pseudonyms to retain anonymity and confidentiality.

"We want to get home safe at night" (Sylvia).

Similarly, to Sylvia's reflections, Mia's 'I poem' acknowledges the impact of gendered norms and the UK discourse in normalising violence and the use of passive language. Mia speaks about her distrust of institutions, and her tone is coupled with anger and sadness as she recognises how much there is to still do regarding VAWG.

**Mia**

I think they're portraying women badly

I think it's been known for ages that the police have a really toxic culture

I don't think violence happens overnight, basically

I see a lot on stranger danger, but not the dangers of the people you know.

I thought, it's my fault

[Am] I a bad person?

I don't want to be a victim.

Another narrative discussed by all women was acknowledged by Florence. She highlights how it is not only actioned violence that affects women but also that "the main impact on MH is not necessarily the act of aggression or the incident itself. It's everything." All women reflected on how the effects of EVAWG significantly impacted their MH:

"I have suffered with bulimia like ebbs and flows for the last like ten years." (Florence)

"That's when the eating stuff started." (Eleanor)

> "It did have a negative effect on my mental health." (Nora)

> "*[Mental health]* it was really bad short-term to the point where my friends and family were telling me to get in touch with the NHS. That I should get help because I can't do it on my own." (Ruth)

> "Massive anxiety and like panic." (Mia)

> "Disassociating from them." (Violet)

> "Yeah, it definitely has had an impact on yeah my mental health." (Hazel)

> "It definitely impacts me because you just feel like you're quite heavy, like you're carrying a lot. And it would be nice to not do that. You know. It would free up my brain and my energy." (Sylvia).

Their reflections highlight how EVAWG is a catalyst for distress and can have a significant, negative multi-effect on women's wellbeing. EVAWG can evoke feelings of anxiety, depression, dissociation, trauma symptoms, eating distress and "insomnia" (Eleanor). This highlights the potentially dangerous impact of EVAWG; it can negatively affect women's MH, self-worth, self-esteem and identity. Thus, from the women's accounts it is evident that experiencing fear, threat, surveillance and violence can have a significant effect on women's mental health in different ways. The impact of EVAWG on women's MH and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness signal how important it is to "highlight the amount of violation that's involved" (Nora) from experiencing everyday violence both for prevention against and adequate support for EVAWG.

Mia, Florence and Violet's accounts differed from the others, as they also had devastating experiences of actioned violence. For Mia, the impact of actioned violence on her MH was significant:

> "I think things like this can actually just have, like such a huge impact on your mental health to the point where you're literally like, like, don't care about your life anymore. And like just like, literally, don't care if you die".

Mia's highlights the extreme impact this had on her self-worth, which was reduced to feelings of suicide and powerlessness. Florence reflected on her experiences, "to have like encroachment, or like, my body violated had been like traumatising". Florence considered how her experience of actioned violence and her experience of encroachment elicited similar feelings:

> "This is just eye contact and you know the two experiences were really different. But the feeling was exactly the same".

Florence highlights how the subtle, everyday violations she repeatedly endured accumulate, and had a profound effect by producing unresolved trauma and exacerbating poor MH. For Florence, she had an additional devastating experience of actioned violence and reflected on how she felt threat and fear in both this and her experiences of everyday violence. Florence's reflections are important to consider the spectrum of violence that women experience, recognising how catastrophic, to name a few, IPV, rape, and sexual assault are, whilst also recognising the detrimental impact of EVAWG, and not minimising these experiences.

Violet held a different narrative regarding her experience of actioned violence, she "shut down emotionally" and "avoid*[ed]* any life media, I guess, anything about violence against women, because it just makes me too stressed". Violet noticed she minimised her experiences of EVAWG, she "treat*[s]* it like a bit like, throw away. I'm like, oh, it's fine, whatever this happens to people" or that "if I am upset by it, I'm like, oh, I'm just being silly and like it could be worse". Similarly, Mia minimised her experiences of EVAWG, reflecting on how she developed more avoidant coping strategies from her experience of actioned violence. Regarding encroachment Mia responded, "You don't want to make too much of a big deal about it. Even if you did feel a bit shaken".

The impact of Violet and Mia's experiences highlight how feelings of powerlessness not only make women feel smaller, and undeserving, but contributed to Violet and Mia also minimising the impact of their other experiences. Violet's discourse was also conflicted, she reflected "I think I do feel like kind of violated" and that it feels "like it's like constant, isn't it? A constant experience" when she was reflecting on her experiences of encroachment. I noticed that this elicited sadness in Violet, she "imagine*[ed]* having no fear or like having no concept of that fear" and wished "that I like wasn't constantly reminded that I'm a woman". Violet's powerful statement acknowledges the threat and fear that women endure daily and how limiting this is; her discourse is emblematic of the social positioning felt by women. Thus, the women recognise the danger and how they are viewed as inferior and the impact is "a dampening down of myself" (Sylvia).

The women each made many reflections, some inter-linking and some distinct. For all women, EVAWG had a detrimental impact on their MH. Whilst all women highlighted that their experiences of EVAWG had an impact on their nervous system, there were differences in how this impacted them. For instance, they reflected on using the 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze' and 'fawn' trauma response. Some resisted, others ran, some closed up, whilst others tried to de-escalate the threat by being compliant, appeasing or pleasing. Their accounts highlight the impact EVAWG has on women's nervous system and the different ways they try to keep themselves safe. Yet, also signifies the limitations women put on themselves or how they might conform to limiting gender norms in an attempt at keeping themselves safe. Furthermore, by being in states of vigilance, women may be more disconnected from their feelings or put aside their own needs to cater to perpetrators needs to avoid additional harm or conflict.

Fear was a theme among all women. Their accounts emphasise the emotional burden women experience from existing in a world where they feel unsafe and also the collective fear they experience for other women. Women also reflected on how using passive language or 'stranger danger' discourses increased their fear and further limited their freedom. Furthermore, half of the women reflected on their experience or feelings towards the police. Stressing how they do not view the police as a safe space they could seek support.

Women highlighted the harmful impact encroachment had on their physical and mental health. Everyday violence has become normalised, so women may be less likely to process their experiences and check in with how being in a state of vigilance or how they feel following an incident. Thus, women may be less likely to consider the consequences of EVAWG, which may

leave long-term emotional scares and induce MH difficulties, fear-driven behaviour, complex trauma and a disconnect from their bodies and identity. Alternative narratives also reflected on experiences of actioned violence. Yet there were differences; experiences of actioned and threatened violence produced similar fear responses for Florence, yet for Violet and Mia they minimised their experiences of EVAWG despite still feeling "shaken" (Mia) or "violated" (Violet). These reflections signify the spectrum of violence women experience and how important it is to recognise all the different impacts of violence, in order to best support women.

Violet's 'I poem' ends this theme; her discourse indicates the conflict she felt about experiences of EVAWG. She minimised her experiences as less, despite feeling terror and a visceral impact on her nervous system whenever she encountered these everyday accounts. Her voice highlights the difficulties women face in feeling validated in their experiences.

**Violet**

[If] I am upset my it, I'm like, oh, I'm just being silly

I feel like it's like constant, isn't it?

I do feel like kind of violated

I think inside, it's sheer terror

My whole entire body

I want to just run away

[Makes] me feel less like important in the world

I just wish that I like wasn't constantly reminded that I'm a woman.

## "Wherever there's like blame or self-blame, there's always gonna be the shame that comes with it": The Entanglement of Blame and Shame in Women's Sense of Self

Nora's 'I poem' introduces this theme, highlighting the complexity of shame and blame in women's experiences of EVAWG. Her discourse is informed by her sense of insecurity, her sense of inferiority and the reminder of how pervasive shame is and how it can infiltrate your sense of self.

**Nora**

I've doubted myself

I felt a lot, very, very shameful

I also did feel like I did blame myself

I think it really messed with who I was

I felt quite dirty

It was more like a violation of me

I felt so disregarded

You'll never stop carrying it unfortunately.

The presence of shame and self-blame was prevalent in women's discourses in differing ways. The normalisation of violence, informed by the discourse present in society, led to shame and blame becoming internalised and entangled in women's sense of self. Ruth, Mia and Nora expressed feelings of responsibility regarding EVAWG:

"It's my fault because I wore a dress." (Ruth)

> "I thought, it's my fault." (Mia)

> "Maybe it's because of what I've done." (Nora).

Ruth, Mia and Nora's discourses mirror that of news tabloids; they should change their behaviour or they are at fault. For instance, Ruth and Nora indicate in tabloids they "didn't address the perpetrator", that "it's almost seen as it's on the women's onus to like, onus to like change her behaviour" (Ruth) or that they "always see it like she was raped, not like he raped her" (Nora). Their accounts highlight the importance of language, because how the media perpetuates victim-blaming discourses or depicts women in these adverse ways, shifts the attention away from the systemic problem. This passivity shifts the blame on to women; it does not use actioned language and fails to name the perpetrator, which leaves the prevalent discourse of VAWG to be one that lacks empathy, compassion and invalidates their experiences by dismissing them as unimportant. Thus, it is plausible that Ruth, Mia and Nora internalised this notion and now blame and shame themselves. Many held this discourse, believing that they somehow provoked the violence. An alternative discourse held was of apathy:

> "I think apathy really is kind of my biggest emotion that's coming to the forefront right now." (Hazel)

> "I can't do anything about it." (Sylvia)

> "I should feel sad about it. But unfortunately I don't, or I should feel angry about it. But I don't. Just that's kind of how normal it is. Yeah, pretty resigned." (Florence).

In contrast, Violet reflected on her feelings regarding her experiences of EVAWG:

> "Makes me sad"

> "*[Feel]* like less of a person"

> "Day-to-day feelings of like being less, less worthy, or like not important."

Yet, Violet struggled to access anger:

> "If I let the anger out. I don't think I'd stop."

> "I really struggle with anger, anyway."

Violet's account may highlight the prevalent gender norms and expectations that are placed on women. Violet struggles with anger; a common narrative is that men are angry and women are more passive or sad, so she may have internalised this. Therefore, instead of releasing her anger, feelings of low self-worth or sadness may prevail. Violet, Sylvia, Hazel and Florence's reactions to everyday violence may describe how persistent experiences of encroachment coupled with existing in a patriarchal society can violate women's sense of self. Such as, leaving women feeling

disempowered or apathetic because of the "expectations *[put]* on the way women should act in society" (Sylvia). Eleanor further expands on this feeling of disempowerment or lack of agency that women might experience by reflecting on the 'victim' label:

> "If you are a victim and there's been a perpetrator like you then don't have any agency or control over your situation."

> "Being a victim, like once you are, you can't not be."

> "If you're a victim, it's almost like that's an identity. Or a brand or sticker or… Like something that you like… A state. No, not a state. Something you inherently are. Powerless."

> "If you are a victim and there's been a perpetrator. You then don't have any agency."

Eleanor acknowledges that she feels held accountable for the violence, but also reflects on how language reinforces these ideas. For instance, that 'victims' are powerless and passive, which can undermine women's agency and consequently women may internalise this as an objective truth. Eleanor goes on to suggest how this labelling mirrors gendered roles; she feels women are "just acting out these predetermined gender scripts". Eleanor's account emphasises how labelling and gender norms can exacerbate the felt lack of power women experience under the force of the patriarchy. Women are expected to conform by being submissive and 'yielding' to the male gaze

and “the responsibility still often lies with the victim” (Hazel). Mia, Hazel and Nora’s reflections on their identity shares ground with Eleanor’s reflections on language and power:

> “I’m really gross. I’m not right. It’s more a deep-seated feeling of just like not feeling like you. I think you do just lose a feeling of like worthiness in yourself. You feel like, yeah, you’re just like a little bit done with yourself.” (Mia)

> “Your sense of self feels quite attacked and there’s been times when you might feel kind of blamed, or felt shame for what’s happened.” (Hazel)

> “My sense of self was definitely skewed” (Nora).

Mia, Hazel and Nora reflected that they experienced a fragmented sense of self that felt diminished and blamed themselves for their experiences. Additionally, they also offered an alternative narrative; how discourses around VAWG, gender norms and expectations exacerbate blame from others. They highlighted how discourses compound this message that “you’re to blame” (Mia) by interrogating women if they have done “anything to provoke that?” (Nora) or “if you got drunk… the narrative is ‘oh, you shouldn’t have’” (Hazel). They highlight the need for accountability in who is causing the actioned violence and addressing current gender and societal norms, as if the current status quo is not challenged then this can perpetuate a cycle of shame, blame and erode women’s self-worth and sense of self.

The women's accounts highlight how their experiences of EVAWG, like living "with fear of a man like, since I was tiny" (Eleanor) or "encroachment, or like my body violated" (Florence), or the responsibility to prevent EVAWG otherwise "it's my own fault" (Ruth), all collectively entangle. These experiences then likely affect women's sense of self, evoking feelings of guilt, self-blame, shame and inadequacy. For instance, Nora and Mia spoke of how they withdrew and ended up "feel*[ing]* quite lonely" or "very isolated" (Nora) or began to "question who you are because you're like, am I a bad person" (Mia). Nora and Mia highlight how corrosive the impact of EVAWG can be; shame embedded itself into their psyche, leaving them feeling "so disregarded" and "really messed with who I was" (Nora). Mia voiced how she felt "a bit gross" following an encounter of encroachment, with others expanding on this discourse, where symbolism underscored their narratives:

> "I felt quite dirty, in a way. And I was like, nothings really happened." (Nora)

> "I felt so like, filthy and horrible." (Eleanor)

> "Felt so dirty, that's why I had to scrub myself clean." (Ruth).

Symbolically, feeling dirty often represents a feeling that you have done something wrong or have been violated. It can imply a sense of shame or moral impurity or that one is no longer valuable or whose sense of self is damaged. Ruth then spoke of how feeling contaminated also engendered physical harm, as she "boil wash*[ed]* my hands" and hurt herself because of this feeling of being dirty: "It hurt a lot. I think I might have kind of burned myself a little bit on the water". Thus, Nora,

Eleanor and Ruth's discourses read as an expression of the psychological and emotional discomfort that they experience existing as women, where the trauma and psychological impact of feeling unsafe became internalised and produced feelings of low self-worth and disempowered and disconnected identities.

Additionally, Nora spoke candidly about how she began to "hyper-sexualise herself so that I didn't let it happen again" and that she began "chasing male validation for so long" following her experiences of actioned violence. For Nora, engaging in overt sexualised behaviour may have been a way for her to regain control of her body, autonomy and sexuality, or she may have developed this as a protective mechanism to avoid coping with the pain of her distress. For instance, Nora hyper-sexualising herself may serve as a way to redirect the anger and pain and be a strategy to reframe her experience, and find some relief from her difficult emotions or solace from her perceived vulnerability. However, Nora reflected that she was "so unhappy in myself" and reflected that this too ended up hurting her MH, as she was engaging in sex under the duress of the male gaze, acting in the role that is 'expected' of her, rather than seeking her sexual pleasure:

> "The submission of it, of my sexuality. The pushing down of it. But like the de-prioritising of female sexuality. [...] The de-prioritising of it definitely links into why, I guess there was a lot of shame".

Nora went on to speak about how she recognises that it was a "trauma response" and that "it's nice to feel validated that way rather than definitely, because there was a lot of guilt and blame". Nora reflected on how the interview had felt affirming, "My feelings and all my feelings are entirely

normal. *[...]* I feel validated in my feelings." Nora stresses the importance of talking about shame and how uplifting and healing engaging in a conversation with someone who has shared experiences can be. Similarly, others recognised how it "needs to be spoken about more" (Eleanor), as it hurt them to be so quiet about their experiences:

> "The worst thing for my mental health has been not talking." (Florence)

> "I thought, it's my fault. I'm not gonna talk to a mate. I think the shame really comes into it." (Mia)

> "The more I started talking to people about it and saying, actually, yeah, I do need help to kick this one. I rapidly, rapidly improved." (Ruth).

Without space to speak about their experiences, Florence, Mia and Ruth felt responsible for their experiences and felt unsafe. Ruth reflected that she was often in "fight or flight" and is prevented from engaging with the world in a way that makes her feel safe or able to relax. Another state of arousal that has been discussed is the 'fawn response', which Florence reflected that she experiences "a lot of shame" from. Florence instead stated that "the more respectful thing to do is to become more like a man to keep yourself safe". We reflected on this shame discourse, and Florence asked "why is it more shameful to tap into like femininity than it is to tap into like masculinity to get yourself out of unsafe situations?" Here, Florence questions the status quo, firstly thinking about how keeping her 'feminine' identity appeases the male gaze, but how this causes her discomfort; it is not her feminine identity that she takes issue with, it is fitting her

femininity into the mould of what the male gaze perceives a woman 'should' be like. Florence recognised her frustration in this, yet we also delved deeper into her intersectional identity, and she reflected on "the privilege of being a white, blonde, not unattractive woman, you know".

Florence then reflected on her partner, Sarah's[3], experience of encroachment. Florence, a queer woman, reflected that she is perceived as a "small blonde woman"; the script she has projected onto her conforms to the male gaze and she performatively passes as an 'acceptable' woman. Whereas, Sarah does not performatively pass as an 'acceptable' woman as her perceived look does not conform to the male gaze as she subverts the feminine ideals of a Western world. Florence shares that Sarah's "main fear when interacting with men is actually like, missed opportunities" rather than fear, which is a different experience to herself. Sarah experiences EVAWG, but also experiences oppression in the form of racism and homophobia, as shared by Florence. This is interesting because Sarah does not perform her gender as socially ascribed. However, she still experiences oppression under the male gaze, albeit in a different way as she subverts the male gaze.

> "Being viewed through the male gaze makes you feel ashamed, but her not being viewed through the male gaze equally makes her feel a little bit like insignificant".

Florence's reflections highlight how pervasive the impact of patriarchal norms is on women. For instance, Sarah experiences fear in a different way to Florence, and Florence shares that Sarah

[3] Like all the other accounts, I have used a pseudonym to represent Florence's partner.

feels less scared than her. However, Sarah still feels a negative impact on her sense of self, as she feels “outcast from society”.

There were both shared and distinctive reflections from the women regarding shame and blame. For all women, there were experiences of self-blame and shame, and connecting to previous themes, women’s accounts indicated how societal discourses that normalised violence contributed to these feelings. For instance, some reflected on how news tabloids depict EVAWG and how this can mirror women’s own internal voice. The discourse in news tabloids is passive, it does not name the perpetrator and instead often adopts a stance that is victim-blaming or places the responsibility onto women to remain safe. The women reflected on how language that is passive or victim-blaming shifts blame away from the systemic problem and towards women, evoking a prevalent discourse that lacks empathy, compassion and can invalidate women’s experiences by dismissing them as unimportant. Thus, women may internalise this as meaning that their experiences of EVAWG are their fault.

Women reflected upon the victim label, emphasising the narrative that women are held accountable, alongside how language reinforces ideas. For instance, the word victim was associated with being passive and lacing agency, which can exacerbate feelings of shame and powerlessness. Thus, discourses that are passive, label women as victims or fit gender norms, or expectations can compound the message that women are to blame, highlighting the need for accountability in who is causing violence. Furthermore, women highlighted that as well as feeling ashamed or “dirty”, that persistent experiences of EVAWG evoked feelings of sadness, low self-worth, or for some a lack of emotion and apathy. Moreover, whilst some women reflected on their

feelings of anger, others indicated that they struggled to access anger. This highlights the compounding effect of shame; of fear, self-blame, a negative impact on MH, and an entanglement of shame in women's identity. This can silence women, further compounding feelings of isolation, shame, and blame. Thus, this highlights how shame can be a barrier to recovery, while women shared that talking about their experiences facilitated their recovery, and was an antidote to their feelings of shame and disempowerment.

All women, as highlighted in the previous theme, experienced different trauma responses, including, fight, flight, freeze and fawn. Nora and Florence reflected on how their use of the 'fawn' response in different ways engendered feelings of shame. Nora hyper-sexualised herself and Florence hyper-femininized herself, both as strategies to protect themselves or reframe their experiences. Whilst their reactions were different, both reflected on how performing under the male gaze increased feelings of shame and prioritised male pleasure as opposed to their own. However, Florence also reflected on queerness and the subverting of the male gaze can also evoke shame, whereas others reflected on the impact of oppression, such as a person's skin colour, class or gender. This highlights the impact of intersectionality and identity and how this can further impact a person's experience and wellbeing.

Ruth concludes this theme with her 'I poem'. This poem is short, but powerful, highlighting the severe effect of shame on a person's sense of self. For Ruth, her experience of encroachment was destabilising, she felt as though she was reduced to nothing and her account showcased this reduction and minimisation of herself.

**Ruth**

[It's] my fault, I did it

I felt shrivelled

I wasn't a person anymore

I was nothing.

## "It's warm agony": The Community of Womanhood in a Patriarchal System

For all women, a felt sense of womanhood was very apparent. Part of the experience of being a woman was that "from all the pain comes so much joy" (Violet), and all acknowledged their sense of connection with their identity as women:

> "It's *[womanhood]* a huge part of my identity. And yes, I wouldn't change it for the bloody world." (Violet)

> "I love being a woman. I think women are amazing." (Hazel)

> "Proud of like the womanhood." (Mia)

> "Being a woman is so much." (Ruth)

> "I like being a woman." (Sylvia)

> "It's *[womanhood]* a big part of the way I am, I think it's just so many layers." (Eleanor)

> "I have a lot of appreciation that it is *[womanhood]* one thing in my life that I feel really anchored to." (Florence)

> "Being a woman is feeling." (Nora).

Yet in contrast to this, the women also reflect on the limitations that they experience as women. The restrictions they experience as a result of a discourse that blames women and holds them accountable for experiencing EVAWG. For instance, all women reflected on the different tactics they use, or how they might change their behaviour to keep themselves safe:

> "The classic key in the hand that everyone does." (Mia)

> "I dress differently." (Sylvia)

> "I do still hold my keys in my hands" (Violet)

> "Covering up or wearing a bulky jacket or you know trying to give the presence of a man so that you don't get attacked." (Ruth)

> "Outside space becomes a lot less accessible to us as women." (Hazel)

"Less likely to walk home on my own in the dark" (Eleanor)

"Be like sweeter and more agreeable" (Florence)

"Am I wearing something too provocative? I might then change." (Nora)

Here, the women's accounts indicate just some of the strategies that have become a norm for them, or the ways they limit themselves as a form of protection. Their accounts stress that the common societal discourse is not one that considers prevention or about making spaces safer for women, but that the responsibility is left for women. Their reflections on womanhood are in some ways conflicting; as highlighted here and in previous themes, the women reflected on the significant impacts of EVAWG and marginalisation, which Hazel acknowledged left her feeling "angry about the things that we have to do to sort of keep ourselves safe". Furthermore, Nora, Hazel and Florence acknowledged that from being women and experiencing EVAWG, they experienced adversity:

"Linking to my womanhood something that's happened to my body." (Nora)

"I think of all the things that comes of being a woman, and that feels that doesn't feel in some ways like, yeah, I guess it just feels unfair in many ways." (Hazel)

"Being a woman has, like many fucking distressing and limiting and annoying things." (Florence).

Hazel, Sylvia and Violet expanded further on being marginalised, considering discourse around intersectionality and how this impacts women's individual experiences:

> "If you're a white middle-class woman, you get treated very differently in the media." (Hazel)

> "*[cis-gender, white, heterosexual men]* I don't think they could ever feel the same sense of fear and encroachment." (Sylvia)

> "*[cis-gender, white, heterosexual men]* I don't think they can fully understand harassment like we can." (Violet).

Here, they acknowledge the complexity of intersectional identity, recognising how the experience of difference and perceived otherness can induce oppression, which can further erode a person's identity, self-worth and exacerbate shame. Hazel, Sylvia, Violet and Florence highlight that the experience of encroachment and harassment is one that is shared with other minoritized groups, such as, LGBTQIA+ individuals, the Global Majority, or the working class. The impact of "provoking against kind of what the norms are" (Sylvia) and oppression is a widely researched area, however these women's accounts highlight the need for services to take into account people's intersectional identities, alongside their experiences of violence, as there may be additional barriers and layers of oppression.

Women's reflections on womanhood were multi-layered and complex. Nora, Florence, Hazel, Sylvia and Violet indicate the importance of thinking about identity when supporting individuals. The women had many shared experiences, but they also had their own individual needs and emotional responses to their personal experiences of EVAWG and systemic oppression. Yet, the women's accounts also emphasis how much their identity is also informed positively because of their sense of womanhood. Violet's account reflected further on this dichotomy of feeling that can be experienced existing as a woman living in a patriarchal society:

> "It's so complicated. It's like, so damaging and like painful and like, hurts my heart when I think about like womanhood, and being a woman, and how it's been, and what the future holds, and all of it, and all my friends and I want to hold everyone and fix everyone. But it's also just like the most wonderful thing. And I, too, it is a huge part of my identity. And yes, I wouldn't change it for the bloody world."

> "It's like simultaneously joyful and like agony. And they sit quite closely together."

> "I love being a woman, but I hate being a woman. It's like agony, but it's like a kind of warm agony that, like just sits there. And I think that's when you can like be with the women in your life and just completely understand that each other feels the same, and I think that everyone feels that like pain, but that also, from all that pain comes so much joy."

Violet's narrative recognises the sexism, the inequality and the negative impact women can experience as a result of just being women. Yet, Violet also highlights how much womanhood

informed her sense of self, and the joy that can come with being part of a community who can understand your experience and validate your pain. This indicates how important identity is as despite all the negative experiences, all felt a real sense of kinship and ownership over their identities as women. Moreover, the women's accounts also emphasised the community they feel with other women, and how powerful this is as an antidote to shame, isolation and otherness. For instance, within all women's discourses was the theme of community, friendship or camaraderie with women:

> "I love like, you know women, communities and female friendships." (Florence)

> "And female fucking friendship, my god, that's so much of being a woman, that's the joy." (Eleanor)

> "I think that friendship is so important." (Nora)

> "Friendship amongst women for me, it's like the most powerful thing." (Violet)

> "I just think female friendship is like kind of the best. It's kind of the best bit. It's so special." (Sylvia)

> "The joy of female friendships." (Mia)

> "I love the relationships I have with my female friends. The relationships that I have with lots of women." (Hazel)

> "We *[women]* just have a way of supporting each other." (Ruth).

The women's narratives are joyful and highlight the importance of community; the importance of having a network that enables them to feel seen, heard and validated. Nora highlighted how powerful it was to have community where her experience was validated, and reflected on how without that support that recovery would have been challenging:

> "Fortunate in the support system and just my own self-resilience, because I don't think I could have done it without that."

Ruth also reflected on the importance of community, particularly in a society that holds women to blame for experiences of EVAWG:

> "Thought that they *[family]* would be disappointed or that they would be angry"

> "And I had no reason, absolutely no reason to think that they *[family]* would have been like that. They *[family]* were wonderful, so supportive. But that was my first thought, was that it's all my fault. I thought, I'd brought this upon myself. I've you know caused this."

Ruth and Nora's narrative emphasises the importance of challenging discourses that shame and purport women as responsible for their experiences of violence. Nora and Ruth indicate the need to push against a culture of silence and challenge these social and gender norms, as keeping quiet affects them negatively, "I don't feel like anybody talks about that. And then, I think, is it just me?" (Mia). Furthermore, others also reflected that when they did speak or were validated in their feelings, that this had a positive impact:

> "The most important thing I find is feeling heard." (Florence)

> "Talking to lots of my friends about their experiences, we all, I would say, have similar experiences." (Hazel

> "I just feel a little bit lighter every single time I talk about it." (Ruth).

This also translated into women reflecting on their positive experience of the interview. Nora, Violet, Mia and Sylvia highlight how research that takes a survivor lens may help by facilitating a space that allows participants to feel more seen or validated in their experiences:

> "This has been really nice to feel very validated." (Nora)

> "It's nice chatting to women about women, really, isn't it. Really nice." (Violet)

> "I've enjoyed speaking about this to you." (Mia)

"This has been a good experience, really nice to talk to you." (Sylvia).

I was so grateful for the women to share with me; it was a privilege to hear their stories. The women's reflections highlight the importance of how coming together can act as a remedy to experiences of shame, blame and poor wellbeing and facilitate a resistance to gender and societal norms that can perpetuate these negative experiences for women. For instance, Sylvia, Eleanor, Mia and Florence reflected on their acts of resistance against EVAWG:

"It's made me like, more defiant." (Sylvia)

"You can be a valuable person without being desired." (Eleanor)

"Finding value in yourself." (Mia)

"Not letting them be the loudest voice. (Florence).

This theme highlights the complexity of womanhood; all women recognised their womanhood as a felt part of their identity and all felt joy in their community and friendship with other women. Yet, there was a juxtaposition of joy and pain; women's reflections were multifaced and in some ways antithetical. For instance, this feeling of "warm agony" (Violet) indicated how women can

experience feelings of shame and self-blame, among other difficult feelings from their experiences of EVAWG, yet that they can also feel deeply connected to and positively about their womanhood.

All women indicated the many different protection strategies they use to keep themselves safe. For instance, holding keys in their hand, not walking alone in the dark or dressing differently. Whereas, some also thought about acts of resistance they make against EVAWG. Such as, finding value in themselves, taking up space, speaking up or defying expected gender norms, and how this can contribute to them feeling empowered. Furthermore, community and the importance of friendship or camaraderie among women was highlighted by all as an antidote; speaking and sharing was vital for women's recovery following experiences of EVAWG. Despite their difficult experiences, all felt such joy in their community with other women, acknowledging how important a sense of kinship and womanhood was for their sense of self and for reducing feelings of shame and blame. Thus, women's experiences of EVAWG and being marginalised is complex, with both significant pain and joy. This duality of experience may come from navigating a patriarchal system where oppression and discrimination is common, yet from this comes a deep sense of community, and fosters resilience, affirmation and joy.

I have ended with each woman's 'I poem' for this theme to highlight their felt experience of womanhood and what this means to them.

**Violet**

I love being a woman, but I hate being a woman

[For] me, it's like so damaging and like painful

[But for] me, it's also like the most wonderful thing

[It like makes] me feel like, like it's a big feeling

[It makes] me feel empowered and yeah simultaneously joyful and like agony

They sit quite closely together

I think friendship amongst women for me, it's like the most powerful thing

I think we just look after each other so much in every single way

I think it's more just like the feeling of being held

I love the feeling of like really talking to women about being women

I think that everyone feels that like pain, but that also, from all that pain comes so much joy

I just don't think men get that

I've never felt more aware of being a woman, but also so happy to be

I think that's what womanhood is for me.

**Nora**

I am a woman

I think being a woman is feeling

I think that there is definitely still a sense of vulnerability and violation

I feel validated in my feelings

I can make these other choices

I think that friendship is so important

[This is part of] my womanhood.

**Florence**

I think women rarely have power, and all our emotions are like, there all the time

I think being a woman in our society evokes those feelings of anger

I feel like although being a woman has, like many fucking distressing and limiting and annoying things about it

I don't feel safe being a woman, but I feel safe in the knowledge that I am

I really have a lot of compassion for myself being a woman

I love like, you know women, communities and female friendships

I feel like it's consistent

I have consistently felt it since I can remember, so actually like, it does feel like home and it does feel like family

I have a lot of appreciation that it's one thing in my life that I feel really anchored to.

**Eleanor**

I literally am in a caring role

I, you know, find it very important to be like, nurturing and caring

I want to be a mother

I think it's just so many layers

I see a woman as like someone who's put together

She has to wear a mask

I mean female fucking friendship, my god, that's so much of being a woman, that's the joy.

**Sylvia**

I notice men looking

I can't do anything about it

I won't be a victim

I think there's a mutual understanding between women

We care for things

I think, I can't imagine it not being me

I think it is very attached to who I am

I like being a woman

I just think female friendship is like kind of the best. It's kind of the best bit, it's so special.

**Mia**

I think it's hard being female when you're younger

I think it's like, a bit of a journey and a bit of a struggle to find that identity that you're comfortable with as a woman

I like feeling feminine when I want to feel feminine

I actually really enjoy being a woman

I think it's just like leaning into the strength of women

I just love friendships with women

I do feel really proud of my friends

I like joy of female friendships

I feel like the gals like can empathise and care about each other

I think it's just another reason to be proud of like, the womanhood.

**Hazel**

I think that will always be with us, really

[How, you know] we're treated in society

I guess the womanhood probably now for me is being a mother

I think it's really, really important that women choose what they want to do

I love being a woman

I think being a woman has massively informed my identity

I think women are amazing, there's like a sense of joy

I love the relationships that I have with my female friends.

**Ruth**

I think it can be the most wonderful thing in the world. But it also means that you feel bad

I would have absolutely floored myself at six, if I turned around and said this is everything that's going to happen in your life

I said to myself, be kind to her

I think also part of it is how it's more likely to see a group of women coming together, to support

I love being a woman

I come from a family full of very strong, independent, career-driven women

I think it's, it's just everything

I mean being a woman is so much, how could I possibly define it?

# CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

## Chapter Overview

This study contributes to the body of literature around VAWG. In particular, it moves beyond actioned violence, contributing to the paucity of research around the impact of everyday violence against women and girls (EVAWG). In this chapter, I discuss the main findings of the research alongside existing literature and theory. I consider the findings with implications for policy and clinical practice. Following this, the strengths and limitations of the research are highlighted, and recommendations for future research are shared. This research adopted an intersectional feminist and survivor framework, and thus reflexivity is embedded in the discussion.

## Research Aim and Summary of Findings

This research aimed to explore how EVAWG affects women and to critically review the prevalent discourse around VAWG in the UK and how this may impact how women perceive their experiences. Co-production from Next Chapter, a DV refuge, was sought in the form of consultation, and eight women were interviewed to gain a better understanding of how their experiences of EVAWG had impacted them, alongside if prevalent societal discourses compounded any adverse effects. An intersectional feminist and survivor framework was adopted throughout this research, with the aim of contributing to women feeling heard and validated, as well as considering women's, and my own, experiences of EVAWG on an individual and systemic level in the analysis. Additionally, it felt inauthentic to not consider my positionality alongside the

research questions due to my own experiences of actioned and everyday violence. Thus, adopting this reflexive account in the research enabled women's voices to remain central to the discursive themes and keep the 'personal in the political' (Thompson et al., 2018).

Four discursive themes informed the analysis, highlighting how EVAWG negatively affected women and the experience was further compounded by prevalent UK societal discourses that normalised violence and patriarchal values. The themes showcase the negative effect EVAWG has on women's MH and nervous system, with the feelings of self-blame and shame being induced and being particularly corrosive on women's sense of self. The themes highlight how the experience of EVAWG was a universal, pervasive experience for all women, yet also emphasise how the community of womanhood had an important and positive impact for women by validating their experiences and supporting them. I discuss each discursive pattern concerning existing literature and how it informs policy and clinical practice implications.

## Reflections on the Process of Analysis

It was a privilege to interview each woman, for them to share their stories and photographs and be willing to share with me on a deep, vulnerable level. I was not surprised that the women I interviewed had multiple experiences of everyday violence or that many had also experienced actioned violence. It is empowering and rewarding to conduct research with feeling; however, it can also be emotionally draining. Listening to the women's stories reminded me of my own experiences, and when I was analysing their accounts, this brought up difficult experiences. Reflecting with myself, and my friends around me was invaluable in this process; it kept me

grounded and allowed me to slow down, which consequentially reminded me to keep considering my positionality so that my voice did not take over from the focus of the women I interviewed. During this process, I experienced more counts of EVAWG. Thankfully, with these experiences, physically, I was safe. Yet, this also took an emotional toll, and I recognised that I was acting within a hyper-aroused state similar to what the women in the interview had reflected on. It reminded me of the pervasiveness of everyday violence, and at points, I felt disempowered. However, finishing this research also felt like an act of resistance. I have recognised similarities in my experiences with what the women shared. In particular, the mirroring of the "warm agony" of being a woman felt so evocative. And, I quote one of the women I interviewed, "female fucking friendship". My relationships with women have been transcendent and so affirming, and the joy and support I have felt from women has been boundless. Like the women interviewed, for me the love between women, in all its guises, is spectacular.

My own experiences of gendered violence inevitably shaped how I approached this research. The dual position, of both researcher and survivor, posed as both a strength and a risk for the analysis. The similarity of experiences between the women and myself deepened my empathy and my attunement to their voices, however it could also have increased my likelihood to privilege certain narratives or explanations, running the risk of narrowing my interpretative lens. I was particularly sensitive to women's expressions of shame, anger and apathy, which may have influenced themes that explored trauma and resistance. My position as a researcher and as a woman with my own experiences of violence could often create a tension between my desire for advocacy and for critical interpretation. It was important that I did justice to the women's narratives, and to do this

I had to safeguard against my own perspectives of how I thought people would react when met with everyday violence.

Reflecting on the themes, '"Wherever there's blame or self-blame, there's always gonna be the shame that comes with it": The entanglement of blame and shame in women's sense of self' and '"It's warm agony": The community of womanhood in a patriarchal society', I can recognise how my positionality may have influenced my interpretation. I resonated strongly with women's feelings of shame and self-blame, I understand how internalised misogyny and shame operate after you have experienced violence and understand how womanhood can feel ambivalent, how joy, vulnerability, pride and rage can co-exist to shape that identity. This does not negate the creditability of these themes, rather it acknowledges the influence of structural, cultural, interpersonal and epistemic power and underscores the situated nature of EVAWG. Through processes of supervision, reflexive journaling, reflective conversations, returning repeatedly to the women's transcripts and revisiting existing research, my aim was to use reflexivity as an ethical tool (Alyce et al., 2023; Deblasio, 2022; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Rather than conceal my influences, I made them visible and showcased how they intersected with women's experiences and existing theory. This process of self-interrogation was, at times, uncomfortable, however it was a necessary process to ensure that women's voices remained central to the research and the contribution to the understanding of EVAWG.

Reflexivity can strengthen the credibility of findings by making the interpretive process visible. Haraway (1988) reminds us that knowledge is situated; it is partial and positioned, thus my interpretation will be both insightful and flawed. I used FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018), which

champions transparency as an imperative part of research, thus acknowledging how my perspectives shaped my interpretation invites a more authentic and accountable reading of the research that aligns with the feminist epistemological framework. Reflexivity allows the reader to see how analysis was constructed, and invites them to explore dialogues between myself and the women's narratives, which are positioned within cultural discourses of patriarchy, gender, power and resistance. I would invite future research to be led by individuals who are different from me, for example, they may be a different gender or from a different culture or discipline, as this may yield alternative interpretations, which would contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of EVAWG.

## "It penetrates every aspect of being a woman": The Universal Experience of Everyday Violence against Women

The theme of EVAWG being a normalised and accepted part of their everyday lives was held within all women's discourses. There was a recurring language of habituation and resignation, for instance around, "how normal it is" (Florence), how it is "a part of life" (Violet) and how women have "been made to think it's normal" (Ruth). All highlighted that EVAWG was a persistent experience that penetrated their experiences of being women and kept them within a fear state. Research substantiates this, indicating how psychological violence is the most common (White et al., 2024), yet is likely under-reported and minimised by those experiencing it as it does not fall within traditional categories of violence. This exposes how societal structures of patriarchy shape psychological experiences, reflecting the systemic oppression of women. Patriarchy operates across political, cultural and economic structures, functioning through mechanisms of surveillance

and control that privilege masculinity and oppress women and other marginalised groups (Gupta et al., 2023; hooks, 2004; Walby, 1989).

The interviews highlighted the need to critically explore EVAWG further; women's narratives described the constant expectation of harassment, encroachment and objectification as standard experiences. Whilst research indicates that VAWG happens to one in three women across their life time (WHO, 2021), this statistic does not include EVAWG. The women in their accounts reeled off many different stories of EVAWG, including their friend's stories, mirroring the 2017 #metoo movement, where collective storytelling encouraged more people to come forward (me too, 2025). The women in this research were not shocked by their peer's experiences, reflecting how normalised such violence has become. The women's storytelling and communal recognition of each other's experiences demonstrates how EVAWG has become a cultural script that women instinctively understand, and functions as a collective coping mechanism that fosters solidarity. This reflection is powerful because the women are not just describing violence, they are co-constructing a shared understanding through their storytelling, and it tells a story of how women may collectively process, internalise and resist everyday violence together. This reflects the feminist-relational epistemology and intersectional feminist framework that underpins this research, which values women's experiences as a counter discourse to patriarchal oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 2017; hooks, 2004; Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2013; Willet & Etowa, 2023). This highlights the felt camaraderie that oppression can forge between people, emphasising the need for more peer support spaces in MH services.

Understanding women's stories through an intersectional feminist lens highlights how the omnipresence of the patriarchy is internalised as normal and can become a backdrop for women's lives (Sabik et al., 2021; Willet & Etowa, 2023. The normalisation of EVAWG demonstrates how gendered scripts can sustain inequality by embedding fear and control into women's daily routines. The women criticised the media's apathy towards VAWG, for example, women's rights being removed and the re-election of Trump likely compounds messages that women receive from media discourses: that women are unimportant and that violence and harassment is inevitable (Bekiempis, 2024; Leszczynski, 2024). Moreover, passive media language (Carll, 2003; Tranchese, 2014), like failing to name perpetrators or asserting that preventing violence is 'common sense', positions women as both subjects and objects of fear. The media trivialises violence and devalues women's knowledge, and suffering functions as a structural mechanism maintaining dominant patriarchal discourses that silence women's experiences, and shape it as public indifference. This exposes the linguistic mechanisms that sustain epistemic injustice, critically demonstrating that language is not neutral; it shapes women's realities by normalising their perpetual vulnerability and subsequently blaming them (Reverter, 2022; Spivak, 1988). Florence stated, "power and patriarchy, men's power and patriarchy relies on a system of women having low self-worth", which echoes the statement "men dominate women in terms of power and privilege" (Berkowitz et al., 2010, p. 133). Fifteen years separate these quotations, yet the felt experience by women is still one of powerlessness and negative self-affect.

This research highlighted that the experience of EVAWG can begin in childhood or adolescence; all women reflected that their first experiences were when they were children or teenagers, which evoked fear that they still carry as adults. The 'shadow of sexual assault' hypothesis substantiates

this, highlighting how women perceive themselves as vulnerable to being sexually assaulted, which often stems from unwanted attention and harassment (Ferraro, 1996; Hirtenlehner & Farrall, 2014; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023; Stanko, 2008). These early experiences could be contextualised using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which situates fear and harassment as social learning embedded within family, school and cultural values, where gendered norms maintain a pervasive sense of threat. Understanding women's experiences with this lens can help highlight how the normalisation of violence is not just interpersonal, but structural, cultural and epistemic too (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; Galtung, 1969, 1990; Spivak, 1988). Women's ongoing fear and vigilance are not just isolated to childhood and adolescence, but are developmental outcomes of systemic gender conditioning experienced across the life course.

Women reflected on the importance of language and the sexualisation of young women and girls in the mainstream. Some of their discourses were illustrative of the 'Lolita effect' phenomenon (Polakevičová, 2012), further highlighting how women's bodies are subject to the male gaze and male entitlement over women's sexual selves (Dunne, 2022; Kristeva, 1979; Morton, 2021; Stollznow, 2024). Yet, if women do not conform to these predetermined sexual identities or to the 'Madonna' identity then they are outcast as a 'whore'. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the Role Strain Theory (Sachs-Ericsson & Ciarlo, 2000) help contextualise how constant surveillance or trying to navigate contradictory social expectations of being sexually desirable and morally pure may compel women to modify their behaviour to protect themselves or view their femininity through shame and constraint. Thus, the feeling of surveillance, coupled with passive discourses in society, is a form of social control that is used against women. This is reflected on by scholars, and in the novel Milkman, which highlights how experiences of

encroachment and a lack of support from people, or society, around you can have a damaging effect on how you feel and how you perceive yourself (Burns, 2018; Carretta, 2018; Faludi, 1991; Rose, 2021).

Patriarchal norms affect women interpersonally and psychologically; their awareness of how violence is normalised and their emotional responses are meaningful reactions to pervasive patriarchal control. This aligns with the feminist relational epistemology (Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2013) as their storytelling is transformed into knowledge that resists epistemic silencing (Reverter, 2022; Spivak, 1988). Thus, positioning women's voices as credible, collective knowledge around their experiences of oppression illustrates the potential for systemic change; it is an act of epistemic resistance by understanding that distress is relationally and socially situated, and that "the personal is political" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2013).

## "It's that feeling of nervousness, feeling of objectification, being the prey. That fear is still enveloped in something as subtle as lingering eye contact": How Everyday Violence Affects Women's Wellbeing and Nervous System

All of the women stated that EVAWG harmed their nervous system and MH. Their accounts echoed Bates (2018) who described the "process of scanning the street you walk; the constant alert tension" women endure. The women voiced living in constant threat, under the male gaze, which heightened their vigilance, restricted their agency, and diminished their sense of self. This mirrors research on the fear-gender gap, exploring how negative experiences, like unwanted attention, can cultivate a fear of sexual harassment or assault by unknown men (Ferraro, 1996; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023; Scott, 2003; Stanko, 2008; Valentine, 1989).

All reflected on dysregulation following encounters of EVAWG, which negatively impacted their nervous system and for some, caused physical pain or tension in their bodies; Ruth described trying to wash away the feeling until she burnt herself. This aligns with empirical research showing that stalking and objectification heighten fear, hyperarousal, dissociation and reduced women's interoceptive awareness (Calogero, 2004; Grabe et al., 2007; Matos et al., 2019; Storey et al., 2023). Thus, women's bodies become a state of embodied social control, which is expressed physiologically through muscular tension, pain and bodily exhaustion. Both Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Bartky's (1990) interpretation of Foucault's (1977) panopticon model help explain how women internalise this surveillance and self-police under structures of disciplinary control, which helps contextualise women's hypervigilance. Therefore, this emphasises the need for trauma-informed services that address both language and somatic experiences to foster safety and bodily regulation.

Constant exposure to threat activated women's fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses. Herman's (1992) trauma framework clarifies that these are rational survival strategies to systemic violence. The women minimised their distress as 'being silly' (Violet), connecting with the previous theme, where women internalised patriarchal values and subsequently normalised violence. Women's fawning responses, becoming smaller, more agreeable or hyper-sexualised, are not freely chosen femininity, but patriarchy-approved femininity of vulnerability or compliance. This demonstrates Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, which conceptualises that gender is not innate but rather performed through repeated acts within rigid social structures and produces the illusion of natural difference, thus patriarchal scripts define acceptable femininity. This critically illustrates

how patriarchy weaponizes gender norms as it infiltrates women's bodies, emotions and nervous system, transforming them into embodied mechanism of self-protection. The findings illustrate how women's nervous systems are co-regulated within a culture that demands self-surveillance. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model situates hypervigilance within nested social systems, from the micro-level of personal safety to the macro-level cultural values that normalise violence. Ruth's exhaustion, lying in "bed at the end of the day" and feeling "the pain of being so tense" symbolises the collapse of her ecological system of safety. Personal suffering embodies social structures; her body became the site where macro-level patriarchy intersected with micro-level harassment, providing sociocultural evidence of structural violence (Galtung, 1969).

The women described numerous difficulties, including anxiety, eating difficulties, PTSD-like symptoms, depression, and self-harm, echoing previous research (Ahmad et al., 2020; Valentine, 1989). Florence explicitly emphasised that "just eye contact" (Florence) provoked the same feelings of fear and distress as her experience of actioned violence, whereas Mia described suicidal ideation. Pathologising women's responses as "disorders", such as hysteria or EUPD, risks mirroring the historical pathologisation of women's oppression or inducing feelings of isolation, otherness and low self-worth (Borgogna & Aita, 2020; Busfield, 1996; Cohen & Hartmann, 2021; Motala & Price, 2024; Oyserman et al., 2012; Tasca et al., 2012). Thus, shifting from diagnostic models (DSM-V) to frameworks like the PTMF (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) reframes women's distress as evidence of structural injustice, which is socially produced rather than individually pathologised. This recontextualises women's experiences and validates their physiological and emotional experiences as legitimate responses to systemic patriarchal threat (Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Willet & Etowa, 2023). This challenges dominant epistemic discourses that dismiss women's

distress by centring social context and power and illustrating how collective patriarchal conditions evoke structural, ongoing harm (Copp et al., 2016; Essue et al., 2025; Lomazzi, 2023).

EVAWG ultimately dictated women's behaviours and limited them, which mirrors Storey et al. (2023) who found women's autonomy burdened by fear and harassment, emphasising the need to tackle gender norms and passive discourses that shift the responsibility on women not to receive violence. As Sylvia stated, stricter legislations "would free up my brain and my energy" and have a significant impact on women's autonomy and safety. For instance, women reflected on their safety rituals, like "Text me when you get home xx" (Mountain, 2021), which became viral on Instagram following the deaths of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa, among other 'safety tools' they used so casually. This reveals how patriarchy embeds submission into everyday life (Bartky, 1990); a text should not be an autopilot process for women to feel safe and they should not have to worry if they will "get home safe at night" (Sylvia). Thus, instinctive acts of "text me when you get home" emphasises how women's experiences are co-constructed through shared understanding and social connectedness, illustrating Willet and Etowa's (2023) feminist relational survival concept: that communal care functions as resistance to systemic oppression.

Regarding help-seeking, most women relied on informal support from friends and family, mirroring findings from the narrative meta-synthesis. Two women openly sought therapy, whereas others who had more formal experiences of help-seeking, also experienced actioned violence. Yet, the normalisation of violence meant women felt their experiences did not fit in a category of violence, or minimised their distress as trivial or unimportant, so they avoided formal support, which mirrors previous research (Dichter et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021; Reina et al., 2014). Similar to

previous research (Refuge, 2024; Pickering et al., 2024), some expressed distrust towards the police, thus, did not feel safe seeking support. This reflects broader critiques that emphasise how institutional structures are historically constructed via patriarchal norms, and fail to recognise women's needs, thus perpetuate epistemic violence (Reverter, 2022; Spivak, 1988). Women's accounts of toxic police culture or their harassment being disregarded as unimportant, highlights this recognition of failure towards women's needs. Women are silenced through disbelief and bureaucratic erasure, which acts as a secondary form of violence, blaming women rather than the perpetrator. Thus, the findings critically expose how systemic misogyny extends to institutional neglect and epistemic injustice, where women's testimonies of violence are discredited because they do not fit patriarchal definitions of what counts as credible knowledge (Edlich & Archer, 2025).

hooks (2004) observed that patriarchal domination infiltrates both the social world and the inner psyche, shaping how women perceive safety, agency and worth. The women's hypervigilance, fear and dysregulation are not evidence of fragility but evidence of resistance and survival: their bodies speak the truth of oppression, transforming private distress into political knowledge. This aligns with a history of feminist critique that argues how the pathologisation of women's distress may stem from structural problems; the women's stories highlight the socio-cultural-political context in which their fear, shame and vigilance exist (Busfield, 1996; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Ussher, 2013). We can contextualise women's responses to distress as adaptive to the systemic violence and felt powerlessness within a patriarchal social system (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). The women's emotional language conveyed how fear and vigilance are enduring emotional states woven into their lives and identities as women, and consequently women have adapted to living

under persistent patriarchal threat. Thus, this theme demonstrates how EVAWG is inscribed into women's bodies and nervous systems as an embodied manifestation of patriarchal control.

## "Wherever there's like blame or self-blame, there's always gonna be the shame that comes with it": The Entanglement of Blame and Shame in Women's Sense of Self

Feelings of shame and self-blame were prevalent within all women's discourses. The women acknowledged that society normalised violence and perpetuated victim-blaming, thus they perceived themselves as responsible. This reflects previous research that explored shame within women who experienced different types of violence (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Camp, 2022; Carretta, 2018; Weaver et al., 2019). The women's internalisation of blame mirrors the earlier narratives of hypervigilance and dysregulation. Whilst vigilance reflects the external policing of women's bodies to avoid harm, shame represents the internal policing of their emotions and identities. Butler's (2024) reflections on the 'phantasm' of gender contextualise how shame is social production that sustains patriarchal order; gender becomes the organising fantasy though which power, threat, and violence are enacted, thus shaping women's bodily experiences and emotional regulation. The emotional states are not discrete but mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which patriarchal power operates; fear maintains bodily compliance, while shame sustains emotional submission. These dynamics highlight how structural violence compels women to both anticipate and self-blame for violations enacted against them. Thus, as discussed in theme two, that same system that teaches women to monitor their bodies for safety also turns inward, teaching women to monitor their emotions for blame and feel responsible for their own subjugation. This

echoes Bartky's (1990) analysis of internalised oppression and emphasises that shame is not a private emotion, but a social one, that maintains gendered subordination.

Previous research highlighted the interactive quality of shame; when people feel shame, they experience more self-blame, fear, and a greater negative impact on their MH and self-worth and identity (Carretta, 2018; Gruber et al., 2014). The women also acknowledged this, for instance, Nora, Violet and Eleanor described dissociation, emotional numbing and "shut down" (Violet) in response to experiences of EVAWG. Rather than interpreting this as apathy, it can be understood as bodily wisdom in the form of a self-protective adaptation for chronic exposure to threat and invalidation. It is a physiological expression of resistance to gendered scripts of passivity that rejects the constant performance of compliance and an attempt to stay safe but refusing to normalise fear (Herman, 1992). However, women being cut off from their emotional selves can also prevent the possibility of relational connection or collective anger. It could illustrate how repeated invalidation of their experiences has taught them that emotional expression brings no relief or validation, thus they have internalised the message that emotional suppression and silence is safety. This dual function, of protection and disconnection, illustrates how patriarchal systems reproduce themselves through the regulation of women's affective lives, compelling them to remain composed, silent and self-contained. This dynamic reflects the feminist-relational epistemology underpinning this research (Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2013), where women's numbness becomes a bodily record of survival under patriarchal constraint rather than a symptom of dysfunction.

The women's discourses were emblematic of the felt blame they experienced from discourses that did not actively address perpetrators and instead shifted the responsibility to them. They described feeling "dirty", "filthy", or needing to "scrub myself clean" (Nora; Eleanor; Ruth), which reflects the embodied shame that follows experiences of objectification. This highlights how perpetuating prevalent discourses in society are, and mirrors findings from the meta-synthesis, where women who experienced IPV felt ashamed and did not seek help as they had a "dirty little secret" (Dichter et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Reina et al., 2014). Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) offers a useful lens here, proposing that women in patriarchal societies are socialised to internalise the male gaze and view their bodies as objects to be scrutinised. Women turn this objectifying gaze inward, representing the internalisation of patriarchal power that fosters shame and self-regulation rather than resistance. Furthermore, feminist psychological theory on internalised misogyny (Brown, 2004; Mann, 2018) offers a lens through which to understand women's self-blame as the absorption and reproduction of sexist ideologies where women perceive themselves as culpable for men's behaviour. Thus, this process displaces structural responsibility for gendered violence onto women's identities, eroding their bodily autonomy and reinforcing shame as a mechanism of social control

The women also acknowledged the compounding effect of shame and intersectional identities, reflecting previous research that recognised how shame intersects with experiences of marginalisation and prevented women from seeking help (Kanuha, 2013; Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). Florence reflected on herself and her partner's experiences of queerness, subverting gender norms and racialisation, and the impact of these experiences of oppression on their identities. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, which conceptualises how systems of

oppression such as, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, interact to produce unique and compounded forms of marginalisation. Women's experiences of being othered revealed how shame functions as a social regulator at these intersections; by disciplining women whose identities deviate from normative whiteness or femininity. Therefore, women's experiences of, for example, queerness, can be understood not as separate from gendered shame, but as sites where multiple power hierarchies converge. Meta recently removed several clauses in its hate speech policy that banned derogatory statements, for example, it now allows women to be called "household objects" and lets people state that queer, non-binary, trans and gender non-conforming people have a "mental illness" (Duffy, 2025; Knibbs, 2025). This perpetuation of patriarchal, heteronormative and gender norms maintains harmful discourse that dehumanises women and those who may subvert traditional gender identities and heterosexuality, inducing feelings of shame as they are othered and told that they are the problem. Through this duality, women mobilise in accordance with patriarchal ideals of desirability and purity and demonstrates how epistemic injustice is perpetuated through institutional indifference. Thus, situating these experiences in an intersectional framework highlights how structural power relations are embodied as emotional pain.

As the women acknowledged in their accounts, shame eroded their identity and they began to internalise feelings of inferiority, an experience that Bartky (1990, p.81) succinctly describes, "A measure of shame added to her sense that the body she inhabits is deficient". Previous research highlighted that when disclosure was met with acceptance, a non-judgemental stance and belief, women feel safe, hopeful and empowered (Chiung-Tao Shen, 2011; Dichter et al., 2020; Heron et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021; Li et al., 2021). Within this research the women also reflected that when

they spoke about their experiences with other women, feelings of shame reduced; this is essential as the feeling of belonging and acceptance that women described, reduced their shame and elicited feelings of power and agency. This mirrors the collective storytelling and peer solidarity described in theme one, where women recognised their shared vulnerability, and theme two, where their shared experiences evolved into communal care. Being believed restored women's epistemic agency, a central tenet of feminist relational epistemology (Thayer-Bacon, 2010), illustrating that being heard is not merely therapeutic, but a political act that challenges epistemic injustice. Thus, in this theme, the same relational connectedness functions as an antidote to shame and self-blame and becomes restorative; shame is replaced by mutual recognition and self-worth, thus shared vulnerability is transformed into collective healing.

## "It's warm agony": The Community of Womanhood in a Patriarchal System

The characterisation of womanhood as "warm agony" (Violet) captures the emotional ambivalence that underpins their collective experience. Rather than depicting pain and joy as oppositional, participants held them simultaneously, suggesting that endurance itself becomes a site of meaning-making. Thus, enabling women to reclaim complexity and refuse the reductive binary of victimhood versus empowerment. This coexistence reflects feminist survival; transforming suffering into solidarity and joy without denying the reality of oppression (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2004). The women's celebration of connection and mutual understanding illustrates how community becomes a vehicle for empowerment, rather than conformity (hooks, 2004). Within this shared 'community of womanhood', emotional multiplicity became both a therapeutic and

political act, redefining resilience as the ability to hold contradiction and still connect as “from all the pain comes so much joy” (Violet).

Butler’s (1990; 2024) concept of performative identity also highlights how women’s expressions of pride, joy, and complexity reconstitute the meaning of womanhood. Rather than using adjectives like, “childlike”, “curvy”, or “flatterable” to describe themselves (Butler, 1976; Feminist, 2024), the women instead chose to authentically narrate themselves as complex and multifaceted people. They used adjectives like “joyful” (Violet), “amazing” (Hazel), “consistent” (Florence), “proud” (Mia), “valuable” (Eleanor) “self-resilience” (Nora) and “defiant” (Sylvia), as well as “strong” and “independent” (Ruth), which directly counters previous definitions of what a woman ‘is not’ (Butler, 1976; Feminist, 2024). Thus, this highlights a performative redefinition of femininity that resists patriarchal scripts (Butler, 1990; 2024). Womanhood emerges in these accounts not as a fixed identity, but as a political act of becoming, where emotion and mutual recognition transform vulnerability into collective strength.

The women’s reflections on their shared experiences and connection with other women acted as a balm to their distress and shame. This is an important and hopeful finding and indicates the importance of community, yet, it also highlights that women have internalised EVAWG as something they have to endure together. This collective regulation of fear and vigilance demonstrates how women adapted to have survival systems grounded in solidarity rather than isolation. Reframing distress as valid response provides a contextual approach to understanding how EVAWG induced a sense of communal knowing between women, as their minds and bodies were shaped to respond to this ongoing exposure to patriarchal power (Borgogna & Aita, 2020;

Byrant-Davis, 2023; Homan, 2024; Klonoff et al., 2000). Therefore, their shared narratives move from collective vigilance to collective healing, demonstrating how connection itself operates as resistance to patriarchal control.

The women's descriptions of "warm agony" and connection can also be understood as embodied responses that counter the nervous-system dysregulation described in theme two. Hypervigilance and fear reflected states of physiological arousal under patriarchal threat, whereas warmth and connection symbolise co-regulation; the body's capacity to return to safety through relational attunement (Herman, 1992). This suggests that solidarity and shared womanhood is not only an emotional or symbolic experience, but physiological acts of recovery. Existing research substantiates this finding, highlighting how powerful friendship is for mental health recovery (Storm et al., 2025). Thus, through community, women collectively regulate against the chronic state of vigilance, transforming isolation and exhaustion into calm, belonging and empowerment, which we could call embodied feminist resistance.

The women also reflected on how normal it was to have protective strategies in place, such as constant vigilance, route planning or clothing modification, when out in public to keep themselves safe from harassment or violence. Women's constant navigation of safety reflects hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing gendered expectations that position women as inherently fragile and submissive and men as dominant (Butler, 1990; 2024; Connell, 1987). This links to feminist critiques who argued that popular culture commodifies women's empowerment (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, a shift in discourse, such as the use of actioned language, is important. The women acknowledged using terminology such as, 'male violence against women' would be helpful

as it names the perpetrator, thus would remove the blame and responsibility from themselves so that they can begin to "achieve authentic choice of self" (Bartky, 1990, p. 24). However, the women accepting violence as inevitable may not represent passivity, but survival. The repeated exposure to EVAWG created a context where women's strategies for safety became acts of protection against patriarchal conditioning rather than internal deficits, or consent and compliance. This critically challenges narratives that women are complicit or passive by revealing how patriarchy shapes women's behaviour through coercive social norms and highlighting women's agency within constraint (Willet & Etowa, 2023). Thus, this illustrates how women's fear is relationally co-constructed out of constrained autonomy embedded within social power dynamics, rather than individual pathology (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Ussher, 2013; Thayer-Bacon, 2010). Recognising this distinction is key for developing trauma-informed, gender-transformative care; the "huge impact on your day-to-day" (Hazel) emphasises the cumulative effect of structural and cultural power on women. Thus, reinforcing previous arguments stressing that distress cannot be divorced from the socio-cultural-political context in which it arises (Gupta et al., 2023; Oram et al., 2022).

Similar to theme three, women also reflected on how markers of identity, such as, skin colour, gender identity, sexuality or socioeconomic status, may have a compounding effect. This not only illustrates how intersectionality manifested within their accounts and the importance of considering intersectionality within experience, but reflects discourses that are prevalent in the mainstream too. For instance, the lack of media reporting around Sabina Nessa's murder and the conviction the public had about her murderer being guilty, as opposed to the wide reporting of Sarah Everard, and disbelief that a white policeman could murder a woman (Bleakley, 2022). They

recognised that some are more vulnerable to the burden of the patriarchy than others, acknowledging that identity is shaped by privilege and exclusion within patriarchal systems. The women emphasised that solidarity does not require sameness, rather, it emerges through recognising difference as integral to collective empowerment (Crenshaw, 1989, 2017). By articulating differences in privilege within their community, the women demonstrated a form of intersectional consciousness (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, womanhood becomes a space of both unity and multiplicity, shaped by intersecting structures of power.

This also aligns with hooks (2004) and Butler's (1990; 2024) arguments that feminist solidarity must recognise difference as a site of connection rather than division, and the notion that womanhood is performative and contextually produced. These findings emphasise the importance of exploring women's experiences, and their identities, so that services do not fall party to labelling all of women's experiences of EVAWG in to one distinct category, or labelling it under distinct diagnostic categories. For instance, previous research highlighted that when women do not conform to ascribed gender roles, they are more vulnerable to receiving a MH diagnosis or experiencing shame (Blum et al., 2017; Butler, 1990; Chesler, 2005; Commane, 2020). Yet, the women also acknowledged their desire to rebel and not let the patriarchy be "the loudest voice" (Florence). This also mirrors previous research that indicated women felt more empowered and experienced greater psychological empowerment when they did not conform to their ascribed roles and challenged patriarchal norms (Rawat, 2014). Thus, to appropriately tailor person-centred support, services would benefit from asking women empathetic, open-ended questions about their individual experiences, understanding that not all experiences are the same and that there are "different types of abuse" (Women's Aid, 2022).

The inclusion of the importance of womanhood and the kinship women feel is a novel finding within VAWG research. It moves away from the re-telling of violence from the perpetrator's perspective and instead emphasises women's enduring experience of being a woman living in a patriarchal society. When the women reclaim their womanhood with joy, rather than shame, they become liberated; it is their way of reclaiming control of their narrative by asserting that their identity is not one solely defined by harm (Brown, 2017; Martín-Baró, 1994; Ussher, 2013). The women's accounts demonstrate a psychological and political shift, for example, from I am "unsafe" (Hazel; Sylvia; Eleanor; Florence) or not feeling "safe" (Mia; Nora) to reclaiming their identity and agency. The women's empowerment is a process of redefining their identity, and meaning within, rather than outside of, systems of oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994; Ussher, 2013), and through this reframing, joy becomes a radical act of resistance; an assertion of selfhood that counters patriarchal narratives of female fragility and shame. This collective warmth and shared identity among women emphasises relational and meaning-based coping rather than individual recovery, as community functions as a protective mechanism, which allows women to reframe distress as a response to systemic oppression (Ussher, 2013; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

The women's accounts do not romanticise the violence they endure, they tell the story of how more needs to be done to tackle these harmful everyday experiences. Yet, they also highlight the importance of their voices being central; women's voices and experiences need to inform policy and practice, so that services work to serve women and empower them and are individually tailored to their needs. This can be read as resistance to epistemic violence; articulating their experiences and being heard on their own terms is a reclamation of epistemic agency, as they transform

subaltern knowledge that is traditionally erased by patriarchal power structures into sites of knowledge production (Spivak, 1988). The women highlight how actually, it is not once a victim, always a victim, there is hope beyond their pain, and that hope comes from their felt sense of identity and their community with each other.

These findings reflect a form of post-traumatic growth, both psychologically and politically, from oppression and disconnection to solidarity, connection and collective meaning-making (hooks, 2004; Thayer-Bacon, 2010; Ussher, 2013). They expand on the earlier themes; the collective storytelling described in theme one, the communal care described in theme two, and the relational and restorative connectedness described in theme three, by illustrating in this theme how collective womanhood became a site of post-traumatic growth and political hope. The women's reflections on warmth, joy, understanding, complexity, and belonging reveal an act of feminist resistance; relational connection can transform shame into empowerment and it functions as both their emotional recovery and an act of political defiance. This collective empowerment through shared struggle supports hooks' (1999) reflection that love can be a radical act of resistance against domination, and illustrates that identity can be re-performed as a form of resistance (Butler, 1990; 2024). Thus, the women's expressions of warmth, laughter, joy, and solidarity do not trivialise their trauma, but rather signals the multiplicity of experience in identity and an assertion of agency that redefines womanhood beyond patriarchal constraint.

## Reflections on the Political Change during the Research

For me, the 2024 American election evoked many feelings: anger, upset, and disempowerment. It scared me and the women around me and elicited a real sense that we are unimportant. As if we were important, then how could a known misogynist and aggressor be re-elected? It is actions like these that continue to disregard women and teach them that they are inferior. This message relates to the thesis theme "society's discourse and its message to women". A re-election like this creates a message that normalises and celebrates violence and disempowers women. As discussed, such discourses can have a detrimental impact on people's wellbeing and it is important to continue to challenge them. The impact of community can shine light in dark and frightening times like this. I can recognise my privilege in my support network, for which I am so grateful. Yet, more needs to be done for women who do not have access to support networks or safe havens. As highlighted in the theme "the felt sense of womanhood in a patriarchal society", a sense of community, comradery and resistance can amplify marginalised voices and offer alternative narratives that challenge the status quo. This can help empower and reduce the negative effects of dominant discourses and the normalisation of violence, thus more research that explores the positive impact of community in EVAWG would be beneficial. Please see Appendix H for a poem that describes the disillusion women have experienced regarding Trump's re-election, prevalent UK discourses and the seeking of support between women.

## Implications for Clinical Practice

The research findings indicated the importance of gender-transformative care in services that validates and understand the impact of embodied experiences of EVAWG, rather than labelling individuals with a 'disorder' that could exacerbate blame, disregard experiences or act as a barrier to support (Lomani et al., 2022; Oram et al., 2022). It is imperative for clinical practice to recognise diversity in services by adopting an intersectional framework, so that they are considerate of the compounding impact of intersectional markers on identity or additional actioned violence, and can provide culturally appropriate and individually-tailored support. Moreover, the findings highlighted that shame operated as a physiological imprint of patriarchal control on women's bodies (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Therefore, it would be helpful for services to also offer trauma-informed, bodily-based therapeutic interventions, such as somatic experiencing, incorporating yoga or sensory regulation, alongside traditional talk-based approaches.

The women in this research also outlined the importance of community; women expressed a strong connection with their identity as women, and with this came the joy, camaraderie, and kinship between women. It is recommended that more community care in the form of community psychologists and peer support be embedded into services. Research highlights that community psychologists can mobilise communities and improve attitudes around VAWG, de-centring patriarchal norms and leave women feeling validated and seen (Daruwalla et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2022). Thus, adopting a more community-focused framework can help people to examine the impact of how patriarchal systems and norms uphold and perpetuate harmful discourses, and consider how this can be dismantled to work towards creating new shared beliefs, which seek to serve the community as a whole (Daruwalla et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2022). The women recognised

that when they had a platform to speak with people who understood their experiences, they felt empowered, understood, validated, less alone and did not feel othered. This positively impacted their experience of sharing, as well as reduced shame and had a positive impact on their MH. Thus, providing funding for services and support that can enable women to feel supported is needed.

Finally, as well as a sense of community informing women's experience of womanhood, they all held their complex interpretation of what womanhood meant for them. Therefore, it is important that services are person-centred and do not place all of women's experiences in the same category or seek to label women's subjective experiences within minimum diagnostic distress (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). This could further compound the feeling of inferiority in women, and due to the subjectivity of EVAWG, it may continue to leave women feeling that their distress is not worthy of support, thus further alienating and isolating them and impeding them from seeking help. Therefore, person-centred care that is validating and compassionate would enable women to reframe their distress as a meaningful response to patriarchal power, shifting the narrative from self-blame to structural understanding. As well as recognise the impact of systemic injustice and the oppression it induces, which could further support marginalised groups, which was also recognised in the findings. Thus, recommendations for clinical practice include acknowledging the different subjective experiences of living in a patriarchal world, and the trauma that this can induce, moving away from fixed diagnostic frameworks, and moving towards intersectional, systemically and politically informed care.

## Implications for Policy

The findings indicated several implications for policy recommendations. For instance, the impact of EVAWG has a severe impact on women; it limited their sense of agency and left them responsible for not being harassed, attacked, raped, or killed. The Equality Act 2010 (Office for Equality and Opportunity, 2024) protects women from sexual harassment at work and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (Home Office, 2024), however these legislations are specific regarding the location of the harassment or the type of violence. Additionally, there is also the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2012), but again, this does not account for subjective experiences of violence. Similar to the discourses the women reflected on, this could infer to women that their safety is unimportant due to the lack of legislation that protects them in public. Moreover, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (Home Office, 2024) indicates that women need to have been in an intimate relationship for six months to qualify for non-molestation orders, and only considers close family members or people who they have lived with. This does not consider women with casual partners, multiple partners, ex-partners, extended family, friends or other platonic relationships. Thus, implications for future policy should seek to protect women from all forms of violence across the full spectrum of relationships. We know this change can happen, as Gina Martin campaigned and got the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 (Ministry of Justice, 2019) added to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2012) to make upskirting, the process of taking non-consensual pictures or videos under people's clothing, illegal. Thus, we know that campaigns to challenge gender norms can be successful.

The findings highlighted the negative impact that UK discourse around VAWG has on women; patriarchal norms and the use of gendered language upholds gender norms that maintain feelings of self-blame and shame and negatively impact women's identity and self-worth (Camp, 2022;

Weaver et al., 2019). It is imperative that there is accountability for who is committing violence, such as using terminology like EVAWG or patriarchal violence. For instance, objective news coverage that uses actioned language could be a powerful prevention tool that helps dislodges the role of social norms that maintain violence (Carll, 2003; Tranchese, 2014). Thus, it would be prudent for future policy to enforce harsher fines and sanctions around VAWG, and wave anonymity around perpetrators, as we can see that when this happens, policy can influence discourse, which can lead to a shift away from gender-stereotyping discourses and signals government's intentions to support women. For instance, the #DontCrossTheLine campaign, where various councils sought to tackle misogyny and VAWG by placing the responsibility on the perpetrators of violence (dontcrosstheline, 2024). Thus, when policy helps influence discourses, this can filter into the public eye, help reduce passive language, and move towards using more actioned language, such as male violence against women and girls or patriarchal violence, which addresses the systemic issue.

In attempts to reduce gender norms and negative discourses around VAWG in the UK, better education is required in schools around consent, healthy relationships, and misogyny, and to provide fact-checking around far-right influencers, such as Andrew Tate. If we teach children and young people about the dangers of sexism and the continued perpetuation of patriarchal norms that negatively impact people's sense of self, then this could work towards reducing everyday patriarchal violence, and systemic oppression. Thus, policy that recognises that everyday violence as a public health and social justice issue is recommended.

## Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this research was its inclusion of co-production in the form of consultation by Next Chapter. As outlined in the narrative meta-synthesis, Women's Aid (2020) indicated the importance of future VAWG research incorporating a social justice framework that utilises co-production, as much of the existing research does not incorporate this step. Moreover, Women's Aid (2020) also recommended research incorporating women's voices; in addition to co-production, this research utilised an intersectional feminist and survivor framework. Utilising these frameworks moves away from studying the women and towards collaborating with them and platforming their stories. Adopting a survivor framework sought to elevate participants' experiences of their violence, whilst also considering how my positionality may influence the analysis, as well as attempting to minimise the inaccessibility of traditional research (Alyce et al., 2023).

However, it is important to recognise the shortcomings of the research, too. The study's sample size is relatively small. While research indicates that saturation can be achieved with eight participants (Kuzel, 1992; Morse, 1995; Namey et al., 2016), the research would have more methodological strength if the sample size was larger. Demographic information was collected in an attempt to move away from WEIRD samples, as this is unrepresentative of the UK population as a whole, and it is imperative to account for different markers or identities (Apicella et al., 2020; Henrich et al., 2010). As previously highlighted patriarchy intersects with other systems of power, which can create new forms of violence, so diverse sampling is important to reveal similarities and

differences between intersectional identities (Collins et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023; hooks, 2004; Morales, 2023, 2024; Phipps et al., 2017). However, whilst the representation for the LGBTQIA+ community was proportionally good, there was a lack of additional diversity, as all were middle-class, lived in London or the East of England, were either in education, employed, or on maternity leave from employment, or cis-gender and seven of the eight women were white British. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to be conducted to see if the findings from this research are generalisable.

Another considerable strength of the study was the chosen analysis method of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018). There is little research conducted on VAWG that utilises this method and none that explores EVAWG. Therefore, it presents as a novel finding, as well as the strength of the method in facilitating a critical exploration of discourse while keeping women's voices central to the account, thus keeping the 'personal in the political' (Thompson et al., 2018). It is important to note that there may be more research that utilises FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) when exploring EVAWG that may be unpublished, awaiting publication, or that I may not be able to access. Thus, this reflection is limited to what is accessible to me.

## Critical Reflection of the Framework

Trying to expose the harm of patriarchal violence and norms without fixing women as perpetually violated subjects has long been a tension that feminist scholars have grappled with (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2004; Rose, 2021). Thus, it is important to be critical and acknowledge how the labelling of experience, like EVAWG, could create a label or classification that could further shape women's

experiences. For example, Hacking's (1995, 1999) idea of "looping effects" would propose that the naming of encroachment, harassment, coercion or threat as violence could transform women's experiences into social discourse, and possibly alter how women understand themselves or behave. The naming of everyday violence is not neutral and it can potentially change how women interpret their own experiences and identities. In this sense, one could posit that this analysis participates in this "looping effect": it can empower women to give voice to their experiences and re-frame them, yet it could also run the risk of re-inscribing a subject position of victimhood for women. A critical awareness of this looping effect is important: it reminds us that knowledge production is not neutral, and that conceptual categories can have material effects on the lives of those who are categorised.

However, it could also be argued that the "looping effects" of violence also exist in the lack of labelling. For instance, the maintenance of patriarchal and gender norms in itself acts as an interactive process, and one could argue that the normalisation of violence and the passivity around not naming the perpetrator or the harm caused by everyday acts also serves as a different kind of category of experience. It is also not a neutral act. Not giving harassment, encroachment, coercion or threat a classification, instead letting it fall party to patriarchal values, may in itself perpetuate harm and continue to maintain women as victims, or position them as the enablers of their violence; therefore the responsibility is upon them, not the perpetrators of the violence. To label an experience as violence is to intervene in its meaning, but equally to not label an experience as violence also intervenes in its meaning. One position takes accountability and the other is passive.

This reflexive awareness is important; my own analysis is part of the discursive loop that shapes how violence is conceptualised, lived and resisted. There is an ethical responsibility in research and by recognising this interplay, we can name violence in ways that exposes structural and systemic harm while keeping women's voices central, allowing space for multiplicity, agency and resistance in their stories. Whilst the concept of looping effects provides some important understanding regarding how classifications are socially constructed and can shape human experience, they can be critiqued for a lack of engagement with ideas around power, intersectionality and embodiment (Hacking, 1995; 1999; Daly, 2021).

It is helpful to consider Hacking's (1995; 1999) concept of "looping effects" for reflexivity, however an intersectional feminist approach that can consider such "looping effects" within structural and political contexts can offer a more critical perspective (Willet & Etowa, 2023). For instance, naming an experience as violence is not just a cognitive act, it is influenced by structural and political conditions, such as systems of patriarchy, authority or colonialism, that give voice to who has the power to name whose experiences are important (Butler, 2004; Haraway, 1988). Thus, we cannot separate the "looping effect" between people and categories from broader relations of power. There is also a lack of consideration regarding how structural systems can be resisted or reimagined. Again, if we do not challenge existing norms then how do we reduce VAWG? Recognising the label of everyday violence is important, but it is only the first step, we must also interrogate the power structures that maintain VAWG. Taking a step toward actioned language, such as labelling it male VAWG rather than just VAWG begins to take accountability as it names the perpetrator. However, could a more appropriate label that names the perpetrator, interrogates power structures that maintain VAWG, and is inclusive of the harm done to non-binary, trans,

gender non-conforming people and also men, be patriarchal violence? This reframing facilitates the constant critique that is necessary to help dismantle a history of violence against not just women, but all who subvert the patriarchy, thus can help guide richer research on more nuanced and intersectional conceptualisations of violence, such as patriarchal violence.

## Further Research

There is a lack of research that explored EVAWG, and this research has identified novel findings. Thus, it would be prudent for future research to expanded on these findings. Future research would benefit from larger sample sizes and a more diverse group across the UK to indicate whether these results are generalisable. Moreover, this research highlighted how prevalent discourses act as a form of social control that continue to shame, blame and pathologise women, and people, who do not conform to the male gaze. Thus, future research would benefit from more diverse samples to explore the impact of EVAWG within different intersectional groups and cultural contexts. For instance, findings from this research indicated perceived differences in queer women, and indicated that intersectionality adds complexity to women's experiences. Thus, it would be recommended for future research to be conducted with more queer women, gender-non conforming individuals, working-class individuals and with the Global Majority. This could also seek to provide further recommendations for services to tailor support to different needs.

Women's Aid (2020) recommended that future VAWG research should incorporate a social justice framework that utilises co-production and incorporates women's voices. This is a strength of this research and future research would benefit from utilising co-production, as this could help develop

policies that seek to reduce and prevent violence and continue to explore the impact of UK discourse around VAWG and the impact this has on women. Moreover, the meta-synthesis conducted prior to this research indicated that there is little research that explored how shame affected women who experienced EVAWG. This research begins to address this research gap, yet future research would benefit from continuing to explore the effect of shame to address barriers women may experience when seeking help, alongside continuing to explore how the collective connection the women reflected on may serve to buffer these negative effects.

# CONCLUSION

This research adds to existing VAWG literature by utilising a discursive, reflexive and feminist approach. It contributes to the field in various ways; there is a paucity of research that explicitly explores the impact of EVAWG, and this research advances the field here. The research qualitatively explored women's experiences of EVAWG and, in some cases, actioned violence. The research produced four discursive themes that critiqued the societal discourse of VAWG and how this may impact women, recognised the universal experience of EVAWG and how pervasive it is, explored the devastating impact this has on women's MH and nervous system, sense of self and the shame and blame this ignites. Interestingly, the final theme presented was conflicting; women acknowledged the "warm agony" of being women, in that they experience adversity and pain, yet also community, softness and joy within their womanhood and that it is a group whom they were proud to be part of and want to continue to be part of despite their damaging experiences.

This research outlined clinical implications regarding the importance of community and how services should consider community-focused approaches, peer support, and specialised gender-transformative care that seeks to make women feel safe and supported when they share their experiences, rather than invalidated or shamed. Additionally, the research recognised the need for services to acknowledge the experience of trauma that comes from living in a patriarchal world, to step away from fixed diagnostic frameworks and move towards systemically and politically formed care. This is necessary not just for women who have experienced violence, but the research

also highlighted the importance of recognising intersectionality in people's identity and experiences; thus, moving towards a more socio-cultural-political model of MH care would seek to support people living with different experiences of oppression. Moreover, the research explored prevalent discourses in the UK regarding VAWG, indicating the need to move away from passive language and challenge social and gender norms that render women responsible for their violence. Moving towards actioned language, like patriarchal violence, names the perpetrator and interrogates power structures, highlighting the insidious harm of the patriarchy not only on women, but on non-binary, trans, gender non-conforming people, and men too. This highlights policy implications in that stricter legislation could help to reduce biased reporting, reduce the use of gendered language in the media to transform gender norms and recognise the need for stricter sanctions when people have committed EVAWG, such as counts of harassment and encroachment.

This study contributed to the field of VAWG research, it utilised co-production, adopted an intersectional feminist and survivor framework, and utilised FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018). It was hoped that the survivor framework and reflexivity was a strength to the research, as identity and experiences were explored by the women interviewed and what they shared, as well as myself. I could relate with the women in our shared experiences of EVAWG. Yet, I was able to reflect on my potential bias and positionality to ensure that the women's voices remained the central focus. Limitations of research included a small sample size and, despite efforts, a lack of diversity among participants; thus, future research should seek to replicate this with a larger and more diverse sample. Finally, this research also highlighted the need for future research to continue to explore how everyday violence affects women, as well as to explore the impact on intersectional groups, such as queer people, non-binary, trans or gender non-conforming people and the Global Majority.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. **Start off with getting to know each other. *Tell them about me – invite them to ask questions if they'd like*.**

   **Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?**

Would like to know demographics – age, ethnicity, pronouns, sexuality.

**Ask about photos.**

Asked participants to bring three photographs of themselves:

- One that represents them feeling empowered
- One that represents womanhood for them
- Another photo of their choosing – that I will ask why they have brought this one and what it represents for them.

Ask participants to tell me about the pictures, what was happening in the pictures, how old were they in these photos/when the photo was taken, how did they feel at these differing times, any differences in mind-set/how perceive self/emotions from how you saw yourself, confidence etc.

2. **How does the way the media portrays VAWG in our society and living with it everyday affect you?**

**Scenario:** Catcalled on the street by a group of men, would you react? If so how? If not, why? How would this make you feel?

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

3. **What do you think about the language that is used in today's society when talking about harassment or violence against women?**

4. **Define encroachment for participants. Can you tell me about an experience or experiences where you have felt this encroachment/everyday violence?**

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

5. **Can you describe an experience where you witnessed a similar experience happen to someone else – did you feel able to challenge?** (School, work etc.)

6. **How safe do you feel in your day to day life?**

7. **As a woman do you change your behaviours to protect yourself? If yes, how?**

8. **Do you think a man could have a similar experience of encroachment/harassment as you?**

*Prompt:* Same for LGBTQIA+? Same for racialised men? Same for trans men?

9. **Scenario: You're telling your female friends about an encounter where you were at a bar and a man kept touching your lower back and staring at you. How would they react?**

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

10. **Are there any other experiences you wanted to share with me?**

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

11. **Thinking about this/these experience(s) you've told me about, could you describe to me whether this had an impact on your mental health?**

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

12. **How long did these experiences impact your mental health?**

13. **From these experiences of everyday violence has this had an impact on how you view yourself?**

14. **How much does being a woman inform your identity?**

**REVISIT PHOTOS.**

**Is there anything that I haven't covered and you would like to talk about?**

What are you taking away from today?

15. **Is there anything you have thought about today that you wish you had known about during those other time points (photos) in your life that you have shared with me?**

## Appendix B: In-Vivo Themes Identified in Data

1. Womanhood
2. The Joy of being a woman
3. The pain of being a woman
4. The male gaze
5. Male entitlement to women's bodies
6. Disappointed by the media
7. Sexual violence
8. Invisible perpetrator
9. Perpetrator being someone you know
10. 'Normal' experience
11. Shock when people surprised by encroachment
12. Heteronormativity
13. Feeling dirty
14. Guilt

15. Shame

16. Self as unworthy

17. Madonna/whore dichotomy

18. Sexual double standards

19. Fear

20. Patriarchal norms

21. Camaraderie of women

22. Bound by norms

23. Discourse ingrained from childhood

24. Discourses in society around perpetrator being a stranger

25. Anxiety and panic

26. Community

27. Impact on self

28. Impact on mental health

29. Dysregulated nervous system

30. Toxic masculinity

31. Intersectionality

32. The police

33. Distrust in police

34. Safety strategies

35. Being ‘small’

36. Gendered roles

37. Disconnecting from the media

38. Queerness

39. Acceptance

## Appendix C: Women's 'I poems'

***Nora's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I mean a lot of distrust

I've always personally had a bit of a difficult feeling towards police

I don't think it's really society that has changed

I think it's more within myself and the growth

I was carrying around like a bunch of baggage

I always see is like she was raped, not like he raped her

I think it is a very, very interesting narrative to put out there

I definitely did see myself as a victim.

**Theme Two**

(So many) like I literally can remember being *[encroached on]* the first time I went to a club

I was sexually assaulted again.

I'm violated, and that's not something that's going to change.

It's always going to be there. Unfortunately.

I think I accepted it.

I think as a female you don't really feel like you can do a lot.

I'm just gonna have to accept this.

**Theme Three**

I can have days really feel nothing, highly numb

I did feel quite lonely

I was constantly chasing all these little highs

I was chasing male validation for so long

The feeling of getting this validation becomes addictive

I felt myself going quite literally insane.

It was difficult. I'm not gonna lie. It was extremely difficult

I did feel extremely violated

I'm still just figuring it out.

***Eleanor's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I have a real hatred of the police

(What) I really think would be helpful is focusing on the actual impact

I also knew in the moment it wasn't about him grabbing my tit

I was crying because this world is a place where he can grab my tit with no consequences

**Theme Two**

I lived with fear of a man like, since I was tiny

I feel quite unsafe quite a lot of the time

But I rarely acknowledge it cause I'm rarely in my body

My body was this thing to be like controlled and managed. Punished.

I was constantly living in fear

I push against the fear so I can go about living my fucking life

**Theme Three**

I felt so like, filthy and horrible

You become like this disgusting thing to yourself

I look back in my diary back then and it was it, literally every single entry starts with disgusting

I needed the male gaze

You then don't have any agency or control.

***Florence's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I almost feel like mildly offended that people are shocked that these things happen

I should feel angry about it. But I don't. Just that's kind of how normal it is

I really want to say this, like, you know, that it's become less normalised

I just think it's just become a bit more sophisticated maybe

You don't really question things.

**Theme Two**

I just wish that, yeah, we spent more time talking about and using language like, preventative measures and then healing and recovery

I think yeah, language can be so shaming

I find it so hard even myself, just like rewiring those like pathways

Anyway you subvert the status quo men will harass you for it

I mean they're like remaining silent and not labelling men as a rapist

(The problem with victimhood is) I just always thought if someone had been raped you could never be happy again. You could never enjoy sex again. You could never be successful.

I get angry that society is like uninterested

We should just take women's rage at face value

Not let them be the loudest voice.

**Theme Three**

I think yeah women sit on things because of fear and shame

I've never really felt that powerful

I think most women and I include myself in this, I think that they think they're inherently bad, like there's something wrong, and they need fixing

I have a really loud inner self-critic

That reminds me that it's like my fault

I'm like, are you in power? Is that empowering? I don't think so.

***Violet's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I think there's a lot around like stranger danger

Just my experience it's always been like people you know

I feel like it's just so ingrained from like childhood

I think we're just kind of bound by like the norms, aren't we?

If I feel encroached upon I think i'm just gonna get on with it

I'm like oh, it's fine, whatever this happens to people

I hate that. We all of us are so like it's so ingrained, and it's so normalised that we're kind of stuck in this cycle of it now

I think it's just ingrained in my bones.

I think we well, we've had to deal with this like every day

**Theme Two**

I think a lot about like how women are treated on a day-to-day basis

(But) I really try to avoid like thinking about violence against women

I just, I really do avoid like any like media

I do just feel really upset by it.

It's accepted, why?

**Theme Three**

I can't take up space here because it's gonna put me in a vulnerable position

I think like generally, on the whole, though like day-to-day feelings of like being less, less worthy or like not being important

That's how I feel when I experience any kind of like violence or harassment

I think it like, probably makes me feel less like important in the world

My energy for fighting is dwindling

Blame myself.

***Sylvia's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I think it just feels like it's embedded slightly

I know the values that women bring are not respected

I guess it made me question whether I was acting in the right way

(Maybe) I should change the way I acted

The narrative in general in society

I think, comes from the way our society it is set up

I guess it does make me change my behaviour, which bothers me.

**Theme Two**

I sort of sense something

I've you know, it's scary, there's definitely there's a fear

I then have like what feels like quite physical fear

I guess there's that feeling in your stomach of like feeling fear in your stomach

Mainly for me, a fear of being raped

I felt unsafe walking around

We want to get home safe at night.

**Theme Three**

I guess it does make me change my behaviour

I think I've done that a lot

A dampening down of myself

I you just feel like you're quite heavy, like you're carrying a lot

I'd make different choices if I didn't hold the responsibility

I would act quite differently

I want to free that up

I think, as women we hold more

I think I'd be able to do a lot more

It would free up my brain and energy.

***Ruth's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

You wouldn't think anything of it

You think that's normal

I've kind of switched off to it, which I think is, ultimately a bad thing

I mean it didn't really occur to me that I didn't like that

I just thought that was the usual

I never thought of anything that had happened to me ever as something to really be food for thought

I know it's going to happen, it can happen at any time, no matter what I wear

I think, as women we've been made to think that it's normal.

**Theme Two**

I couldn't wait to boil wash my hands

I did, and it hurt a lot

I was actually scared

I end up with nail marks on my palm

I remember feeling hyper-active? Stiff as a board

I was watching everything all the time

I just felt silent, and and icky

I don't want to feel that way again.

**Theme Three**

I don't feel like it's bad enough to be a survivor

I'm struggling with a word to try and to define it

I felt like I got my victim letter and then that was it. They called me a victim, and they left me alone

I got the letter that said I was a victim, and it felt like a bullet upon myself

I am a victim, like it's my fault!

***Mia's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I think as women we don't get told that enough

We just kind of minimise it, like we're used to this

I'm conscious all the time and stuff

I had this experience, and like we literally just went round the group like everyone sharing having, like a violent, horrible experience that had happened to them

We'd all had a horrible, threatening experience

I mean everyone's experienced that kind of unwanted physical attention.

**Theme Two**

I don't always feel 100% safe

I felt really like panic

I think I felt a lot of anxiety

I was just feeling anxious, and I wanted to get to my destination

I started being quite fear-driven, I think, I some of my behaviours

I wasn't really hopeful anymore

I was like so not in my own head

I was almost just getting to the point where I was just like doing life

I think yeah, definitely had a lasting impact

I don't want to feel

My body's like wary of feeling like really sad again.

**Theme Three**

I think, like a really, really strong, very powerful emotion that comes with it like it's your fault

I felt like, really I felt a bit gross

I think you do just lose a feeling of like worthiness in yourself

I've acted really bad, and I've been toxic

I felt really like really not proud of myself

I would sit there and think like I'm a feminist. What the fuck am I doing here?

I felt like a fake me

I'm pathetic. Why am I here?

I was just like not empowered at all.

***Hazel's 'I poems'***

**Theme One**

I feel like we have to change our behaviours, the ways we walk around

I've been cat called my whole life

When I was at school we got sexually harassed all the time

I think it's probably just the everyday feeling just being as a woman really

I think a woman wouldn't be surprised

I don't think they have to consider as many things that we do as women

I think that will always be with us.

**Theme Two**

I've never really felt, as a woman, safe walking around

I'd say, for sure, you know that kind of hyper-vigilance and feelings of fear

I actually stopped walking around at night because I felt really unsafe

I feel like that made me really jumpy

I sort of don't like that I need a man to feel safe

I have to be safe

I'm much more vulnerable.

**Theme Three**

I think and certainly the responsibility still often lies with the victim

Your sense of self feels attacked

I think shame's quite a big thing

I think certainly like, if you got drunk, and you know something happens, then you would like the narrative is, oh, we shouldn't have

You might feel kind of blamed, or felt shame for what's happened.

# Appendix D: University of Essex Ethical Approval

University of Essex

06/02/2023

Miss Lauren Weeks

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Lauren,

**Ethics Committee Decision**

Application: ETH2223-0102

We are pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "A twofold exploration of women who have experienced encroachment and intimate partner violence: A Critical Discussion exploring the Narrative of Male Violence against Women and the impact of threatened and actual violence on women." has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

REO Research Governance Team

reo-governance@essex.ac.uk

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# Appendix E: Participant Information Sheets

***Participant Information Sheet for Consultation***

**Participant Information Sheet: Consultation from Next Chapter for Interview Questions and Topics to be explored within the Research**

**A twofold exploration of women's experiences of male violence against women. A critical discussion exploring the narrative of male violence against women and the impact of threatened violence and intimate partner violence.**

I welcome you to take part in the following thesis research exploring issues regarding gender inequality, male violence against women, and women's feelings of encroachment. Encroachment is the experience of an intrusion on a person's territory or their rights.

The focus of the research will be on the potential impact these issues may have on women, such as the impact on women's mental health, sense of self, and any feelings this impact may evoke in women. The focus will be exploring what meaning women make from their experiences, to advocate for change, and will have a lens focusing on critiquing the narrative of male violence against women that is present in society.

This research will receive consultation from Next Chapter, who are a domestic abuse charity who work across the areas of Tendring, Colchester, Maldon, Chelmsford, Braintree and Uttlesford in Essex. They provide free and confidential services to support people who have or who are currently experiencing intimate partner violence.

If you wish to take part in the research please read the following information, which explains the process, direction and aims of the research. Do not hesitate to ask the researcher any questions before, during or after reading this information sheet.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this research is to explore the impact gender inequality, fear, a feeling of encroachment, violence, and societal pressure can have on women's wellbeing. The research aims to explore the impact this may have on women, uncover what could be changed within services and policy, empower women and break down barriers.

The research will explore the living experience of women who have experienced threatened violence and intimate partner violence. The research will explore how women's experiences may have impacted their sense of self, how their experiences may have impacted their mental health, and what feelings and emotions their experiences evoked within them.

The project is qualitative, which means it focuses on exploring what you say and will not analyse numerical data.

**Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to take part in a consultation process as you are part of the team at Next Chapter or are being supported by Next Chapter.

You have been asked to take part as part to help guide the focus of the project as a result of your experience and knowledge.

You have been invited to share your experience and knowledge to help inform questions to be asked within subsequent interviews.

Additionally, your knowledge and expertise will also help inform topic areas that are important to explore within this research and identify areas that have already been explored within previous research.

**Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and will not affect the quality of your support from Next Chapter or your job at Next Chapter.

You have the right to stop consulting at any point, and you may withdraw at any point during the consultation and up to two weeks after the consultation date.

If you chose to withdraw after the consultation has taken place all of your data will be removed and deleted. If you choose to withdraw at any stage then please contact the researcher via email whose details are listed at the end of this document.

All information you provide will be confidential, but if you decide you do not want to take part or do not want your interview answers to be part of the project then do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

If you chose to withdraw then all of your data will be disposed of and you will not suffer any consequences from deciding you no longer wish to take part in the project.

After two weeks withdrawal will not be possible as data will have already been anonymised and the analysis of the data will have commenced.

**What is the research process?**

Once you have agreed to take part in the consultation, you will be given an informed consent form to complete and sign your consent to taking part.

We will conduct an unstructured discussion group that will last approximately two hours and will focus upon your knowledge and expertise. The discussion group will take place between yourself, the researcher and other group members and will be in a private and safe space where you feel comfortable.

It is suggested that the discussion group will take place in person in a location provided by Next Chapter. However, if this is not accessible to you please alert the researcher and an alternative solution can be put in place.

The conversation will not be recorded, however notes will be taken during the discussion group.

As the conversation will not be recorded data will not be transcribed. This is an informative consultation process and your data will not be used in the analysis of the project. Because of this notes will be taken during the discussion group to ensure that information is captured for input on the next steps of the research process. The next steps includes informing the interview schedules to ensure appropriate themes that you have deemed important are addressed.

There are no proposed disadvantages or risks to taking part in this project, however, if you feel any distress during or after taking part you can contact the researcher who can arrange additional support for you from Next Chapter.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The research aims to explore the living experience of women and endeavours to tell their stories to gain insight on the impact of gender inequality, a sense of encroachment and violence against women inequality may have had on their identity, feelings and mental health, whilst advocating for change surrounding these issues.

As a participant, you will get the opportunity to tell your story and explore avenues that you feel has had an impact on you. You will have the opportunities to express what you would like to be heard and what you feel is important.

As a participant in the consultation process, you will have the opportunity to help direct and guide the focus of the project and the subsequent interview questions.

**Will the data collected in this study be kept confidential?**

Yes, only the researcher will have access to the raw data, which will be stored on the secure cloud service Box within password-protected files. All consent forms will be secured and a participant number will identify you once data has been analysed, and pseudonyms will be used to conceal your identity throughout the paper.

All written notes will be scanned in and uploaded to the Box also and the physical copies will be shredded and disposed of in confidential waste.

The data retained is in accordance with the University of Essex Data Protection and Research Activity Guide[4] and the University Of Essex Code Of Good Research Practice[5], thus, data will be kept securely in electronic form for three years after the completion of this project. After this time, all raw data will be disposed of.

In accordance with the above this means the data will be kept securely in electronic form and stored within a password-protected file until the project is completed and marks have been received. After this time, all raw data will be disposed of.

It is important to note that due to the fact that the research will be disseminated to Next Chapter there is a chance that they may be able to identify you if any quotes are included in the thesis paper due to the strong relationships that are built, the close nature of the work and relatively small team at Next Chapter.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

If you would like to take part in the research, please contact the researcher at the email address provided for further information.

The researcher will then liaise with you and arrange a time and date that is best suited for you to proceed to the next steps of the research. The discussion group has been arranged to be conducted online, however if this is not easily accessible to you please let the researcher know and an alternative location can be arranged.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The notes from the discussion group will be stored within a password protected file on the cloud service Box. The discussion group will not be transcribed.

Consent forms will be stored and kept in password-protected files within Box as well.

The information from the discussion group will be used as consultation to help inform topic areas for the research and for questions to be asked within interviews.

The following interviews will be transcribed and analysed qualitatively using the method of Discourse Analysis. The results of the research will be written up and presented within the research thesis for the DClinPsy, Clinical Psychology. If the results from the project are novel they may be published further, such as in an academic journal or presented at an academic conference.

[4] Data Protection and research activity | University of Essex

[5] Code of Good Research Practice.pdf

A copy of the university project report will be provided to Next Chapter. There will be no raw data included in this report and any data included will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used.

If you would like a copy of the published research do not hesitate to contact the researcher who can email you a completed copy of the research dissertation upon receiving the final marks of the course.

The results will also be disseminated to Next Chapter via a presentation or a summary report. Like the project report there will be no raw data included and all details will be anonymised.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

Lauren Weeks has organised and funded this research for a DClinPsy Clinical Psychology thesis research paper at the University of Essex in the School of Health and Social Care. The research is supported by the Division of Psychology and supervised by Dr Danny Taggart and Dr Caroline Bald.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Essex Sub Committee 2, University of Essex.

**Concerns and Complaints**

If you have any concerns or complaints about any part of this study, in the first instance please contact the researcher of this project, Lauren Weeks, using the contact details listed below.

If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed satisfactorily or if you feel that you cannot approach the researcher, then please contact the Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, [Susan McPherson, smcpher@essex.ac.uk].

If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager [Sarah Manning-Press, sarahm@essex.ac.uk]. Within your email please include the ERAMS reference number, which can be found at the foot of this page.

**Contact for Further Information**

Please do not hesitate to contact my supervisors or me for any further information.

**Researcher**: Lauren Weeks
**Email address**: lw21862@essex.ac.uk
Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex and employed by Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

**Supervisor**: Dr Danny Taggart
**Email address**: dtaggart@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer and Tutor of Clinical Psychology Doctorate at the University of Essex.

**Supervisor**: Dr Caroline Bald
**Email address**: caroline.bald@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer of Health and Social Care.

**Thank you!**

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this information sheet and consider taking part in my research.

***Participant Information Sheet for Interviews***

**Participant Information Sheet: Women's experiences of threatened violence and sense of encroachment**

**A twofold exploration of women's experiences of male violence against women. A critical discussion exploring the narrative of male violence against women and the impact of threatened violence and intimate partner violence.**

I welcome you to take part in the following thesis research exploring issues regarding gender inequality, male violence against women, and women's feelings of encroachment. Encroachment is the experience of an intrusion on a person's territory or their rights.

The focus of the research will be on the potential impact these issues may have on women, such as the impact on women's mental health, sense of self, and any feelings this impact may evoke in women. The focus will be exploring what meaning women make from their experiences, to advocate for change, and will have a lens focusing on critiquing the narrative of male violence against women that is present in society.

This research will receive consultation from Next Chapter, who are a domestic abuse charity who work across the areas of Tendring, Colchester, Maldon, Chelmsford, Braintree and Uttlesford in Essex. They provide free and confidential services to support people who have or who are currently experiencing intimate partner violence.

If you wish to take part in the research please read the following information, which explains the process, direction and aims of the research. Do not hesitate to ask the researcher any questions before, during or after reading this information sheet.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this research is to explore the impact gender inequality, fear, a feeling of encroachment, violence, and societal pressure can have on women's wellbeing. The research aims to explore the impact this may have on women, uncover what could be changed within services and policy, empower women and break down barriers.

The research will explore the living experience of women who have experienced threatened violence and intimate partner violence. The research will explore how women's experiences may have impacted their sense of self, how their experiences may have impacted their mental health, and what feelings and emotions their experiences evoked within them.

The project is qualitative, which means it focuses on exploring what you say and will not analyse numerical data.

**Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to take part as you are a woman who has had an experience of threatened violence, encroachment or gender inequality and the project is interested in your experience of this.

Therefore, you have been invited to take part to share your experience during an interview.

**Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. All information you provide will be confidential, but if you decide you do not want to take part then do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

You have the right to end the interview at any point. If you choose to leave during the interview we will terminate the interview and all of your data that has been recorded will be deleted.

You can chose to withdraw your data from the study after the interview has taken place and you may do so up to two weeks after the interview has taken place. Please contact the researcher via the email address at the bottom of this sheet and all your data will be removed and deleted and you will not suffer any consequences from deciding you no longer wish to take part in the project.

After two weeks withdrawal of your information will not be possible as the data will have already been anonymised and the analysis of the data will have commenced.

**What is the research process?**

Once you have agreed to take part in the research, you will be given an informed consent form to complete to sign your consent to taking part.

You will then be asked, with your consent, to bring along three photograph(s) that can be accessed electronically or physically– either that you have taken or of you. These photograph(s) will be meaningful to you and represent the different feelings that have been evoked in you in relation to the research topic. If possible one photo should be of a time or representation of when you felt empowered.

Bringing photograph(s) is your choice and is entirely voluntary and you will not suffer any consequences if you decide to not bring them. There will be no physical reference, image or recording of your photograph(s) within the study.

The only reference that would be made to your photograph(s) would be via written descriptions within the analysis and write up of the study regarding how the photograph(s) made you feel.

We will conduct a semi-structured interview that will last approximately one hour and will include a series of questions, which you are more than welcome to look at before the interview proceeds. The interview will take place between yourself and the researcher and will be in a private and safe space where you feel comfortable. If you decided to bring photograph(s) discussion of these will take place within the interview.

It is suggested that the interview will take place across a telecommunications software, such as Zoom or Teams. However, if this is not accessible to you or if you would prefer the interview to take place face-to-face then please alert the researcher and an alternative solution can be put in place.

We will begin by visiting the photograph(s) you brought along with you (if applicable) and will revisit these photographs during the interview. The conversation will be recorded on the telecommunications recording software or a Dictaphone and will be transcribed verbatim and analysed as part of the research paper. You may request a copy of your transcription if you wish.

The data will be used amongst other data for analysis for the research paper. There are no proposed disadvantages for taking part in this study, however, if you feel any distress before, during or after taking part you can contact the researcher at any point.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The research aims to explore the living experience of women and endeavours to tell their stories to gain insight on the impact of male violence against women, feelings of encroachment and gender inequality may have had on their identity, feelings and mental health, whilst advocating for change surrounding these issues.

As a participant, you will get the opportunity to tell your story and explore avenues that you feel has had an impact on you. You will have the opportunities to express what you would like to be heard and what you feel is important.

**Will the data collected in this study be kept confidential?**

Yes, only the researcher will have access to the raw data, which will be stored on the secure cloud service Box within password-protected files. All consent forms will be secured and a participant number will identify you once data has been analysed, and pseudonyms will be used to conceal your identity throughout the paper. If you brought photograph(s) with you to the interview they will only be visited during the interview and reference will only be made to them from the transcribed interview for the analysis and write up of the paper, where all identifiable information will be changed.

The only information that will be included, with your consent, will be your age, ethnicity and sexual orientation. However, you are under no obligation to consent to the inclusion of this information and if you chose to not disclose these attributes they will not be included in the write-up and you will suffer no consequences.

The data retained is in accordance with the University of Essex Data Protection and Research Activity Guide[6] and the University Of Essex Code Of Good Research Practice[7], thus, data will be kept securely in electronic form for three years after the completion of this project. After this time, all raw data will be disposed of.

In accordance with the above this means the data will be kept securely in electronic form and stored within a password-protected file until the project is completed and marks have been received. After this time, all raw data will be disposed of.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

If you would like to take part in the research, please contact the researcher at the email address provided for further information.

The researcher will then liaise with you and provide a consent form for you to sign to consent to taking part in the study.

Once the consent form has been signed and returned to the researcher, the researcher will contact you to arrange a time and date that is best suited for you to take part in an interview.

The interviews have been arranged to be conducted online, however if this is not easily accessible to you please let the researcher know so an alternative solution can be arranged.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The interviews will be transcribed and analysed qualitatively using the method of Discourse Analysis. The results of the research will be written up and presented within the research thesis for

[6] Data Protection and research activity | University of Essex

[7] Code of Good Research Practice.pdf

the DClinPsy, Clinical Psychology. If the results from the project are novel they may be published further, such as in an academic journal or presented at an academic conference.

A copy of the university project report will be provided to Next Chapter. There will be no raw data included in this report and any data included will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used.

If you would like a copy of the published research do not hesitate to contact the researcher who can email you a completed copy of the research dissertation upon receiving the final marks of the course.

The results will also be disseminated to Next Chapter via a presentation or a summary report. Like the project report there will be no raw data included and all details will be anonymised.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

Lauren Weeks has organised and funded this research for a DClinPsy Clinical Psychology thesis research paper at the University of Essex in the School of Health and Social Care. The research is supported by the Division of Psychology and supervised by Dr Danny Taggart and Dr Caroline Bald.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Essex Sub Committee 2, University of Essex.

**Concerns and Complaints**

If you have any concerns or complaints about any part of this study, in the first instance please contact the researcher of this project, Lauren Weeks, using the contact details listed below.

If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed satisfactorily or if you feel that you cannot approach the researcher, then please contact the Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, [Susan McPherson, smcpher@essex.ac.uk].

If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager [Sarah Manning-Press, sarahm@essex.ac.uk]. Within your email please include the ERAMS reference number, which can be found at the foot of this page.

**Contact for Further Information**

Please do not hesitate to contact my supervisors or me for any further information.

**Researcher**: Lauren Weeks
**Email address**: lw21862@essex.ac.uk

Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex and employed by Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

**Supervisor**: Dr Danny Taggart
**Email address**: dtaggart@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer and Tutor of Clinical Psychology Doctorate at the University of Essex.

**Supervisor**: Dr Caroline Bald
**Email address**: caroline.bald@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer of Health and Social Care.

**Thank you!**

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this information sheet and consider taking part in my research.

## Appendix F: Consent Forms

***Consent Form for Consultation***

# Consent Form

**Full title of Project:** A twofold exploration of women who have experienced encroachment and intimate partner violence: A Critical Discussion exploring the Narrative of Male Violence against Women and the impact of threatened and actual violence on women.

**Name, position and contact details of Researcher:** Lauren Weeks, Trainee Clinical Psychologist (DClinPsy student at the University of Essex and employed by the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust), lw21862@essex.ac.uk

| **Taking part (please tick the box that applies)** | **Yes** | **No** |
|---|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I confirm I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that if I decide to not take part up to two weeks after confirming my consent that any materials that contain my details will be destroyed and that I will not receive any negative consequences to withdrawing my consent. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree to take part in the above study. | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Use of my information (please tick the box that applies)** | **Yes** | **No** |
| I understand my personal details such as email address or personal details will not be revealed to people outside the project. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in potential publications, presentations and training materials. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree for the data I provide to be stored (after it has been anonymised) in the Box Cloud Service of the University of Essex and I understand it may be used for future research. | ☐ | ☐ |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I understand that my data will be anonymised using a participant number and pseudonyms. I understand that despite this process it may not be possible to retain anonymity within the write up of the research for the people who work at or attend Next Chapter. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree for notes to be taken and audio-recorded during the consultation process. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that any recordings of the consultation will not be transcribed. | ☐ | ☐ |

Below are the details of the researcher and the supervisors of the study.

**Researcher**: Lauren Weeks
**Email address**: lw21862@essex.ac.uk
Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex and employed by Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

**Supervisor**: Dr Danny Taggart
**Email address**: dtaggart@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer and Tutor of Clinical Psychology Doctorate at the University of Essex.

**Supervisor**: Dr Caroline Bald
**Email address**: caroline.bald@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer of Health and Social Care.

**Signature to confirm consent below:**

| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|

| Name of Researcher | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|

*Consent Form for Interviews*

# Consent Form

**Full title of Project:** A twofold exploration of women who have experienced encroachment and intimate partner violence: A Critical Discussion exploring the Narrative of Male Violence against Women and the impact of threatened and actual violence on women.

**Name, position and contact details of Researcher:** Lauren Weeks, Trainee Clinical Psychologist (DClinPsy student at the University of Essex and employed by the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust), lw21862@essex.ac.uk

| Taking part (please tick the box that applies) | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I confirm I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that if I decide to not take part up to two weeks after confirming my consent that any materials that contain my details will be destroyed and that I will not receive any negative consequences to withdrawing my consent. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree to take part in the above study. | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Use of my information (please tick the box that applies)** | **Yes** | **No** |
| I understand my personal details such as email address and personal details will not be revealed to people outside the project. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in potential publications, presentations and training materials. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree for the data I provide to be stored (after it has been anonymised) in the Box Cloud Service of the University of Essex and I understand it may be used for future research. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that my data will be anonymised using a participant number and pseudonyms. | ☐ | ☐ |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I agree to the interview being video and/or audio recorded. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand that if the interview is video recorded this will be if it is conducted online. I understand that this will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I agree to the interview being transcribed verbatim. | ☐ | ☐ |

Below are the details of the researcher and the supervisors of the study.

**Researcher**: Lauren Weeks
**Email address**: lw21862@essex.ac.uk
Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex and employed by Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

**Supervisor**: Dr Danny Taggart
**Email address**: dtaggart@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer and Tutor of Clinical Psychology Doctorate at the University of Essex.

**Supervisor**: Dr Caroline Bald
**Email address**: caroline.bald@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer of Health and Social Care.

**Signature to confirm consent below:**

| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|

| Name of Researcher | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|

## Appendix G: Debrief Form

# Debrief Sheet

**A twofold exploration of women who have experienced encroachment and intimate partner violence: A Critical Discussion exploring the Narrative of Male Violence against Women and the impact of threatened and actual violence on women.**

Thank you for your participation in this research.

This research project focuses on gender inequality and male violence against women, and the impact of encroachment, violence and inequality in present-day society. It aims to examine the impact these issues have on women's feelings, identity and mental health.

The aim of the research is to look at the impact threatened violence and intimate partner violence may have on women and explore their living experiences, and advocate for change surrounding these issues. To do this you participated in either a consultation discussion group, semi-structured interview.

If you took part in the consultation process you were asked to take part due to your knowledge and expertise to help inform areas to explore within the research and to help inform the interview questions.

If you took part in the interviews you were asked questions about the impact your experiences of threatened violence or intimate partner violence have had on your emotions, identity and wellbeing.

You were asked your thoughts on the narrative of male violence against women present in today's society and what perceived impact you feel this may have had on you or other women. Alongside the questions in the interviews we visited photograph(s) that represented different feelings and experiences in your life.

Following the interviews, which were recorded with a Dictaphone or via a recording software, the conversations will be transcribed verbatim, sorted by participant number and pseudonyms will be used throughout the research paper to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

All data from the discussion group, interviews will be treated with the strictest confidence and only the researcher will have access to the raw data, which will be stored in password-protected files on the cloud service the Box.

Data from the interviews will be analysed and themes will be collated from your account and similarities and differences will be looked for. This will all explore the impact encroachment, threatened violence and intimate partner violence has had on your feelings, identity and mental health. The research will focus on these areas, alongside gender identity and societal context, and explore any areas you disclosed.

You have the right to withdraw your data up to two weeks from the data of the discussion group, interview and if you would like to please contact the researcher and inform them.

If you took part in the interviews, you are welcome to have a copy of your transcribed interview and if you would like a copy please inform the researcher and she will email the transcription over to you.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Psychology Department Ethics Committee at the University of Essex. Please keep this debrief sheet for reference.

Please do not hesitate to ask any additional questions and if you think of any after the interview has taken place then feel free to contact the researcher with any additional questions regarding the research. Similarly, if you have queries or concerns regarding the interview, then please email the researcher to discuss. If you feel you have been impacted in any way throughout the research, you can find additional support from several charities that can offer advice and helplines, with contact information listed below.

This research has been supported by Next Chapter. Their contact details are 0330 3337 444 or 01206 500585 and their website is https://www.thenextchapter.org.uk/

**Wish Women's Mental Health Charity**

0208 980 3618

https://www.womenatwish.org.uk/

**The Fawcett Society**

0203 598 6154

https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/

**Body Gossip**

http://www.bodygossip.org/contact

Many thanks for your time and interest in this research, again if you have any questions regarding the researcher do not hesitate to contact the researcher whose information is listed below. Their supervisor details are also included below.

**Researcher**: Lauren Weeks
**Email address**: lw21862@essex.ac.uk
Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex and employed by Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

**Supervisor**: Dr Danny Taggart
**Email address**: dtaggart@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer and Tutor of Clinical Psychology Doctorate at the University of Essex.

**Supervisor**: Dr Caroline Bald
**Email address**: caroline.bald@essex.ac.uk
Lecturer of Health and Social Care.

## Appendix H: Poem describing what it feels like from one woman's point of view following Trump's re-election.

dear mother, yes, today they voted in a rapist,
that country we keep comparing to our own
despite the ocean in between I know, I know, the same language
and all that, but dear mother today are government
sent a congratulating letter to the man who brags about
grabbing women anytime he wants, yeah I know
you have to be polite in politics, apparently, so many leaders
with giggling fingers on triggers hoping for some power - bam!
shake hands and smile for the camera; a decision between genocide
and rapists, apparently, a decision between healthcare and dying,
school shootings and national pride - has it always been this way, mum,
you've seen so much suffering in your life and yet you carry on believing
that most people are kind, and most people are good, and I agree
but right now, it's difficult. please tell me how you do it, mum
when everywhere you look, it's all genocide and rapists and guns?

Poem by Hollie McNish (2024).