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An Analysis of Gendered, Intersectional Dynamics in Domestic Homicide Reviews

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This paper aims to identify, for the first time, how gendered intersectional dynamics are framed in Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) and incorporated, or otherwise, into their recommendations. Conducting a mixed methods document analysis of 46 DHRs, we find that the gendered and raced nature of domestic abuse/homicide frequently remains unstated and explore these silences in relation to incident-focussed risk assessment practices and ‘counter allegations’ of abuse. At the point of domestic homicide, intersectional gendered relations cannot be denied, minimised, or ignored. However, we argue that the race and gender-neutral framing found in DHR policy documents and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 too frequently extends to DHRs themselves, obfuscating the learning potential intended to lay at the heart of the process.

KEY WORDS: domestic homicide review, domestic abuse, gender, intersectionality, femicide

INTRODUCTION

Domestic homicide is a gendered crime and in 2022 approximately 48,800 women and girls were killed globally by their intimate partner or family member (UNODC 2023). While homicides are mostly committed against males (by other men), women and girls are disproportionately impacted by homicidal violence in the home. Worldwide, they constitute 53 per cent of victims killed in the household and 66 per cent of those killed by an intimate partner (UNODC 2023). Figures are underestimated due to differences and absences in the reporting, recording, and maintenance of criminal justice (CJ) records. Domestic Violence Fatality Reviews, as they are known internationally, or Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) as they have long been referred to in England and Wales¹, aim to be a means through which to better understand these crimes. DHRs seek to identify the antecedents to the homicide, gaps in agency response, and make recommendations to improve practice at front-line, organizational, and (where relevant) national levels. Through disseminating the lessons learnt, DHRs aim to improve responses to

1 In February 2024 DHRs were renamed Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs) to include deaths that occur because of DA related suicide. Here, we retain the language of DHR to reflect the terminology of the documents at the time they were conducted.

domestic abuse (DA) generally, and prevent domestic homicide specifically (Home Office 2011, 2016).

In this paper we use a mixed methods approach to analyse 46 DHRs and the recommendations they made to criminal justice services, most frequently the police. Whilst studies have systematically reviewed research examining DHR recommendations (Jones *et al.* 2024), prior work has not focussed in detail, or from a critical, intersectional gendered position, on the analysis and recommendations that relate to CJ services. In presenting our findings we highlight a particular tension. Namely, whilst DHRs depict the history of abuse and the often limited service response that (typically) female victims subjected to men's violence experience, there is little engagement in DHRs with the gendered power relations that underpin the victimization. Intersecting issues of race, nationality, and ethnicity also receive little interrogation, meaning that recommendations often lack an intersectional gendered underpinning. In turn, they miss key issues that underlay inequality—as we set out—by not thinking more holistically about gendered intersectionalities. Intersectional arguments (Crenshaw 1991) critiqued the occlusion of Black women in both feminist and anti-racist theorizing and praxis, as feminist work focussed on White women and anti-racism on Black men. Such absence, we argue, prohibits the degree to which the DHR process can meet its intended aims of learning lessons from domestic homicide, promoting a better understanding of DA, improving service responses, and articulating the full reality of a victim's experience (Home Office 2016). We conclude by suggesting that the gender-neutrality and lack of intersectional framing found in DHR policy documents (Rowlands 2022) and the DA Act 2021 (Aldridge 2021; FitzGerald and Carline 2024), too frequently extends to DHRs themselves.

Gender and violence against women

In the UK, an average of 140 women are killed annually by men (Ingala Smith 2024). For the years ending March 2020–2022, 67 per cent of domestic homicide victims were female, whilst 97 per cent of perpetrators were men. In 75 per cent of cases, the homicide involved males killing female partners or ex-partners (ONS 2023). These figures sit within a broader context of increased reports of violence against women and girls (VAWG) crimes in England and Wales. Twenty per cent of all police recorded crime now constitutes VAWG—sexual, DA, stalking, and harassment offences (NPCC 2024a). Recorded instances of which have increased by 37 per cent between 2018–2023, resulting in the national police chiefs lead for VAWG declaring that 'violence against women and girls is a national emergency' (NPCC 2024b).

Consequently, much theorization around VAWG and DA specifically locates it within a context of gendered, structural inequalities where overlapping characteristics of disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, faith, and sexuality influence what abuse looks like, the possibility of escaping it, and service responses to it (Downes *et al.* 2019). Despite this, in April 2021 the UK Government's DA Act came into force and with it, a statute and statutory definition that fails to acknowledge the gendered nature of abuse (Aldridge 2021; FitzGerald and Carline 2024). However, as McCabe (2024) argues, a primary focus on gender works to recreate the gaps highlighted by Crenshaw (also see Chantler and Thiara 2017). Hence, the statutory definition allows for other forms of violence, such as adult family abuse and honour killings to fall within its remit, ensuring that different forms of DA—including those experienced by minoritized women operating in the 'private' sphere (Scottish Government 2024)—are recognized and incorporated. This is to be welcomed, but as Kelly and Westmarland (2016, p. 114) have argued, cross-government definitions of DA have consistently 'disguised, diluted and distorted the reality of men's violence against women.' Therefore, whilst acknowledging that minoritized victims and perpetrators have differential access to power, resources, and support compared to White British dyads, DA and domestic homicide remain highly gendered crimes. The deflection

away from gender works to increase support for the gender symmetry debate (Johnson 2006). That is, the belief that women are as violent as men in their intimate, heterosexual relationships. An argument that, despite having received traction, appears incongruent against the evidence laying out the extent and nature of men's violence towards women (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Stanko 1990; Stark 2007; Myhill 2015). Indeed, feminist analysis has played a key role in showing that men and women use violence in different ways, for different purposes, and with distinct consequences. Further still, when the frequency, impacts, fear, severity, and injury caused by intimate partner violence (IPV) are factored into any analysis, abuse symmetry significantly dissipates in the direction of men being (systematically) more violent towards women (Dobash and Dobash 2004; Hester 2013; Kelly and Westmarland 2016).

In light of gender symmetry debates there has been a move in England and Wales towards suggesting that abuse is not gendered, and responses, policy, and practice shouldn't be either. In turn, feminist analysis of DA as an ongoing pattern of behaviour rooted in power and control, reproducing as well as replicating gender inequality, has been sidelined (Kelly and Westmarland 2016). In so doing, women's experiences of victimization become increasingly difficult to 'see' - to identify, assess, and appropriately respond to (Barlow and Walklate 2021). Building on work that recognizes the gendered, raced, classed, and heteropatriarchal nature of law—a law built around a phallogocentric value system (Smart 1989; Ballinger 2005, 2012)—Naffine (2020) suggests that we should view gender-neutral positioning in law as 'suspect'. This is because of the ways it hides yet enables male power to be used to advance men's interests. Situating this debate in the context of the 'man problem', Naffine asserts that men dominate as object and subject in law yet remain concealed as the driving force within it. As others have shown, gender neutrality in approach often comes to be associated with gender injustice in practice (Miller 2001). However, male power is racialized and intersections of sexism and racism mean that Black men are typically more limited in their access to the privileges afforded by a gender-neutral approach.

Domestic abuse and criminal justice

In England, there has been an increase in initiatives aimed at developing criminal justice responses to DA since the 1990s, focussing on legislation, partnership approaches, and pre-arrest policies. For example, the criminalizing of coercive and controlling behaviour in 2015, the establishment of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors, and moves towards a Coordinated Community Response (Standing Together 2020). Approaches to the policing of DA have long emphasized the need for a more 'interventionist' approach, including proactive arrest policies (McPhee *et al.* 2022). When confronted with conflicting accounts and counter allegations of DA, police guidance emphasizes that the 'primary aggressor' should be identified (ACPO and Centrex 2004). Both parties should not be arrested and especially if one is acting in self-defence. Whilst police have increased their use of Association of Chief Police Officer (ACPO) guidance, in dual DA callouts, evidence indicates that women are three times more likely to be arrested per incident compared to men (Hester 2013). This intersects with personal and institutional biases, well established in criminal justice contexts (Loftus 2009; Casey 2023), where police attitudes about DA, women, and ethnicity influence the degree to which abuse is considered 'mutual' or otherwise.

Indeed, concerns remain around the ability of the CJ system to manage the needs of victims and secure convictions. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) reports continue to show inconsistent approaches to risk assessment and management, problems with case building, information sharing, DA recording, and failure to use/apply available legislation (HMICFRS 2017, 2020; HMCPSI 2020). The ongoing pattern-based nature of DA continues to sit in tension with the incident-focussed reality of criminal justice, where attention remains on what is visible, measurable, and actionable in the 'here and now' (Barlow and Walklate

2021). Austerity politics and reductions in CJ personnel (Chalkley and Chalkley 2020) have undoubtedly impacted the ability of measures instituted to achieve their full potential.

DHRs are a further tool that plays a role in the prevention and early intervention of DA. Implemented in 2011, they are a statutory requirement when someone aged 16 or over dies from the violence, abuse, or neglect of someone to whom they were related, shared a household, or were in an intimate relationship with. As noted, their purposes include strengthening organisational responses to DA, contributing to better understanding of abuse, and in turn, preventing future homicides (Home Office 2016). However, as Rowlands (2022) argues, DHRs are sites for the production of power and knowledge. In their analysis of the policy documents leading to the implementation of DHRs, it was found that the gendered reality of domestic homicide—victims mostly being women and perpetrators men—was rendered mutable. Rowlands does not explicitly mention intersectionality, but makes it clear that structural, cultural, and temporal frames all contextualize victims' experiences. Rowlands also found that policy documents often framed DHRs as tools to bring together (largely statutory) services and to learn from (although not necessary about) victims of homicide, especially in relation to risk identification and performance. Whilst victims in these documents were often constructed as lacking agency and subjectivity, recent guidance has placed greater emphasis on using the DHR process to communicate life 'through the eyes of the victim' (Home Office 2016, p7). Despite this, in recognition that further improvements to the process are needed, the Home Office recently consulted on updating the DHR statutory guidance (Home Office 2024). Findings from which should be released in 2025.

In response to the absence of critical, gendered, and raced engagement with DHRs, this article makes an original contribution by aiming to identify how gendered intersectional dynamics come to be shaped in DHRs when narrating individual deaths. We consider how these dynamics are incorporated, if at all, into the recommendations that DHRs make. In so doing, we consider whether the gender-neutral framing found in DHR policy documents and legislation is reflected in DHRs themselves. We present examples where such attention was necessitated yet failed to be received, as well as examples of productive commentary related to gender and its intersections. Although our focus is on DHRs in the English and Welsh context, our findings likely have implications for countries globally that operate fatality reviews.

METHOD

Forty-six DHRs were analysed by the article authors between July and September 2023. DHRs were taken from the HALT domestic homicide study dataset (<https://domestichomicide-halt.co.uk/>), a repository that contains 302 previously collated reviews. Due to DHRs being publicly-available, anonymized documents, ethical approval was not required for the study. The 46 DHRs were purposively sampled, prioritizing the most recently published (between 2017 and 2019) and those that made recommendations to CJ services. Although our sample may be considered small, it is not by comparison to other DHR-focussed research (Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly 2016; Benbow, Bhattacharyya and Kingston 2019). The consistency with which themes were generated across DHRs conducted in different locations in England and Wales (across 21² police force areas), and at different time periods, also suggests that we can draw rigorous conclusions from the data.

The corresponding DHR homicides occurred between 2011 and 2017, although most (82 per cent $n = 36^3$) took place between 2014 and 2016. The CJ organisations that recommendations

2 One DHR did not provide this information.

3 Two DHRs did not provide this information.

were directed towards included the police; probation; Integrated Offender Management (IOM) Units; the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS); Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs); Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA) boards; Community Rehabilitation Companies; prisons and solicitors. However, of the 46 DHRs making recommendations to CJ services, the majority (61 per cent, $n = 28$) directed recommendations towards the police, followed by the probation service (26 per cent, $n = 12$). Very few recommendations were targeted at the CPS (4 per cent, $n = 2$), IOM Units (4 per cent, $n = 2$), PCCs (4 per cent, $n = 2$), the prison service (2 per cent, $n = 1$) or solicitors (2 per cent, $n = 1$).

A mixed methods approach was adopted, with the qualitative analysis structuring a further descriptive quantitative overview. A qualitative template was developed to systematically extract information from the DHRs as they were read, ensuring a consistent approach across the article authors. DHR recommendations, central case facts, key critiques, and good practices were extracted, along with any author reflections on what was missing from the DHR. These data were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2022) using a critical thematic approach (Lawless and Chen 2019). This involved an in-depth re-reading of the extracted data to understand recurring patterns and to code without limiting the number of codes. This was followed by closed coding, which involved linking the patterns identified to larger power relations by asking questions about what the emerging themes might be doing, and by considering their interrelationships (Lawless and Chen 2019). Here, it was sometimes necessary to go back to the DHR to identify further context and information. All authors had conversations to interpret codes, confirm their relevance and fit, merge data, and develop broader, critically informed themes.

A quantitative matrix was then developed using these themes and DHR IDs were mapped against them. This allowed for a descriptive quantitative account of the most prevalent types of recommendations and the specific CJ service they were directed towards. The analysis that follows prioritizes the qualitative data, although we provide a quantitative overview of case-level factors and victim and perpetrator demographics for the benefit of completeness and contextualization. The qualitative themes that we present are: ‘the invisibility of gender and race in Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) statements’, ‘risk assessment’, and ‘counter allegations’.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

Case-level characteristics

Of the 46 DHRs, most involved cases of Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) (83 per cent, $n = 38$), although 15 per cent ($n = 7$) constituted an Adult Family Homicide (AFH); namely, men killing male and female family members. One case involved amicide—the murder of a vulnerable female by the sons of the woman she cohabited with. Reflecting the gendered nature of domestic homicide, the victims of IPH were predominantly female (89 per cent, $n = 34$), killed mostly by current male partners (66 per cent, $n = 25$) or ex-partners (26 per cent, $n = 10$). Most victims and perpetrators had been in their relationship for over three years⁴ (63 per cent, $n = 22$), with just under a quarter (23 per cent, $n = 8$) being in the relationship for 10 years or more. The same number had been together for 12 months or less. In 29 per cent of cases ($n = 11$) the victim and perpetrator were separated at the time of the homicide, whilst in 59 per cent ($n = 27$) the couple were living together. In almost a third of cases (33 per cent, $n = 15$) there were no children under 18 living in the home.

The majority of DHRs (89 per cent, $n = 41$) reported a history of abuse within the relationship. In all 41 cases, perpetrators were reported to have been abusive to the victim. In 27 per cent of cases ($n = 11$), there were also reports of abusive behaviour from the victim. Thirty-five

4 This information was only available in 35 of the 38 cases.

percent of victims ($n = 16$) had a criminal history, compared to 74 per cent ($n = 34$) of perpetrators. For perpetrators, over half (57 per cent, $n = 26$) had criminal histories for DA-related offences whilst, for victims, this was the case in 9 per cent of cases ($n = 4$). Nearly all victims (98 per cent, $n = 45$) and most perpetrators (87 per cent, $n = 40$) had received support from a service prior to the homicide. Although this was usually physical health services, 52 per cent ($n = 24$) of victims and 30 per cent ($n = 14$) of perpetrators had received some form of 'support' from the police e.g. signposting into another service, the issuing of home alarms, etc.

In over three-quarters of cases (76 per cent, $n = 35$) services were aware of DA between the victim and perpetrator, with police being aware in 33 DHRs (72 per cent). A DA risk assessment was reported to have occurred in 32 (70 per cent) of the DHRs and where a risk rating was reported ($n = 27$), a 'high' risk categorization was given in just over one-third (37 per cent, $n = 10$).

Victim and perpetrator demographics

As indicated, most victims were female (85 per cent, $n = 39$), whilst most perpetrators were male (93 per cent, $n = 43$). Victims ranged in age from 16 to 70 years and were mainly White British⁵ (48 per cent, $n = 22$). The next most common ethnicity categories were 'White Other' (7 per cent, $n = 3$), 'Black African' (4 per cent, $n = 2$), and 'any other ethnic group' (4 per cent, $n = 2$). Ten victims (22 per cent) had migrated to the United Kingdom and where migration date was reported ($n = 7$), six had done so five years or more prior to the homicide. The term disability was infrequently used in DHRs, and it was rare that a panel '*addressed equality and diversity factors by recognising the impact of disability resulting from physical and mental health problems*' (DHR173, p3). Only four victims were explicitly identified as having a disability, although 48 per cent ($n = 22$) were diagnosed with a mental health condition. Perpetrators ranged in age from 18 to 71 years and were also mostly White British (44 per cent, $n = 20$). This was followed by 'White Irish' (4 per cent, $n = 2$), 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean' (4 per cent, $n = 2$), and 'Black African' (4 per cent, $n = 2$). Five (11 per cent) perpetrators had migrated to the United Kingdom and for the four where migration date was reported, this had occurred between 1 and 14 years prior to the homicide. Three perpetrators were categorized as having a disability, whilst 37 per cent ($n = 17$) had a mental health diagnosis.

The invisibility of gender and race in EDI statements

Despite most victims being women and perpetrators men, as set out, very few of the EDI sections in DHRs, or the analysis that followed, mentioned sex, gender, or sexism and their relationship to domestic abuse/homicide. Further, as Chantler *et al.* (2022a) argue in their analysis of minoritization in DHRs, a 'normalized absence' exists in relation to race.

Sex was, mostly, not mentioned/explicated as relevant to case facts or outcome despite the gendered nature of domestic homicide being well-established:

The review adheres to the Equality Act 2010. All nine protected characteristics were considered by the panel and none specifically apply to [victim]. [Victim] was pregnant with [perpetrator's] child when she died and she was vulnerable and was essentially a child expecting a child. There were no other equality factors relevant (DHR162, p. 15).

In DHR274, the perpetrator had an extensive history of violence and control towards female partners (and their daughters) and previous convictions for choking and strangulation—also highly gendered crimes (Edwards 2015). However, it was stated that the protected characteristics

5 Twelve victims (26 per cent) and 13 perpetrators (28 per cent) had missing ethnicity data.

had been considered 'and the panel felt there was no comment to be made about any of them' (p. 20).

Although the numbers are too small for conclusions to be drawn, it is noteworthy that of the four IPH cases where men were the victim, three acknowledged that DA occurs in all sections of society regardless of 'gender and sexual orientation' (DHR203, p. 45) and/or despite proportions being lower, men can be and are vulnerable to victimization. Sometimes, this sat alongside statements that portrayed responses to male victims as retrograde, whilst those to female victims were well-established, integrated, and operating optimally:

Many service areas are very used to dealing with female victims of domestic abuse and are familiar with the signs and symptoms that may indicate a woman is possibly a victim of abuse. This allows the service to support the woman with appropriate services (DHR282, p. 12).

Arguably, an oversimplistic dichotomy that neglects the work that finds service responses to abused women continue to be poor (HMICFRS 2017; HMCPSI 2020; McPhee *et al.* 2022). Further still, a conclusion that renders women's struggles invisible at the expense of centring men (Naffine 2020).

Although a minority of DHRs acknowledged sex, stating for example that: 'sex is also relevant as there is extensive research to support that in the context of domestic violence, females are at a greater risk of being victimized, injured or killed' (DHR177, p32), these did not always go far enough. For example, only a few linked DA to 'women's unequal status in society and oppressive social constructions of gender and family' (DHR256, p78) or unpacked gendered dynamics further in their analysis (see below). This is despite evidence indicating that reductions in men's coercively controlling behaviours are associated with the 'letting go' of restrictive and entrenched gender norms (Schrock and Padavic 2007; Downes *et al.* 2019). Realities that cannot be highlighted or recommendations linked to if unequal gender roles and structures are not being made visible.

Further still, sex was typically not tied to overlapping characteristics of race. This was often due to the sidelining of race, racism, ethnicity, and culture in DHRs (see Chantler *et al.* 2022a), impeding any ability to examine how a victim or perpetrator's intersecting social identities may impact abuse, service engagement, and response. DHR207, for example, was the only one to use the language of 'misogyny' and situate the perpetrator's abuse into his stereotyped 'understanding of gender' (p. 159) yet concluded that agency responses did not appear to have been aggravated by race. An account that's difficult to accept as convincing when the perpetrator was a Black male, the victim a White woman, and evidence indicates that fears around minoritized men being subject to racism impact their partner's reporting of violence (Chantler *et al.* 2022a). Similarly, in DHR298, despite the panel concluding that the perpetrator 'had a sexist attitude towards women', they seemingly accepted the Individual Management Review (IMR)⁶ conclusions that '[the perpetrator's] mixed ethnicity (Black West Indian/White British heritage) had no bearing on the way their agencies dealt with him' (p. 14). Police racism takes on multiple guises, including more punitive responses to minoritized men. It also includes assumptions around the normalization (and tolerance) of abuse within minoritized communities, including stereotypes of exaggerated violence attributed to Black males (Razack 2004; Lammy 2017; Casey 2023). All of this feeds into minoritized communities' lack of trust in the police and CJ system more broadly (Gill and Anitha 2024). Thus, despite longstanding concerns around the

⁶ All agencies that were involved with a victim or perpetrator of domestic homicide are required to submit an IMR outlining and analyzing their involvement with that case.

policing of minoritized communities, neither DHR (alongside several others) considered this context.

Just two DHRs (out of the 16 involving minoritized victims/perpetrators) named the application of an intersectional approach for the purpose of better understanding the circumstances, risks, and needs the victim faced. A picture that was interlinked with—as indicated—over a quarter of victims and perpetrators having no ethnicity data recorded in DHRs. This prohibits the possibility of adopting an intersectional approach, even if there is appetite to do so. When an intersectional lens was used, it was stated that: ‘...the Review Panel used an intersectional perspective to consider how [victim’s] personal circumstances and different identities may have affected her experiences, the needs and the risks she faced, as well as service responses’ (DHR145, p. 67). In this DHR, in addition to considerations of sex, it was possible to trace the relevance of the victim’s immigration status on service access and engagement (or lack thereof) and tease out how this was used by the perpetrator to exert power and control. Other coercive tactics made visible included him preventing her from praying and attempting to discredit her as a mother by making unfounded claims that she had allowed their daughter to engage with extremist groups. Anxieties around terrorism and the strengthening of Islamophobic sentiment in the United Kingdom since the late 1990s (Chantler, Gangoli and Thiara 2019) provide a further context that can be mobilized by perpetrators to undermine victims. Thus, an intersectional approach allowed for consideration of the ways in which the abuse was compounded by her different, intersecting identities. In turn, a more complete depiction of the ‘victim’s reality’ (Home Office 2016) is produced and recommendations aligned, as was the case here, to the problems that an intersectional analysis exposes. Namely, the need to commission services for minoritized women in the locality and to train practitioners on how immigration status can be exploited by perpetrators.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Recommendations to improve assessment processes were made in approximately half of DHRs, typically coalescing around needed improvements to DA risk assessment. Although mostly directed towards police services, this recommendation was also targeted at probation and MAPPA Boards. Across these services, DHRs underscored that assessment was often lacking, with opportunities to assess risk being missed, including an absence of an ‘intense programme of purposeful home visiting’ (DHR268, p80) to facilitate the management of high-risk MAPPA offenders. The detail and depth of assessments were often reported to be limited, as well as risk assessment being influenced by reductionist assumptions related to victims and perpetrators:

Police undertook assessments at relevant points in line with expectations, however the quality was limited and they failed to recognise the picture of serious and sustained abuse. The horrific levels of injuries together with the risk factors of her vulnerability and isolation from friends and family were allowed to become blurred by her alcohol use and the risk was seen as standard or at its worst medium ... (DHR312, p. 42–43).

As the quote implicates, police-based risk assessment (as well as probation-based) was often undermined by a failure to think holistically. This included failures to ‘link police information to new incidents’ (DHR153, p. 23)—both physically violent and controlling—and in turn, to an ongoing pattern of abusive behaviour over time. Or, as DHR210 described it: ‘although coming to the attention of the police for numerous incidents, each one was often treated in isolation and there was a failure to see the “big picture”’ (p. 37). Police difficulties in identifying coercive control are established (Brennan *et al.* 2019; Barlow *et al.* 2020) and were reflected in the policing

practices the DHRs critiqued. However, there were many examples of overt physical violence—often constructed as easier for CJ services to ‘see’—also being missed:

...there were missed opportunities by agencies to discover [Victim] had sustained a broken jaw. Had these opportunities been taken and the information agencies had combined, it is very probable that the offender would have been recalled to prison before the incident occurred. Therefore, on balance, the DHR Panel conclude that the death of [victim] was preventable (DHR268, p85).

Failures of holistic thinking are related to a range of factors. These included neglecting family members from risk assessment processes: ‘... professionals with offender management responsibility must work collaboratively in order to build a holistic view of the family to inform the assessment and management of risk...’ (DHR199, p84, Probation). It also included a lack of practitioner curiosity and inadequacies in the ‘record[ing] of all activity/contacts’ (DHR146, p56, Probation). As the DHR268 quote above implies, there were failures to share risk-relevant information with partner organizations due to such sharing being ‘ad-hoc and based on “events” rather than being routine and specific’ (DHR268, p80). Even when information was shared, this did not always translate to it being considered at the relevant multi-agency meeting:

Probation Offender Managers should ensure that information about visitors to Domestic Violence perpetrators supplied by the prison service is considered at MAPPA meetings and six weeks prior to release from prison so that any necessary enquiries regarding potential new partners can be undertaken (DHR146, p44, Probation and MAPPA Boards).

Failing to make connections between men’s public violence and that which occurs in the home was also part of the picture: ‘[Perpetrator] was also threatening and violent away from the home and to ensure Police Officers make the link between violence outside of the home and domestic abuse a reminder has been issued to all staff following this case...’ (DHR154, p. 24). All of these examples contextualize why, as outlined, of the 27 cases where a risk rating was reported in DHRs, only ten classified victims as ‘high-risk’.

Risk assessment and the ‘conceptual apparatus of risk’ has been critiqued for being gender-blind (Barlow and Walklate 2021, p. 889), as well as insensitive to minoritization and influenced by racism and stereotypes. Chantler and Baker (2023) found that although professionals were more aware of DA prior to a domestic homicide in relationships where either the victim or perpetrator were minoritized compared to White British, the former were less likely to receive a ‘high’ risk assessment compared to the latter. Thus, minoritized victims’ experiences of abuse risked invisibility. Chantler, Bates and Struthers (2022b) also found that when investigating police risk assessment outcomes for minoritized victims, there was a significant effect of victim ethnicity on the number of DASH⁷ risk factors ticked (with minoritized DA victims having significantly fewer factors ticked compared to White British). These variations highlight an urgent need to investigate the differences in risk assessment recordings based on ethnicity.

Indeed, the mismatch between women’s lived experiences of victimization and the practices/outcomes of risk assessment are known. For example, a focus on incidents of DA, as was frequently happening in DHRs, keeps hidden the reality of IPV. Such abuse is not marked by discrete acts, but by the repetition of tactics that coerce, control, and micro-manage for the purpose of entrapping women (Stark 2007). A focus on DA being reducible to single events and the conflation between incidents, different forms, and repeated patterns of abuse (especially in

crime surveys—see [Aldridge 2021](#); [Hester 2013](#); [Myhill 2015](#)) has also fed into gender symmetry debates ([Dobash and Dobash 2004](#); [Johnson 2006](#)). Although, as outlined, many DHRs flagged the limits of taking an incident-based approach, only one made related recommendations, evidencing the potential mismatch between DHR critique and the recommended actions that follow:

When a ‘domestic abuse’ incident is reported which is the first recorded between particular parties, this alone should not be judged as a factor to consider the incident as low risk. Cognisance must be taken of the ‘domestic abuse’ history of the parties... (DHR273, p84, Police).

Most often, recommendations focussed more generically on ensuring that assessment processes were ‘monitored and feedback is provided to ensure consistent and accurate approaches’ (DHR207, p. 168, Police) and that CJ staff are better trained in risk assessment dynamics (including coercive control). Neither the recommendation above nor the DHR’s analysis, went any further to challenge—as other DHRs failed to do—incident-based approaches’ propensity to hide women’s experiences of abuse by disconnecting ‘the everyday’ from ‘the horrific’ ([Kelly 1987](#)). In turn, there is a resultant failure to centre the severity, longevity, control, and fear that distinguish women’s experiences of violence ([Hester 2013](#); [Myhill 2015](#); [Kelly and Westmarland 2016](#); [Myhill and Kelly 2021](#)). Failings that do little to highlight the reality of abuse or to provide a basis to challenge the saliency of the gender symmetry debate. Perhaps it is to be expected that CJ services, who are embedded into incident, risk-based ways of working, do not highlight the gender and race blindness of current risk assessment practices in the IMRs they submit. However, for the purposes of learning and working towards alternative approaches, it is an absence that DHR panels do not highlight it either.

Reluctant victims

As alluded to, assumptions related to victims could result in risks being downplayed. If, for example, a victim was framed as a reluctant witness, practitioner frustration could set in. In turn, ‘rather than seeing the implausibility of an account by [the victim] as a trigger for more investigation, the [IMR] writer suggested that she was “not prepared to give an honest account...”’ (DHR207, p. 151). Being constructed as dishonest could, unsurprisingly, reduce the likelihood of future victim disclosures:

When she disclosed to the Police that she had been assaulted by [perpetrator] and later retracted, she was informed by the Police that if she continued to make allegations and then withdraw, she would be charged with wasting Police time. Given what we now know about domestic abuse and [victim] this was an inappropriate comment potentially serving to create an even greater barrier to disclosure (DHR312, p12).

In this case, as well as several others, it was the failure to be gender and ethnicity-sensitive, as well as abuse-literate, that linked to the frustration. That is, a failure to understand, and try to work with, the reality that women who live in fear negotiate attempts at survival and control through acts of resistance ([Chantler 2006](#); [Stark 2007](#); [Rajah and Osborn 2022](#)). Whilst this may include reporting the abuser, resistance is not risk-free and often results in retaliation. To manage the prospect of escalating violence, acquiescing towards the demands of perpetrators—which may include retracting statements—is necessary ([Chantler 2006](#)). Even if this may be construed by CJ practitioners as undermining safety in the long term. For minoritized victims, professionals also need to be mindful of pressures and surveillance from wider family as well as

partners, fears of racism/cultural insensitivity, immigration status, language barriers, and norms around shame and honour all contributing to rendering women less willing or able to engage (Femi-Ajao *et al.* 2020; Scottish Government 2024). However, as highlighted, even when minoritized victims do report, their experiences do not appear to be taken as seriously as White victims (Chantler and Baker 2023; Chantler, Bates and Struthers 2022b).

Despite victim reluctance featuring in a significant number of DHRs, again, only a minority made recommendations as to how practitioners might manage it. These included adopting 'lateral problem-solving approaches' (DHR242, p77, Police), using 'exploratory and probing questions' (DHR312, p. 54, Police), reviewing 'police non-engaging victim procedures' DHR154, p. 31, Police), and instituting training '...in relation to BAME communities...' (DHR145, p. 134, CSP). However, these DHRs mostly failed in their analysis to locate victim reluctance within its gendered and raced context and to remind CJ practitioners to do the same. Or, as DHR207 (p. 151) succinctly put it, to be explicit that 'patterns of repeatedly calling the police and then withdrawing her statement suggests abuse and should have been seen as such' (DHR207, p. 151).

COUNTER ALLEGATIONS

Closely interlinked with the tensions that ensue from neglecting gender and race dynamics was the issue of counter allegations: male perpetrators reporting to the police that their female partner had been abusive to them. As case-level characteristics indicate, of the DHRs that reported a history of relationship abuse, all perpetrators had been abusive to the victim. In 27 per cent of cases, there were also reports of abuse from the victim themselves. Again, feminist scholarship has emphasized the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach to better understand counterclaims. An approach that requires, as set out, consideration of the severity and impacts of abuse over time for the purpose of differentiating an initiator from a retaliator of violence (ACPO and Centrex 2004). The rhetoric of gender symmetry and the limits of incident-based ways of working, which fail to capture women's experiences of coercive control, has meant that officers are warning and arresting women instead of identifying their reasons for violence e.g. retaliation and self-defence (Miller 2001; Hester 2013; Nancarrow *et al.* 2020; Reeves 2023; Reeves *et al.* 2023). Such realities are reminiscent of Naffin's (2020) concern that gender neutrality can mask men's ability to use the law to support their self-interests. Indeed, abusers are known to manipulate the criminal justice process and personnel precisely to frame victims as the initiator of violence. For example, by making false allegations, being the party to call the police, and presenting as composed when they arrive on the scene (Nancarrow *et al.* 2020). When the gendered nature of DA and coercive control are not rendered explicit, identifying the primary aggressor can be all the more complex (Barlow *et al.* 2023).

In a small number of DHRs, counter allegations were mentioned in IMRs or the chronology of events, but concerningly, not analysed further: '[Victim] reported she had been assaulted by her husband, there were counter allegations of assault made by him' (DHR244, p15). More often, the issues were elaborated but did not always go far enough:

On [date] [victim] went to [perpetrator's] workshop to confront him about the situation which resulted in a disturbance that the police attended. [Perpetrator] called the police to allege that [victim] had assaulted him and damaged his property whilst [victim] contacted the police very shortly thereafter to allege that she had been assaulted by [perpetrator]. In the account [perpetrator] gave to the police, he said [victim] had kicked him in the testicles and had damaged various work tools including a jet washer. He said he was in a lot of pain but declined an ambulance. [Victim's] account was that [perpetrator] had twice slapped her

around her head, threw her to the floor several times and that her arm was bleeding from contact with the concrete floor (DHR174, p8).

In this DHR's analysis, as with others, there was a failure to use the relationship history—a history that set out the severity of abuse she had been subjected to over time—to name the perpetrator as the primary aggressor. However, to contextualize women's violence, to caution against future women being criminalized, and to communicate the need to identify primary perpetrators in similar cases—all crucial aspects of learning—it is incumbent upon DHR panels to centre relationship history. Whilst DHR174 did acknowledge that the perpetrator had 'manipulated' the police and likely used the allegation to 'exert control' (p. 22), this was not more powerfully placed in a context of systems abuse; the intentional manipulation of legal systems by perpetrators to extend their harassment and control (Douglas 2018; Nancarrow *et al.* 2020; Reeves 2020, 2023; Reeves *et al.* 2023). As Barlow *et al.* (2023) argue, misidentification is tied to a failure to recognize a perpetrator's potential to manipulate, alongside the inability to 'dig deeper' into the relationship context. Considering the legal system is built around a phallogocentric worldview (Smart 1989; Ballinger 2005, 2012), it is perhaps to be expected that retaliating women see their experiences of men's violence misrepresented and/or excluded. Women's experiential knowledge of victimization has long been subordinated by the law (Ballinger 2005, 2012). However, in their capacity as instruments for learning, DHRs must ensure that they do not perpetuate this silencing. Instead, they must provide a space that enables women's experiences of abuse to be fully heard and understood.

Certain examples did exist, some comprehensive, where the gendered dynamics underlying counter allegations were brought to the fore:

...The police recorded that both [perpetrator] and [victim] were medium risk victims. However, only [perpetrator] was alleged to have made threats to kill, to have attempted to strangle his partner and to have threatened to hurt pets. Only [victim] expressed any fear. This history should have been recognised in considering who was the primary perpetrator, who was the primary victim (DHR236, p149).

Despite the panel, in this case, lamenting the police's frequent recording of the female partner as the primary perpetrator, no corresponding recommendation was made to hold officers to improved account. Similarly, constructive analysis was not always tied to intersecting aspects of a victim's identity. This is concerning considering migrant, refugee, and women of colour (and those experiencing multiple disadvantage) are more likely to be misidentified (Nancarrow *et al.* 2020; Reeves 2020, 2023). Reasons for this include a lack of access to interpreters to enable women to fully convey their experiences, alongside discriminatory attitudes amongst some CJ personnel framing these women as unreliable and untrustworthy. In DHR156, a case where counter allegations had been made by the husband to different agencies including the police, the DHR author argued:

It appears not to have been considered by any of the practitioners that [perpetrator] could be using [domestic abuse] disclosure as a form of control over [victim]... I would suggest that, if he were not working, it was reasonable for [victim] to expect him to care for the child while she worked; however, he presented her expectation that he would do cleaning and childcare as unreasonable, and evidence of her control of him... (DHR156, p50).

Here, the victim was described as 'a well-educated, aspirational businesswoman, who was established in her local community with a wide network of friends' (p. 49). It may therefore have

been the case's lack of adherence to archetypal gender roles (and reductive stereotypes of DA victims) that permitted the distance to enable gendered dynamics to be considered. In this DHR it was also stated that 'there was no evidence to suggest that culture related to nationality influenced [victim] in not disclosing her experience of abuse', despite being from a (White) minoritized background. Supposed culturalized norms can position minoritized woman as lacking agency, and in light of the victim not fitting that trope, it may have inhibited the possibility of considering the bearing her culture had (or otherwise) on the abuse she was subjected to. As outlined, a range of additional and distinct factors may inhibit minoritized women's disclosures (Femi-Ajao *et al.* 2020; Scottish Government 2024). Reassurance then that the DHR panel had considered these factors, would have been beneficial.

The often-cursory treatment of equality and diversity issues in DHRs means that the bearing that any intersection of identity has on disclosure, let alone its relevance to counter allegations, is infrequently considered. An exception to this rule was DHR281. This case involved a woman victim from an unspecified non-UK background being arrested after reporting the abusive behaviour of her partner who then made an allegation against her. The DHR analysis stated that 'research shows that women are three times more likely than men to be arrested when they were construed as the perpetrator of domestic abuse' and that 'arrest rates for women from black and mixed ethnic groups are twice as high as those for white women' (DHR281, p. 2). Although the recommendations to stem from the DHR did not relate to counter allegations explicitly, it was recommended that 'professionals should challenge their preconceptions and consider unconscious bias' (DHR281, p. 2, Police). This may be particularly pertinent when practitioners hold assumptions that may influence them to find a perpetrator more credible—assumptions known to exist among CJ personnel (Loftus 2009; Casey 2023).

CONCLUSION

This article has offered an original contribution by critically examining the way in which gendered intersectional dynamics come to be shaped in DHRs when narrating individual homicides. In so doing, it provides unique insights into where the focus of interrogation sits for DHR panels and where it does not. It also provides broader insight into how CJ agencies, most often (although not exclusively) the police, respond to DA in cases that result in homicide. In relation to the latter, our study strongly suggests that risk assessment processes need to be enhanced given that two-thirds of cases known to services were not seen as high-risk. Currently, the DASH (the risk assessment most frequently used in DHRs) is being replaced by the College of Policing's Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA)—albeit too early to say whether this will fully respond to the critiques of DASH (see Robinson *et al.* 2016). Early piloting indicated that when using DARA police officers made risk assessments more aligned with those of specialists and documented more coercive and controlling behaviour (Wire and Myhill 2018). However, greater identification of the latter did not always result in the assigning of an appropriate risk grading, implicating that assessment tools are only part of the picture. As our data show, whilst inaccurate assessment relates to the failure to identify patterns of abuse over time, it also links to missed opportunities to assess risk, the depth of assessment being limited, and the process influenced by assumption and stereotype. Minoritized women have been found to have fewer DASH risk factors ticked (Chantler, Bates and Struthers 2022b), and although professionals were more aware of DA in couples where one of the dyad was minoritized, they were less likely than White British couples to be classed as high-risk. Thus, innovations in risk assessment must be cognisant of minoritization.

Whilst DHRs in our sample set out the context of abuse that victims subjected to men's violence frequently face prior to a homicide, DHRs usually left issues of gender and race unstated.

They infrequently teased out the gendered, intersectional nature of domestic abuse/homicide, the structural power relations that underpin it, sustain it, or that influence and undermine service practices. This means that DHR recommendations lacked an intersectional gendered underpinning. Instead, they tended to be more generically targeted towards attending training, developing and monitoring risk assessment processes, and skills acquisition. As we have set out, although important, these miss key issues that underlay inequalities. For example, by not challenging incident-focussed risk assessment practices that fail to centre the longevity, severity, control, and fear that lay at the heart of women's experiences of abuse. Or, by not emphasizing the importance of analyzing relationship history for the purposes of distinguishing an initiator from a retaliator of abuse. By neglecting gender and race dynamics, DHRs remain limited in the extent to which they can meet their intended aims. Namely, promoting a better understanding of DA, learning lessons from the homicide at a 'deep' as opposed to surface level, communicating a victim's reality, and improving service responses to abuse more broadly (Home Office 2016).

Considering our findings, we argue that the race and gender-neutral framing found in DHR policy documents (Rowlands 2022) and that is embedded in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (Aldridge 2021; FitzGerald and Carline 2024) is too frequently reflected in DHRs themselves. Although there were examples of constructive analysis in relation to gender, these examples were too few, not always tied to intersecting aspects of identity, or to recommendations. Thus, DHRs frequently constituted a further example of the trend towards race and gender neutrality in the context of DA. Despite being positioned as tools for learning, neutrality obscures the reality of abuse, making women's victimization more difficult to identify, assess, and respond to (Barlow and Walklate 2021). In turn, these findings illuminate the inequalities that race and gender neutrality as a principle sustain (Naffine 2020). Failing to locate DA within structural, patriarchal, intersectional, and gendered practices reduces the potential for developing interventions that will be effective in dealing with the issues (Kelly and Westmarland 2016). As our data show, restrictive gender norms, misogyny, and racism are infrequently mentioned in DHRs or linked to a perpetrator's offending. Recommendations relating to this are therefore not made, even though evidence indicates that the 'letting go' of entrenched, stereotypical gender norms is central to reductions in men's coercively controlling behaviour (Downes *et al.* 2019). It is crucial that the nature and causes of DA inform the interventions to address it and DHRs must capitalize on communicating this point.

Recognizing that DHR processes require amendment, the Home Office (in May, 2024) consulted on revisions to the DHR statutory guidance. This included the addition of an Equality and Diversity Toolkit that provides brief information, statistics, and links to research related to the protected characteristics and how they intersect with DA and disclosure. Although we welcome this addition, we suggest it will not be sufficient in isolation to ensure that gender and its intersections remain centre-stage. Especially in the context of broader moves towards the de-gendering of abuse (Kelly and Westmarland 2016) and within a (White) phallogentric system that has not been designed to place women 'centre stage' (Ballinger 2005; 2012). Within this context, it may be of little surprise that intersectional gendered dynamics should come to be silenced and/or misrepresented. An attentiveness to this context amongst DHR panels may help to ensure that DHRs play an intentional role in subverting this history (and not replicating it) and provide the space and language necessary to convey all women's experiential knowledge of abuse. However, currently, at the point of domestic homicide, where gendered relations cannot be denied and should not be ignored, the broader acceptance of gender neutrality limits the leverage with which to argue (or the conviction that one must) that intersectional gendered dynamics should be a central focus of the DHR process. Better training for DHR panels on sexism, misogyny, gender, and its intersections is essential to help instil their centrality and to

ensure that they are meaningfully engaged with. The need for CJ services to record the race and ethnicity of the victims and perpetrators they encounter is also evident. Without this, it is not possible for DHRs to use the information to better understand the bearing they had on abuse, reporting behaviour, and/or service response.

Whilst our focus has been on DHRs in England and Wales, our findings likely have implications for other countries that operate fatality reviews. Future research would benefit from using a larger sample of DHRs, and international equivalents, to identify the reach and replicability of our findings. Research that examines how gender and its intersections are framed in IPHs when men are the victims is also worthy of pursuit. There was some suggestion within our data (albeit based on too small numbers to draw conclusions) that sex and gender in those cases are being made visible, sometimes to the extent of misrepresenting women's DA service experiences.

Changing the macro structures that underpin violence against women requires large-scale systems change that DHR panels may not feel is within their remit to influence. However, they do have the power to name the inequalities inherent in, and that are perpetuated by, incident-based approaches and arrest practices that neglect relationship history. And, further still, the power to render women victims' sex, gender, and ethnicity relevant to their abuse. It is in seeing and naming these dynamics, and in asking services to be aware of, and make changes in relation to them, that shifts also occur from the ground up to reshape inequalities at the top. To fully meet their intended aims of improving practice and enhancing learning, the impetus must be on the DHR process to see and name sex, gender, and its intersections.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data sources supporting this publication are openly available from the Homicide and Abuse Learning Together (HALT) website: <https://domestichomicide-halt.co.uk/>

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