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# Violence Against Women in Minoritised Communities: Cultural Norm or Cultural Anomaly?

*Khatidja Chantler and Geetanjali Gangoli*

## Introduction

Violence perpetrated against minoritised<sup>1</sup> women in the UK and elsewhere in Europe is frequently cast as a cultural issue without an adequate interrogation of what culturally based violence is, which aspects of violence against women count as cultural and what the implications are of using a cultural frame to understand and respond to domestic violence in minoritised communities. More recently, the ‘cultural’ in relation to minoritised communities has been re-formulated and more tightly specified as ‘honour based violence’. This chapter seeks to address four key debates. Firstly, we question the notion of how and why gender based violence is perceived as a cultural phenomenon in minoritised communities (i.e. as a cultural norm), but constructed as an individual action (i.e. as cultural anomaly) in majority communities. Secondly, we briefly highlight the role of cultural relativism in understanding abuse; thirdly we outline the difficulties of responding to minoritised victims of gender based violence within a cultural frame. Lastly, we return to the theme of honour and offer a critique of over determining violence against women through the trope of honour and challenge the notion of violence against minoritised women as a cultural norm. We argue instead for a multi-layered analysis which incorporates the structural and cultural in conceptualising any form of violence against women whether in majority or minoritised communities.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term minoritised throughout the chapter to indicate that one is not a minority purely on the basis of numbers, religion, language etc, but is positioned as such through a socio-historic process.

## Violence against women and the role of culture

We are troubled by the trend to cast violence against women in minoritised communities as purely cultural. To begin this debate we briefly compare the construction of two forms of violence against women: forced marriage and date rape. These two forms of violence serve as examples to illustrate our key points rather than offering a detailed analysis of forced marriage or date rape. Forced marriage debates within the UK are firmly positioned within cultural discourses, the chief lexicon being 'honour based violence' with honour and shame the key markers. So although forced marriage currently sits within the UK Government domestic violence definition, it is also conceptualised as honour based violence pertaining mostly to minoritised communities. In addition, the concept of honour is usually presented as only concerning minority cultures, so within this construction, forced marriage comes to be seen (erroneously) as a characteristic and normal part of certain cultures. A recent report on honour based violence in the UK argues that forced marriage and domestic violence particularly in South Asian and Middle Eastern communities are 'not isolated practices, but are instead part of a self-sustaining social system built on ideas of honour and cultural, ethnic and religious superiority' (Brandon and Hafez 2008:1).

On the other hand, to our knowledge date rape is never explicitly formulated as a cultural issue in majority communities. Feminist writers on sexual violence (e.g. Kelly 1988) highlight how male sexual violence is made possible because of unequal gender relations. This means that, at least in part, sexual violence is explained at a structural and cultural level, yet this analysis seems to disappear when we compare the treatment of date rape with forced marriage. Date rape, which has largely been analysed in Anglo-American contexts, is constructed as an individualised aberrant or abnormal behaviour and therefore is not seen as part of the culture. So the representation of Anglo-American culture remains intact and 'honourable' with date rape behaviour being seen as outside of this. In contrast, when we consider the case of violence against women (including forced marriage) in minoritised communities this is frequently constructed as an intrinsic part of the culture.

We must, therefore, ask ourselves what processes are in play to allow these differing constructions to exist. We argue that the key difference is the way in which culture is called upon as an explanation of certain anomalies, for example, forced marriage in minoritised communities but is occluded in the case of date rape. In the instance of date rape, no reference is made to culture and an individualistic focus is instead offered as an explanation. The differences in the manner in which date rape and forced marriage are treated leads one to mistakenly assume that forced marriage is endemic within mi-

noritised communities and hence a central part of their cultures whilst date rape is an unusual occurrence and therefore not endemic to western culture. How have these constructions taken hold given that there are no reliable figures in the UK for either form of violence? What veracity do they hold and should we accept these assertions without question? The culturalist formulation buttresses the view that forced marriage is the inevitable fate of young women in minority communities, particularly in South Asian and middle-eastern communities. It also paints a portrait of these (young) women as pathetic and hapless victims who only exist through culture, thus undermining agency and autonomy (Shachar 2001). Indeed, agency and autonomy do not sit comfortably with the stereotypical view of South Asian women as passive. Patriarchy in minoritised communities is thus allowed to flourish in the safe knowledge that 'culture' can be used as a foil to prevent the protection of women. This in turn feeds into the view that minority communities are more patriarchal than western communities. What fails to be acknowledged is that the West's construction of passive women, together with an insistence that forced marriage is 'part of their culture', fails to protect minoritised women.

Razack (2004) argues that perceptions of cultural superiority inherent in some western feminisms is problematic and highlights the work of Wikan (2002) as an example of this. Razack (2004) critiques Wikan's work on the following three grounds: Firstly, Wikan implies that Westerners have values (liberal, democratic, egalitarian) whilst Muslims have cultures, inevitably constructed as oppressive and patriarchal. This creates a dichotomy between individual autonomy and freedom versus the oppressive forces of culture which are seen to be an inherent part of the 'other'. Secondly, Razack argues that the over-determining manner in which culture is used by Wikan obscures structural relationships based on race and class and neglects the historical basis of the power relations (often based on colonisation) between majority and minoritised communities in European contexts. Thirdly, Razack points out that implicit in Wikan's work is the self-image of the West as outside of culture, privileging instead personal autonomy. In turn, this is seen as a more 'civilised' way of living, and further that this civilised way of living needs to be taught to migrants. Thus 'barbaric' others need to be instructed in the values of the West.

Further, in the case of forced marriage, there are a range of other factors that precipitate forced marriage including structural factors such as poverty, particularly in trans-national marriages (Chantler et al. 2009). Within essentialist culturalist discourse, these factors are overlooked and this position contributes to a limited understanding of violence against women in minoritised communities and places them in a vulnerable position (Siddiqui 2005). The issue of how culturalist thinking contributes to the increased vulnerabil-

ity of minoritised women is discussed further below. For now, it should be noted that it is the differences in the power relations between majority and minority communities that allow violence against women to be cast as ‘cultural’ in minority communities but as ‘abnormal’ in majority communities. These differences are not just semantic, as they tend to have an important effect in how we respond to domestic violence in minoritised communities.

## The double-edged sword of relativism

One of the key theoretical positions in relation to explaining violence against minoritised women is cultural relativism. According to cultural relativism, there can be no definitive view as to what violence against women is, as this depends on the socio-cultural contexts and understandings of different communities. This means that what is considered abusive in some contexts will not necessarily be viewed as such from the vantage point of a different community. This position has the advantage of attending to different cultural contexts in framing violence against women, and enables us to explore the specificities of the forms of violence perpetrated against women in diverse communities, thus allowing for a more nuanced understanding of violence against women. The other major advantage of relativism is that it readily accepts changing definitions and understandings. An example of this can be seen in the current UK definition of domestic violence which is quite different from previous ones. The key difference is that the definition has shifted from its previous conceptualisation of domestic violence as only occurring in intimate, heterosexual relationships to a conceptualisation that includes violence perpetrated by family members as well as violence within gay relationships. Notwithstanding these advantages, a key factor which is frequently glossed over in relativist debates is the issue of power. In what follows, we interrogate relativism and illustrate the complex relationship between culture and power in the context of violence and abuse.

We argue that relativism is also a double-edged sword as it can work against protecting women and children from abuse in minoritised communities in the West. Principally this is achieved by suggesting that what happens in such communities is unique and embedded within those communities, and therefore a special case. This can have serious repercussions by making certain principles, such as violence against women, seemingly irrelevant to minoritised communities as these are framed only within culturalist discourses and practices, rather than within a (universal) human rights framework (Gill 2006). In the next section, we discuss some key concepts and dynamics that

work to deny minoritised women the protection they are entitled to, particularly when working from a relativist position.

### Protecting minoritised women from violence

Drawing on research on minoritised women and violence against women (Chantler et al. 2001; Batsleer et al. 2002), we argue that in relation to protecting minoritised women from abuse, there are three key inter-related ideas that need to figure in our conceptualisation, understanding and practice. These are: race anxiety, cultural privacy and the tendency to privilege culture over gender. The inter-relationship between these are important to understand as they serve to obscure sensitive responses to minoritised women and need to be guarded against if the state is to offer relevant protection to minoritised women.

Chantler et al. (2001) use the term 'race anxiety' to refer to individual and collective (institutional and state level) anxiety about how to intervene in relation to minoritised peoples, particularly in the context of abuse and other sensitive topics. The anxiety is generated through a fear and shame of being labelled racist or culturally insensitive and it is this anxiety that appears to over-ride sound assessment and decision-making in relation to protecting vulnerable women in abusive situations. Such anxiety has a silencing effect, for to speak might bring accusations that the practitioner or institution is culturally insensitive. Importantly, institutions do not want to be 'named and shamed' as being institutionally racist. Hence, maintaining the institution's honour becomes paramount. However, cultural sensitivity frequently entails the exclusion of issues of gender and other marginalised groupings, so that being 'culturally sensitive' in effect serves largely to uphold traditional, conservative readings of communities. Race anxiety, therefore, contributes to the conditions which allow for abuse in minoritised communities to go unchallenged.

The desire to be culturally sensitive and the requirement to be seen as 'non-racist' prevents the speaker or institution from challenging practices based on unequal power relations *within* minoritised communities. The failure to intervene when it is required is further underpinned by the notion of 'cultural privacy' (Batsleer et al. 2002). Cultural privacy refers to the manner in which self-appointed 'community leaders', often powerful men within minoritised communities, draw the boundaries over their community domains (Gangoli et al. 2006). It is community leaders who thus influence what can and cannot be talked about and further it is community leaders who are normally consulted by the government and local authorities. Sensitive issues

such as domestic violence and childhood abuse are unlikely to be discussed openly as these would shatter the romanticised notion of strong, nurturing families within minoritised communities. Here, the interests of minoritised women and children are rarely seen as important, and the security of the patriarchal family, representing male interests, takes priority. Hence community leaders are more likely to draw a veil of silence over sensitive issues and insist on a level of cultural privacy. Black feminists working on domestic violence within minoritised communities, e.g. Imkaan and Southall Black Sisters, are often seen as working against community interests, as they pose a challenge to patriarchy. Feminists (including black feminists) have long pointed out that an essential step to combating violence against women is to move away from the notion that what happens in the home is a private matter. It is, therefore, the movement of domestic violence from the privacy of the home into the public domain that is essential, as it is the public consideration of abuse and violence which leads to legislation and support for victims. This shift from private to public is also what is required in relation to minoritised communities, that is, a shift is required from 'cultural privacy' to a more public contestation of sensitive issues such as violence and abuse within minoritised communities (see also Kukathas 1998; Sachar 1998).

Cultural privacy together with race anxiety makes for a powerful cocktail that act as barriers to the detection and appropriate intervention in abuse situations. Inevitably, this leads to a privileging of cultural issues over gender. The desire to be culturally sensitive overlooks issues of abuse as this is wrongly formulated as being 'part of their culture' and the anxiety stops the interrogation that is required. To break this cycle, we argue that a consideration of gender within minoritised communities is essential. However, this position is also fraught with problems. If one were to work only with gender issues at the expense of cultural and structural issues, such as poverty, racism, and immigration controls, the resultant gender analysis would be devoid of context and of the lived experiences of minoritised women. This is a point that has been made forcefully by black feminists over a number of years (e.g. Amos and Parmar 1984) and is worth reiterating in the context of recent anti-immigration legislation in Europe to supposedly combat forced marriage. Hence the gender analysis which is required is one that is fully cognisant of other dimensions of oppression and disadvantage (Thiara and Gill 2010). Thus, several studies that focus on domestic violence in minoritised communities in the UK have been at the forefront of highlighting the problems of 'no recourse to public funds' (Chantler et al 2001; Sundari et al. 2008; Rai and Thiara 1997). These can be thought of as largely focussing on structural issues, whilst other literature, discussed below has focussed almost exclusively on cultural issues such as honour.

## Understanding honour

It has become fashionable within policy and academia to understand violence against minoritised women as arising from an honour based culture (Brandon and Hafez 2008). Feminist activist organisations such as Southall Black Sisters have consistently pointed out that there is no honour in committing crimes of violence against women. This has led, in the British context, to the labelling of these crimes as ‘so-called crimes of honour’ to signify their inherent lack of honour. In this section of our chapter, we pay particular attention to the construction of so called honour based crimes and interrogate the differences between this and crimes of passion. These two paradigms are positioned as binaries, with crimes of passion attributed to the west and honour based crimes attributed to Muslim communities in particular. These terms and their attributions have been much contested and in our view this needs to continue as some of the thinking around these terms has been described as ‘tortuous’ (Razack 2004: 152).

Honour and shame have been treated as motifs of otherness, and attributed almost entirely to minoritised communities. However, there is much literature on how being the victim of any violent crime can cause overwhelming feelings of shame (World Society of Victimology 2005); the role and consequences of shame experienced by adult survivors of child sexual abuse (Feiring et al. 2002) and abusive family environments (Hoglund and Nicholas 1995); and women experiencing sexual violence (Kelly 1988). There is also literature on how certain stigmatised members of society, including prostitutes, can feel a sense of shame due to their occupation (see Tomara 2009; Pheterson 1990). While some of this shame is individualised, rather than collective, we argue that ideas of honour and shame in South Asian contexts can also be both collective and individual. For example, women’s bodies are frequently read as repositories of community honour (Sanghari and Vaid 1989), but shame can also be experienced individually by women who may have experienced sexual violence (Gangoli et al. 2006). Hence, shame is much more widespread than is commonly articulated in western contexts. Acknowledging this helps to prevent shame being perceived as a marker only of cultural others.

Discourses of honour and shame in the literature in some non western contexts, and minoritised women in the west, understand honour as vested in the bodies and actions of women (and to a lesser extent men) with loss of control over women potentially leading to shame (Araji 2000). Unlike the examples cited above, shame may be vested in the bodies of individual women, but is shared by the community, which is embodied by the men. There is a rich corpus of literature that looks at ways in which women’s



bodies are seen as symbolically representing a community, nation or race, and how dishonouring a woman can lead to a symbolic dishonouring of the community or nation (Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996; Gangoli 2006). Research on domestic violence within specific minoritised communities in the UK, particularly South Asian, has pointed to the importance of culturally specific concepts of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) in preventing women from articulating their experiences of violence in domestic situations (Bhopal 1997). *Izzat* and *sharam* are based primarily on the notion that the bodies and actions of women and girls represent community or individual honour. South Asian young women and girls in the UK are often vulnerable to such control, as there can be a high premium attached to ideas of sexual purity and chastity for young unmarried girls, especially in the context of taboos around pre-marital sexuality, loss of virginity and fears of young women being 'corrupted' by western values (Gangoli et al. 2009). This can sometimes be manifested in forced marriage of girl children, as a method to prevent such transgressive sexual behaviour.

However, it should be noted that until very recently chastity and sexual purity have also been features of many western industrialised nations. 'Shot-gun' marriages in the west are a good example in the recent past of the pressure on women pregnant outside of marriage to marry their lovers since sexual relations outside of marriage were not culturally acceptable. Alternatively, such pregnancies were concealed and young women sent away to have their babies in alternative parts of the country where the babies were placed for adoption. In part, the free availability of contraception combined with state welfare support for lone mothers has enabled more permissive sexual mores. This illustrates the centrality of material resources in shaping what is considered to be culturally acceptable. Another more recent example is the case of marital rape. It was only in 1991 that rape within marriage in the UK was recognised as a violation, highlighting the cultural acceptance that a husband was entitled to sex with his wife whenever he wanted, thus throwing into question the notion of the progressive rights of women in the west.

Moreover, in religious communities in the west (of whatever faith), sexual purity is still highly prized. A recent case in point is the Christian movement's reaffirmation of sexual purity before marriage, for example the 'silver ring thing' initiated by Pastor Denny Pattyn in Arizona, USA in 1996 and which was launched in the UK in 2003 (times online June 22 2007, accessed 21/08/09). It preaches chastity and the silver ring is to remind the wearer that they have pledged to be virgins until they marry. Interestingly, if the wearers are unable to keep their promise they are advised to flush the ring down the toilet rather than wear it and dishonour the community. These examples

(pregnancy outside marriage, marital rape and religious emphasis on sexual purity) illustrate how ideas of collective shame and honour are not the exclusive domain of minoritised non-Christian communities.

It has been argued that honour crimes are different from other forms of violence against women, including sexual jealousy. Purna Sen has identified six key features of crimes of honour, including: gender relations that problematise and control women's behaviour and sexuality; women policing other women's behaviour; collective decisions regarding punishments; women's participation in killings; ability to reclaim honour through killings or enforced compliance; and State sanction of such killings through recognition of honour as motivation and mitigation (Sen 2005). She suggests that honour crimes have more in common with dowry related murders in countries like India and femicide in various contexts than those involving sexual jealousy or what she terms 'individualistic fit of fury' (Sen 2005: 51). Seen thus, the focus is more on collective honour and shame, as reflected in the behaviour of women, rather than the individual.

However, we argue that while different forms of violence against women are contextually different, discourses of honour and shame are not restricted to specific ethnic communities or to particular forms of violence against women. Recent work also argues that contrary to Sen's assumptions, the links between dowry and domestic violence are neither obvious nor automatic but that domestic violence in India, as in the west, has other important social and economic causes and manifestations and that reducing Indian experiences of domestic violence to dowry can be essentialist and can lead to exoticising domestic violence in India (Talwar Oldenburg 2002). Therefore, seeking cultural explanations for violence against women in Third World countries when similar research conclusions are not made for violence against women in Western countries can be dangerous and counterproductive (Talwar Oldenburg 2002). Further, we argue that dowry related murders often have strong individualist and/or relational aspects (for example, financial reasons or strife between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law), in addition to ideas of honour. Further, violence against women in ethnic white groups in the west can also demonstrate some of the features identified as symptomatic of honour crimes above and this is discussed below.

Whilst accepting many of Sen's arguments, we depart with the analysis that domestic killings in majority communities are merely crimes of passion committed in a moment of rage. While this may be the case in some domestic killings in both the majority and minoritised communities, we argue that crimes of passion cannot explain all domestic murders or violence in any community. There have been several cases in the UK media concerning domestic violence in majority communities where ex-spouses or partners have

murdered their partners (and often children) on pre-arranged contact visits. In this situation, it is hard to argue that the violence committed during such visits is not premeditated or part of a pattern of violence perpetrated against the victim. It is also worth noting that the level of violence meted out to all women, including majority white women who leave abusive relationships, is significant (Hester and Westmarland 2005), highlighting the pressure on majority women to stay in violent relationships as leaving can exacerbate the violence. Many feminists (Stark 2007) working in this field have long argued that violence against women is not an individual act, but is part of a system of domination and control based on unequal gender and other social relations. What puzzles us is that this feminist analysis clearly acknowledges the role of structure and culture in shaping unequal gender relations, yet somehow this gets obscured when comparing violence against women in majority communities versus violence against women in minoritised communities. It seems to us that this is a retrograde step as it performs its own kind of double violence. The first kind is to transfer the unit of analysis in relation to majority women from the structural/cultural to the individual level, thus directing attention to the 'few bad apples' rather than to the structures and culture which maintain violence against women in majority communities. The second kind of violence is to only see the cultural in relation to violence against minoritised women, thereby invoking essentialist thinking and pathologising minoritised communities.

Research on the relationship between sexual jealousy and intimate partner violence in USA has found that controlling for cultural variations, intimate partner violence is a common behavioural result of sexual jealousy among American couples, and this is based on the degree of intimacy between the partners, which in turn owes much to 'symbolic' practices such as sexual exclusivity as a commitment (Paik et al. 2000). Sexual jealousy appears to manifest most strongly where sexual exclusivity or monogamy is seen as challenged, and this can have a strong gendered element, with men more likely to be violent, based on the belief that violence is justified when they suspect that their partners are unfaithful or in other situations where they believe that their honour is being threatened. Further, far from being individualistic fits of fury, many of these murders are planned meticulously (Polk 1994). There is also evidence that suggests that there is a tolerance for physical and sexual violence against women by young people in the UK, especially where the violence happens within a marriage and where the woman is seen as sexually promiscuous or cheating on her partner (Burton et al. 1998). It would appear, therefore, that for white majority communities as well as minoritised communities, wives are considered the property of their husbands, and cheating on them can be seen as justifying physical retribution.

This may not be articulated as collective honour and shame but seen as individual loss of face (Araji 2000). As Araji also points out, this individualisation of shame and honour can be seen to be closely tied to the more individualistic focus of western industrialised societies so it is not surprising that the collective ideas which are in circulation in the west get subordinated to the individual level. Further, following Sen's definition of honour crimes, there is evidence that such violence, deemed as 'crimes of passion' are often treated leniently by western judicial systems (Mullen 1995). Regarding such acts of violence, Araji (2000) further notes that in some non-western 'traditional' societies, women's sexual transgressions are often not punished if they are not made public, for instance if a woman in India is pregnant out of wedlock, a discreet abortion can prevent further repercussions. In contrast, in Western societies women are mostly abused or killed for transgressions that are both known or suspected privately as well as those that are public. While this may also happen in minoritised communities, it could well be the fear of disclosure and the resultant loss of honour that may be a contributory factor to abuse in such cases.

## Conclusions

We contend that violence against women in minoritised communities cannot be understood purely in terms of the cultural or in terms of honour based violence. We also argue that violence against women in majority communities cannot be understood as merely individual acts of violence. To persist in seeing them as such compounds the violence experienced. Race anxiety, cultural privacy and the privileging of culture over gender in minoritised communities will continue to leave women unprotected. Black feminist organisations, such as Southall Black Sisters, have also attacked unthinking multi-culturalism as contributing to violence against women in minoritised communities going unacknowledged. Dustin and Phillips (2008) point out that both doing nothing as a consequence of this unacknowledgement, as well as doing 'something' is problematic if that something does violence to minoritised cultures via its misrepresentation.

Feminist analyses emphasise patterns of power and control and unequal social relations as an explanation for violence against women (Hague and Malos 1998). We have illustrated how violence against all women is part of structural and cultural arrangements. The slide to a more individualistic focus that is gaining ground in explaining violence against women in majority cultures is problematic. This slide is particularly noticeable in discussions when

violence against majority women is juxtaposed with violence against minoritised women and works to position majority communities as culturally superior. Lessons from over thirty years ago do not appear to have been heeded as yet by liberal western feminists. Liberal feminists have increased their spheres of influence and are now more powerfully positioned to act to protect all women from violence. Instead, some of their interventions have been taken on by nation states to increase surveillance, regulation and control of minoritised communities often through the use of immigration control in the name of protecting minoritised women from 'honour based violence'. This chapter urges for an approach that utilises multidimensional levels of analysis: individual, cultural and structural in understanding and responding to violence against women and to stem the tide of culturalist explanations of violence against women in minoritised communities.

However, as we have reiterated throughout the chapter, we cannot ignore culture and have focussed on honour as a key motif. This chapter discusses the limitations of constructing violence against women in minoritised communities as only constituting the cultural. Our key argument is that ideas about culture influence all forms of violence against women, including women from majority communities, yet this often goes unacknowledged. Central to our concerns is the manner in which a focus on culture alone in relation to minoritised women has the double effect of leaving minority women unprotected from violence, and at the same time sediments the view that minority cultures are 'backward' in relation to gender relations. We also suggest that by drawing attention to the way in which honour and shame can influence particular behaviours need not necessarily lead to cultural relativism, but can possibly lead to a greater understanding of contexts. For example, even if we start by accepting that sexual jealousy in intimate heterosexual relationships in both white mainstream and minoritised communities is based on ideas of hurt honour and shame, we might then begin to understand how its formulation may differ in both contexts. To illustrate, in white mainstream communities, these ideas may be more individualised or linked to ideas of individual masculinity while in some minoritised communities, they may be more community or family based, or based on ideas that women's behaviour can discredit familial pride and honour. Our argument is, therefore, not that culture is irrelevant in violence against women but that it is relevant to both majority and minoritised communities, and exoticising particular forms as cultural and others as aberrant can have tragic consequences for all women who are victims of violence.

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