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Series 2 Episode 3

Help seeking in response to domestic abuse and the experiences of Thai women living in the UK following migratory marriage: A Conversation with Angie Wilcock



[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

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Introduction to Episode Series 2 Episode 3

[00:00:28] **Sarah:** Hello and welcome to the Portal podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host, Dr Sarah Lonbay, and I'm here with my co-host.

[00:00:37] **Lesley:** Hi, I'm Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:39] **Sarah:** We're really pleased to be back in the studio after a bit of a break to record this second series, and today we are here with Dr Angie Wilcock, who was a guest on our previous series. Hi Angie.

[00:00:52] **Angie:** Hi. Yeah.

[00:00:53] **Sarah:** Nice to see you today.

[00:00:56] **Lesley:** Sorry, we're a little bit hyper and excited.

[00:00:58] **Sarah:** We are, yeah, it's snowing, it's nearly Christmas. Anyway, so we'll calm down and we're going to have...

[00:01:04] **Lesley:** That was at the time of recording. It was snowing .

[00:01:06] **Sarah:** At the time of recording, yes. It won't be, hopefully, when we release these. Yeah, we're really pleased to welcome Angie back. As you know, this current series we are looking at domestic abuse and domestic violence, and Angie has very kindly agreed to come back and talk to us about some of the work that she's been doing. So just to start off with, and just to get us into it, could you introduce yourself, Angie? I know you did last time, but our guests may not have listened to the previous episode.

[00:01:34] **Angie:** Yeah, I'm Dr Angie Wilcock, I'm a senior lecturer here at the University of Sunderland, but also I've got a practitioner background working in the criminal justice system with offenders within the third sector. And this is where I suppose my passion came from violence against women, and how I try and do my research and link that into my teaching as well. So practice and professional experience overlaps here.

Help seeking in response to domestic abuse

[00:01:59] **Sarah:** That's great, thank you. So just to start us off then, could you tell us a little bit more about the research... Well, there are two projects I think we're going to talk to you about today. so maybe a little bit more about the first one, the help-seeking in response to domestic abuse.

Understanding experiences of domestic abuse

[00:02:13] **Angie:** Yeah, well the first one came, actually it was part of my thesis, my PhD thesis, that from working in practice I realised there was a lot of women experiencing domestic violence who didn't necessarily name it or relate to it. And when I was talking about this idea with Professor Catherine Donovan at the time she said, "you know, that's a great idea, you need to get that up and running". And that's where that research came from. I originally did a quantitative survey online, just put it out online with the City of Sunderland Council, and put it on their web pages, to try and employ women to come forward for the qualitative phase. And actually 50 women came forward. I had no idea of what their backgrounds were, whether or not they had experienced domestic violence, and from that I carried out 20 in-depth qualitative interviews. So it was for a range of women, women who said they never experienced domestic abuse, where I could see, which we'll go into probably, that they *had*. Women who worked in frontline service provision and also women who had that experience of domestic abuse. And that's where this

piece of work came from, or the paper I've written now about the challenges to their ontology that came through the field work.

[00:03:26] **Lesley:** So when you sent, because that's what I was interested in, so when you first were advertising was it trying to just get, was it about perceptions of domestic abuse, domestic violence, without it having to be about "you have experienced it"?

[00:03:42] **Angie:** Yeah, it was about women's *understandings* of domestic violence, and what their routes to help-seeking would be. Because we know predominantly a lot of people don't come to the attention of the services, they don't seek help. So we knew there was a lot of informal networks that supported women. So I just put the survey out, asking what people thought and gave them tick boxes, you know, to pick from there, and there was room for some qualitative feedback, and I was shocked at how many people did not relate certain sexual, financial and emotional forms of abuse to domestic violence or domestic abuse. And ultimately that's what I followed up. And help-seeking was practically would only have been, and it's what they relate to now, it's that public story that if it was *physical*, they only felt a need at that point. So I wanted to explore that more in-depth to get the narrative around that.

[00:04:30] **Lesley:** Yeah, because obviously last series you came on to talk about this from the perspective of the emotions, which I know we'll probably get into as well, but this time we're sort of interested in the content of it, because one of the ones we did have in the last series was around this sort of coercive control and people's understanding of that. And that *not* being understood and *not* being perceived. So was that one of the things that you found?

[00:04:54] **Angie:** I did, that's what came out. And this is what one of the last chapters I wrote from the data was about, that coercive and controlling behaviour, and a lot of behaviour by women is altruistic, so it's based around that they would put the needs of their family and children before themselves. So what they were saying is in terms of seeing coercive sex or manipulated sex was, "well, yeah, I'm in a relationship, it's part of that and I just need to do it, he'll go in a mood, he'll go in a huff, he won't talk to us for a week, or maybe he'll have an affair". So to keep that harmony of the family, some women actually said, "well, you know, it's, you just do it to keep the peace". It's sex to keep the peace. And that's where that came from, that coercion. But when I

flipped the coin and said if that happened to you in the public, she says "oh, that would be sexual assault, you would report that". But that private/public divide is still vast.

[00:05:45] **Lesley:** It is, it's huge, isn't it? Because that's the thing for me, it's like we're sort of getting more knowledge about what is coercive behaviour. But being able to help people to understand that, in their own relationships are they actually, because there's compromise isn't there? And you put other people's needs ahead of your own at times. But at which point that becomes harmful is so difficult for them to work out themselves.

[00:06:15] **Angie:** Some of the women, they turn over and cry, but it was normalised and I've seen a lot through jest. She says, well, the women at work would tell you just pull your nightly down when you're finished, you know, this type of jest. And she said that normalised it for me because then I just presume well that's what everybody does, so it's a normal part of a relationship, it's part of the rules of being in a relationship. And I think that jest normalised that. And again, with money, finances, one woman said, and do you know what was frightening? I know, Sarah, you've done work around the aging population, the older women, how controlled the older women were in their relationships, but just saw it as, well, you get your housekeeping and you have to live off that, and if you run out, well then you've just got to manage or you do without. I said, so I asked the question, "did your husband have money, pocket money?" She went, "oh yes, he had the rest of his wages, but you know, they give us that, I was grateful, we he had to manage on that, and if we didn't then that's our problem for not managing it properly". But they didn't ask them for more money, and for that one woman, who we're probably going to talk about, flagged it up in terms of she actually realised halfway through the interview that for all these years she'd been controlled, and that was the difficulty in that.

[00:07:22] **Lesley:** That must have been really difficult. That's the bit I found so interesting, because there's a lot of power issues going on there, isn't there? And around, I think did you talk about it as like there was a 'consciousness raising'?

[00:07:34] **Angie:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:07:35] **Lesley:** But also about I think was it reconfiguration of personal experience? Like I can almost visualise them thinking that through as they're talking to you. What was that like?

[00:07:47] **Angie:** I'll say a little bit about consciousness raising in case anybody doesn't understand. I think it was Stanley and Wise who first coined this phrase, and it was about women talking to women about their experiences, not necessarily in an academic framework, but out in public and women's groups, institutions, and women talking about issues, and everything that went on in the home, their personal or public life, and realising that it sparked a conversation and we all experience things differently. So some people might use foul language every day in their lives and that be normal to them, but another woman might be harmed by that. So it's about raising that awareness for them to reconfigure how they live their lives and maybe there's something different in what they do, whether that's right or wrong. So that just sparks that imagination where you start to think, "wait a minute, I've been doing this this way, is that right or is it wrong? Is it healthy or is it unhealthy?" And that's when the women started to question, when they were talking about it, and they started to ask me questions that I couldn't answer for them because they had to come to their own conclusion.

[00:08:43] **Sarah:** Yeah, that must have been a difficult line to walk for you as well.

[00:08:46] **Angie:** It was, thankfully professionally, and I know it doesn't come into the research, I've got a counselling diploma, and I suppose it's strange because your professional barriers for those who've worked in a professional background, you have this sort of persona, this barrier that comes up where you're dealing with the moment, you're in the moment and you reflect on everything else afterwards. And while I was in there, and I saw this reconfiguration for the mature woman I've just mentioned, she was actually in service provision as well, frontline, and she'd said, "you know, I've been the major wage earner for years, but, you know, I'm a spend thrift, he keeps telling us I squander, I'm a spend thrift, so he controls the money". She says, "yeah, I get 30 pound every week, but if I spend that, then I've got to go back and tell him what I've spent it on can I have some more". And she says, "but that's just the way it is". And she says, "I know I'm the major wage earner, but I suppose I do waste it, and he looks after it and captures it". And we talked about different things, and the "sex to keep the peace" came into parts of that, and how years ago when our son was small, he'd gone to hit her when she had

some, but "that was just a one off, that doesn't, that's not domestic violence in my relationship at all". And it wasn't until we were talking about, she was actually talking about service users, and then she just stopped and she was sitting thinking, she went, "I just need to reflect for a second, because I'm just reflecting on what I've just said to you about my relationship and what I'm saying", she said, "I've been experiencing domestic violence for years, haven't I?" And I could see, I suppose as I was watching her, I could see her persona changing, I could see the pennies were starting to drop, so I think I must have prepared myself a little bit for that. And I just went, "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that, I don't know your personal relationship. I can only go from the conversation we are having and I can't make that decision for you". So I offered to stop the interview at that point, so we stopped and she took some time out, she walked back because I'd gone to her place of work where I was doing the interview. And then she came back into it. But at the end, where you keep your journal afterwards, the notes, the conversation we had afterwards, for her, she was now saying to me, "what do I do? What do I do? Do I go on and live this sham marriage or do I go home and change that? I know now what I've experienced. He's controlled that money and spent my money, but really I've been living on 30 pound. How do I go away and deal with that now? So what do I do with that now?" And I said, "look, I'm really sorry, but I can't tell you what you need to do with your life, I've given you the health seeking information, you're in service provision..." She ultimately had to go away and deal with that. So she came in thinking she had a brilliant, saying "I've got a brilliant relationship, don't have any issues", from my service user point of view, to going out and saying "I don't have a great relationship, and I've now realised for the last 30 years I've been in this controlling environment".

[00:11:33] **Lesley:** That's very powerful. I feel like I'm going through in my little head thinking how on earth would I deal with that? Because it's like what you're expecting, in some situations, to come up. But in that way you were there as a researcher to try and just understand, and it wasn't *about* that. I know you were saying you were prepared to some extent for that, Angie, but that's quite a lot, I mean the *weight* of that. I just really felt the weight of somebody asking me and the realisation.

[00:12:03] **Sarah:** And those kinds of moments I think must happen in practice a lot. I mean, I don't know if you ever experienced anything like that in your practice, Lesley, where conversations not ostensibly about the relationship and domestic abuse, but the relationship might be being explored and those moments might happen where people realise that.

[00:12:22] **Lesley:** I think it's more, because I was in generic practice, so I think as a practitioner, I wouldn't know what I was going to go in for. Like you go into situations and you don't know what you're going to expect to find, for me. And I think if you're expecting one thing and it's a complete curve ball to something else, I think as a practitioner I probably would expect that. Now, I don't know what other people would feel about that. As a researcher though, that's where, for me, I would feel like my positioning of "what do I do about that?" because as a practitioner, I would know where I would go, but in that, that's making me feel slightly uncomfortable. You know, because I think... wow...

[00:13:01] **Sarah:** It's a very difficult position to be in, in terms of the responsibility of that. I mean, our role as researchers is very clear, isn't it? We're not there as practitioners, we're not there to offer that support ourselves, but if you have triggered that kind of realisation through your project. It's difficult, isn't it?

[00:13:24] **Angie:** Well, definitely, yeah, and I've stayed with some women for up to two hours after the interview. And I think, for me, it's coming from that feminist perspective as an insider, or wanting to be an insider, and obviously intersubjectivity comes into play, why I was there, what I was doing, my interest and why I had that interest. And I think it becomes to that where we've got what Denscombe, I've talked about that, becomes the fake friendship. That we want to do this study because we want to hear women's narratives so we can get that story out there to raise awareness, but we also have to realise these are women's *lives* that we're all sort of gaining on, and they do start to reflect and they are going to have triggers of moments. And I think we can't be blind to that when we go into research. I think for me, having some knowledge from my professional background helped, but I also had to take some time out. After about five or six interviews, I had to stop because I was getting to a point where, and for the women who were saying some of them who had really had experience and hadn't told their story, and they were telling me some quite heinous sort of moments, it was cathartic. So I've given this to you now then you go and deal with it. And I was at home, and it's like, what am I doing? And for me emotionally, when we talked about the emotion in research, it was for me thinking, wow, yes I expected this, you talk about that, you do your ethics, you put on the form what risk there may be, but we don't really fully understand that emotional harm or risk that that's going to come, and we have to make sure that our respondents are not harmed more, I suppose, when they leave that interview.

[00:15:08] **Lesley:** Yes, because of sharing that. But for that woman, when you're talking about that, I just feel like you must have heard that, and the way that she was sharing things with you as she went through, that there's this dawning realisation of, "hang on a minute, I've never seen it like that before", and now seeing it. And then you've got a responsibility towards her. So even though as a person and as a researcher, you're sort of saying, "well, okay, I'm not here to resolve that", I find that really hard, I think because the practitioner in me just wants to go, "no, I can't, I can't just leave". You know? And I think that's some of the challenges in practice, is you *are* in their lives, and therefore when those things are shared with you the ability to walk away is very difficult. And and to just leave it...

[00:16:00] **Angie:** You can't. And I think for me it was a bit, I think it's Blakely that says you've started to *feel* the research rather than just being part of it. And it was about, and I think another author, I can't remember the name off the top of my head now, but it's about staying a bit longer to give a bit of yourself. And that's what I felt I had to do. And thankfully I'd done a lot of reading around that sensitivity and I had thought I was well trained or versed to deal with that, but you do deal with it in the field, but for researchers, I think for me listening to the transcriptions, because of what they'd said, I wanted to transcribe everything myself and I did. But then you're listening to that transcription and even now when I teach it, coming up 10 years on, I still hear each woman's voice in my head as I say her piece. And some of them I still can't read out fully. So I think it's that emotional depth that, yes, we want to have this into subjective reality, we want to immerse ourselves, and I'm aware there's always a power imbalance, I don't say that there's never because of course we do. But we build this fake friendship to get this rich narrative that we want to help people to raise awareness, but then we can't just walk away afterwards, in some way we need to deal with that aftermath.

[00:17:15] **Sarah:** Yeah, I agree. I think there's lots of approaches in research that help us to manage some of that as well. I was really interested about what you were saying, it's been brought up a couple of times now, both in relation to harm within the research process, but also harm in terms of how people think of that for themselves. Because you were talking before, obviously we were talking about a lack of recognising that some of these experiences are domestic abuse, and 'harm' and 'risk' are very subjective, aren't they? So I'm just wondering if you can say a bit more about that in terms of understandings of domestic abuse.

[00:17:53] **Angie:** Yeah, well for some women, as I said, we all experience things differently and what was a level of harm for some women wasn't for others. So some of those who had experienced domestic abuse found the coercive and controlling and behaviour was fine. It was normalised and became part of routine. It was when it got more physical and very much more violent that they saw that as a risk at any level. For some of the women who said they hadn't experienced it, they'd been told how to dress, what to wear, the people who were acknowledging their experiences was all the physical aspect of it, they didn't relate to anything. But for those at what they argue is a 'lower level', I would say every form of domestic abuse is quite harsh, but they've been told what to wear, being told how to dress became a routine, and for them it was only some of them said sometimes it was recognised as harmful when they said things like, "but I didn't want to wear that that day, but I had to, and I was really uncomfortable because I wanted to go out in the black dress and he said I had to wear the red dress", or "I wanted to buy the gold top and he went and bought the silver top and wouldn't allow me to buy the gold top". And I think that's when their sort of realities were changing, they sort of came to be the person he wanted them to be. And it wasn't the person they'd gone into the relationship as. Their families used to make points about them changing, or how they did their hair was a big one, this lower level that became part of that routine, but it enabled that escalation later, and it wasn't until it got much more physical that it was actually labelled or they recognised it to be abuse. If that's, not sure that's what you're touching on, but yeah, that's how they sort of came to see it. And I think, for me, there was elements where maybe it's because I study it and I understand it much more in-depth, little things they were saying about what to make for the tea, on a Monday and Tuesday, everything was set, the older women, and you didn't change the day because he'd go berserk when he'd come in or it'll go in the bin. There was no respect for you'd stood and cooked that tea, they didn't say, well, he was the one who goes to work, he's the one, he's the breadwinner, which is still *dominant*, and you're thankful for what he gives you. And when I said, "but do you find yourself in an equal relationship?" and they did! They thought because, yeah, I go to my women's groups or I can go to the bingo, or I can do, as long as I'm back in for his tea at four, and I've got everything on the table. Unfortunately for me it was the younger members who found that fine, because for them it was a *protector*. And I think there was some research done by Girl Guiding who found that young girls have a problem between the protective father and the protective partner, where it's only because he doesn't want anybody to look at you or shout at you so he makes you wear the longer dress. It's only because he cares about you that he doesn't want you

going out with your friends, or he'll take you there and pick you up. And the younger ones for me, some of them said they've got apps on their phones now where apparently they're, they can know wherever you are. And the boyfriends, because it's only because they really care about us and they need to know where I am and then they say "what are you doing in there?", that's control to me. But they didn't see it as harm at that point. But it's very difficult because for me I'm thinking this is starting, it's harassment, it's control. But for them, this is just part of the routine and it's that protective, "well, my dad wouldn't let us go out and that so he doesn't because he just cares about us".

[00:21:11] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think that's really interesting what you're saying, and that's what I was touching on, talking about the subjectivity of harm, because these women aren't seeing it. You were saying that they would recognise physical violence, that perhaps results in some kind of bodily mark, but these other things, not recognising it as being damaging or harmful in any way.

[00:21:32] **Angie:** It's very difficult.

[00:21:33] **Sarah:** Just thinking in terms of practitioners and how they notice these things as well. You know, I remember doing safeguarding training, this is years ago, and being trained about what kinds of marks to notice and things like that, but coercive control, there aren't physical signs like that. So how do practitioners kind of make those, this is a big question, but what kinds of things can they rely on?

[00:22:00] **Angie:** I think it's really difficult because all our lives, our lived realities, we might be similar while we're sitting in this room, but when we go home, our lives are so different, and we all fall into a routine, I suppose. And I think our interpersonal bias influences that as well, because what we see as harm, or what we don't see as harm, and coercion, I even see obviously being released, you probably do it yourselves, you're out, you people watch, you see things happening. Even down to supermarket's, one poor woman asking if she could buy a tin of peas, and I am terrible for doing that, and what I might see as harm, they're happily in that relationship, who am I to go along and tell them that what they're doing's wrong? Yeah. Yeah.

[00:22:42] **Sarah:** It's so difficult, isn't it?

[00:22:43] **Angie:** It's so difficult. And I think for practitioners, especially from a social work perspective, trying to understand what's healthy and unhealthy for

that one person or different families, like I've said, coming from the housing and the task force, some families foul language or swearing was a natural phenomenon for them every day, and that's how they conversed with each other. But for me to go into that family and say that's wrong, that's how they conversed with their children, and when does that become harmful? Another family could be totally different, someone swears at them or shouts and that's them really nervous and harmed.

[00:23:18] **Lesley:** It's so context specific, isn't it? It's so difficult to generalise, isn't it? Because thinking what you were saying about with the apps and stuff, on the other side of that *is* protection. There is protective elements of having someone know where you are. And I use that for my son, and he knows I do it, and it's because in case he gets lost, so he knows that I can check up on him if he's lost, right, and it's a reassurance for me. But I get that you've then got a practitioner going into those situations, and the thing is they're on alert for the problems aren't they?

[00:23:53] **Angie:** Yeah, the triggers.

[00:23:54] **Lesley:** But knowing whether that's problematic for *that* family, and for that *person*, because then you don't know that actually maybe that person who's identifying it is actually more harmful to the other partner than they are, you know, it's so difficult.

[00:24:10] **Angie:** Yeah. I think picking it up as well, because from the frontline practitioners who was in that study, for me a lot of them, what I saw as harmful was routine. Like the one where the man managed the money. So for me, I'd said, so if you were in someone's house and someone said that to you, would you just be "it's fine, it's just how they live their life"? So it's like personal, what you see in your family life is normal and probably not harmful. Will you miss those triggers in an abusive relationship? Because traditional ideology and beliefs and cultural and gendered norms that we accept and not challenge because he is the main breadwinner, he covers the bills, gives them the housekeeping, the kids have got shoes on their feet, you know, he does as he pleases, and yeah he tells us what to wear I wear this, but that's become part of that routine. And if that's what happens in their life, how would they see it any differently?

[00:24:59] **Sarah:** Yeah, it's really difficult, our perception of risk, isn't it really, that we're talking about? What we might see as being 'risky'. And I suppose

those things are really difficult to identify when we're talking about coercive control, or emotional or psychological abuse, because you can't see the impact.

[00:25:17] **Angie:** And I think it's very difficult.

[00:25:20] **Lesley:** It is. I mean, I was thinking about the practitioners I'm working with at the minute on advanced safeguarding modules, and one of the key things that I've done with them is reflexivity. Because, for me, it's about actually you've really got to understand where is that coming from? That perception that you have, that *that's* okay, and that's *not* okay. Where's that coming from in terms of yourself? Because that's the bit, for me they're the tool in this. Because I suppose if it's alright to connect that to mothers, because obviously my background is in child protection, and I'm sitting here listening to what you're saying, Angie, completely engrossed in it, and then thinking as a practitioner, just not having the space, in any way, to really be thinking about that impact on that person, because what I'm seeing in that practice situation predominantly is the mother, and whether or not the mother is protecting the child. Because that is where it automatically goes, and there's lots of reasons why that happens. But were some of them mothers in that?

[00:26:24] **Angie:** Yeah, some of them were mothers, and like one woman who, and she was from a very good professional background, and she said, "look, all I wanted was to go out to the shop and not have the card refused because he'd gambled all the money, and I just wanted to buy the kids..." It was the kids at the front of this, who needed their teas, their dinners, their school, and I just didn't want to turn up in a shop. And she was left with thousands of pounds worth of debt because he was getting it on the back of her. And for her it was about the children. "He doesn't realise what he's doing to the children". And they never came to the attention of services, and we know a lot of families don't, until he ultimately was sent to prison eventually. But I think for that type of thing, for her, the children was first and foremost, and she thought she was protecting the children all the time. And she said "yes, every family has their ups and downs", it's what they all say. "We all have our rows in front of kids, who doesn't?" So for me, that for them it was no different. It was when I went to the bank and there was no money left to buy their shoes, to buy their school uniforms, to buy their food shopping that I didn't have it. And a few others as well where they thought they were protecting the child, but obviously they just didn't see that, well, no, the children are witnessing and it's difficult.

[00:27:33] **Lesley:** It's hard to see, if you can't see it as something happening to yourself, to then see it happening and the impact on your children, that's so difficult. Because I remember when I started practicing, and I'm starting to feel old now, because I remember at the time getting an acknowledgement of the emotional impact on children was a challenge at that point. It was like, well, unless the children were getting physically harmed then it wasn't having an impact, and it was like, actually no, it *is* having an impact on the children, the children are aware of a lot more than you think they're aware of, but it's so difficult, isn't it? Because that was emerging then, and I feel like what we've got emerging now is this idea of this coercive control, which has obviously always been there, but then we find a way to name it. But then that doesn't help necessarily *see* it.

[00:28:23] **Angie:** No, it doesn't.

[00:28:24] **Lesley:** How you see it in practice and what do we do about it?

[00:28:27] **Angie:** But a lot of people don't recognise the physical element, they just see it as having a row if it happens every now and again, or when he's drunk, it's excused, and it's minimised because of the behaviour. And I think for coercive, it's so difficult that it has become part of that routine over the years, that how do you now tell someone that their relationship after 40 years there's an issue and it's caused an issue for the children. And I suppose the children see it for them, accept it and just see a part of their dad being angry or because he's the 'head of the house', they do what they're told in terms of that. I think it's really difficult.

[00:29:02] **Sarah:** It's that normalisation for people as well, when that's what you see and what you're subjected to, you don't realise, like you said, that there's other ways of being and other ways to look at that situation.

[00:29:13] **Angie:** And if family and friends are in that same predicament, I know in terms of myself and friends and all this, I've picked them up a few times, that they've actually said, "I told you not to come out with that on" to their partners, "you're a mess". So I've instantly gone, "what have you just said?" And she said, look at the... and I said, "if he said that to you... he wouldn't dare". And I said, "so why have you said it to him? Because you're controlling what he's wearing." "Well, he just hasn't got a clue, has he? So I need to dress him." and I'm like, "but if he was dressing you, well he wouldn't get the chance, so why are you?" And do you know, people just don't see that

opposite side of it. And he goes, "oh, it's not worth the argument, I just put on what she says", and I'm like, oh my god, that's control!

[00:29:48] **Lesley:** Yeah because I was wondering how much, like, because was women that answered or did you get men as well?

[00:29:53] **Angie:** No, this wasn't, this is just friends I'm talking about, but yeah it was women, my research. I did get some men coming through, but we had to filter those out because my study was about women.

[00:30:02] **Lesley:** So it was specifically about women.

[00:30:03] **Angie:** Yeah, and I do want to go back and do some work on men, because I think there's also there's a big gap. And I think talking to Nicola about what their perceptions are of coercive and controlling behaviour, we need to understand that because if they don't understand, if nobody understands what it actually is, how can we ever do anything about it?

[00:30:19] **Sarah:** Yeah, and people don't, because it's such a thin line, like you said, where people might just perceive it as someone being protective and caring, when does it cross over into being something more sinister or damaging?

[00:30:31] **Angie:** And we know coercive and controlling behaviour underpins, I would argue, all forms of domestic abuse. It starts very early on, in the onset of relationships, and this is what the young members were saying, "oh, it's because he loves us, he tells us he loves us because he cares, he'll pick us up and drop us off, he wants us to wear this because I look good in it on his arm, I'm his babe on his arm", and it's frightening. And once that's embedded, it leads to that escalation, and you're caught.

[00:30:57] **Lesley:** Yeah, because I'm so interested in things around early intervention and I find that really interesting that I do feel like it is important that we know about these things to try and do something to prevent it getting further down the line, because we don't want that. And it's about the awareness raising around that, because I'm quite curious to know how much practitioners, hopefully practitioners who might be listening to this, really know about the coercive control element. I'm now thinking, my little research brain's going Sarah, and I'm thinking, is that the kind of thing that maybe we could do a survey on alongside this?

[00:31:31] **Sarah:** Absolutely, yeah.

[00:31:32] **Lesley:** I just think it'd be interesting to hear. What do they understand and what do they think their responsibilities as practitioners are around this, because I just feel like that's a whole area that, I mean I've gone back and done my 30 days retraining in practice, which I've loved doing, and everything is like, on the one hand still the same, and then on the other hand completely different, in terms of the issues that affect people, and so much more complicated to try and understand what earth is going on. Mm-hmm. Sorry, my little brain's heading off...

[00:32:09] **Angie:** It'll be interesting to see what practitioners' perceptions are of coercive and controlling behaviour.

[00:32:14] **Sarah:** It would be really interesting. Maybe the three of us could do something together, that'd be really interesting.

[00:32:21] **Sarah:** Angie, I know that you've also done some work around women's experiences as migratory wives, and could you please tell us a little bit about that?

[00:32:29] **Angie:** Well, this is the work I'm busy doing at the moment, and to be honest this has been in my head for about nine years and I've spoken about it constantly. And mainly because a number of years ago when I was based over at Priestman Building, I came into contact with a Thai woman who was very emotionally upset in the street, she was lost, she was confused, and to cut a long story short, she had come over, she'd married a guy, he was working offshore, he'd give her 10 pound for the fortnight, he was away, no means of transport of getting around, she just spoke little English and she was just totally lost. So I got her home. When it came to light, she didn't speak a lot of English, I started to realise he was quite controlling and I got her into the woman's centre when he was away on my way to work, I used to pick her up, take her there for the day, pick her up and take her back. So she learned to speak English and empower herself basically. So she started to understand what he was doing when she was locked in the bedroom and he was on the computer. I won't go into that because you can imagine what, so that comes from there. But what happened was, in terms of migratory marriages, Thailand we know has a reputation for the sex industry, and I think this led to the influx, after the Vietnamese war, Western men travelling into Thailand, basically sex tourism. And this led to the marriage of Thai women to Western men and

women coming now to live in the UK or around Europe, Germany, America, you know, Westernised societies, and agencies started to set up and these are their tickets, it's women as a commodity basically, in terms of dealing with this. And this lady that I come across lived in a rural village, she was the prettiest one of the family, and she was told to marry this Thai man, because he was sending money home and it got her two children, who she had to leave behind, into education and it paid for the family. This doesn't happen to all women linked to agencies, and a lot of them out of Bangkok see it as a way out of poverty, they see it as a way out of that sex tourism industry, but we've also got very intelligent professional women who come into the country through those agencies, but the stigma sticks. And I realise that we've got a dispersed community of Thai women. South Asian women have this community where they're all together and they've got support, Thai women don't, they're isolated and they're dispersed around the UK in pockets. But they're very resilient at the same time, because what I noticed this woman had managed to get on Facebook and walking around town she spotted another Thai woman, so they started to speak to each other and they've built a little community on Facebook, this network just as a support network. And I'd done a lot of searching and it's a huge gap where no work's been done around this area until very recently. There's a young woman just finished a PhD but it's based in London. And I thought, right, this is the opportunity, I am going to do it. So yeah I've started the field work, and initially, while I wasn't really looking for domestic violence, because it was their transitional experiences of how they integrated into society after migratory remarriage, honestly it's heinous, what's coming through is quite shocking in terms of...

[00:35:36] **Sarah:** Really?

[00:35:36] **Angie:** Yeah, it is. So that's where it's took me. Barriers, the key one, I had 10 women lined up for interviews, so far I've only managed to get four done, I've got another two lined up. The barriers is the men, they're gatekeepers, don't think it's a good idea for them to participate. And that's what I was saying to Lesley just before this interview, that I've just been speaking to an agency yesterday who said they've got quite a number of Thai women from around the area making contact because of their isolation, they can't get to them they're stranded. And for me it's a form of 21st Century slavery that's legalised.

[00:36:14] **Lesley:** Do you think the reason, because they're so spread out that's meant that the issues are not coming to anyone's attention because

they're so disparate across the UK, but now hopefully you're going to start to pull that together to try and understand what is actually happening there. Because there is no control. Well not control, that's terrible, but there's no understanding of their experiences and coming to the UK as, was it migratory marriage?

[00:36:44] **Angie:** There's very little known, and I started the research just in the North East of England but I've gone back to ethics and had it extended the whole of England now, because there's women linking in from other areas who are picking up my, because I've advertised on some of the Thai Facebook pages, so I've had that changed to try and broaden the sample really. And one of the key things, and I think it's a finding, I've said to these women, "so when you asked the process of going through the agency, that this agency links you, do you ever visit the UK?" And they've said, "oh, I came once for a holiday". "Did he come out?" "No, never". "So did you visit the area, you know, integration?" "No", nobody really speaks, but isolation is terrible. And I said, "what about the local authority or the Government, did they follow up?" They've been in the country 10 years and they've never been followed up by anyone. No one's ever checked to see if they're linked with doctors, no checks of anything whatsoever. But one key thing this woman said to me, and I think it's a huge finding in itself, she said, "can I ask why when we come to the UK, if the Government know that they are sex offenders, why aren't we told? And I went, "right..." She said, "because I've been here 10 years", and it wasn't until someone they were talking to said something in jest, she then went away and Googled it and found out he's been done for child sex offences. And so I explained Claire's Law, the Domestic Violence Disclosure scheme to her, she had no knowledge of that. And I thought, you know, if the Government's allowing these women to come in through migratory marriage, because they've got a certain income as well and they've gotta have a certain positioning, then surely, if they have a record, surely they have a duty to say to these women, "do you realise he's got this record?" Because she's suffered horrific sexual abuse from him, she's now trying to flee, and I just think why wasn't she told this? Because you've immediately isolated that woman and put her at risk.

[00:38:39] **Sarah:** Put her in a really difficult, risky, awful situation.

[00:38:42] **Lesley:** Is there like post-immigration laws and processes, I mean I don't know them, but I would assume there's some kind of process, or is it just

once you're there, once you've got your status, whatever that might be, that's it.

[00:38:54] **Angie:** That's it. That seems to be it, because I'm going to look into the Local Authority, because surely there's some duty of care? I don't know. And this Local Authority, obviously once they're married and they've become citizens, we know that there's no support for women fleeing domestic abuse before citizenship, or very little. I mean, Southall Black Sisters is brilliant and My Sister's Place, but for women, and for them they were threatened with deportation, and I said to one, "would that not be a good thing?" And she said "no, because that's shame to the family. My brother won't, the family won't have the money he sends home every month, I have to sacrifice this to get my children through education, something I didn't have."

[00:39:37] **Sarah:** So they're facing all kinds of additional barriers for leaving, it's difficult for any woman in that situation, and what you said before kind of resonated with some of the conversations we had on the last series of the podcast around, or maybe it was conversations Lesley and I had outside podcast, I can't remember now, but just about the complexity of the systems that we have here, right? And if you're born and raised here those systems are still impossible to navigate. If you come here as an adult, and you're not familiar and you maybe don't speak the language or you're learning to speak the language, that's an impossible maze that you just don't have access to at all. So that's incredibly hard for someone to know even that services might exist that they could go to, let alone how to find them and get access to them.

[00:40:23] **Angie:** It's that language barrier, isn't it? And there was another lady who said she'd done a master's, a very well-educated woman, she said "oh, he's a great husband, I don't have any problems", but they'd moved three times, and I said, "why?" She said "oh, because when I get friendly with people, he moves us on because he doesn't think we need any more in our relationship bar me and him". So I said, "but is that not isolating?" And she says, "yes because I need more than that, so he bought me a dog", she says, but I want to go". And she said "I'm from a middle-class family, which is quite rare", she said, "in Thailand". And she says, "when I married him...", they're all, there's about a decade age gap between all of them, most of them, that's the minimum, a decade age gap. And she said, "I want to do a degree, but my father's had to pay for it". I said, "so why has your father had to pay for your degree if your husband wants you to be educated, he wants you to integrate?" She went, "he just said there was no need for me to go, I have got enough degrees, so my

father's paid for it, and now I can go and do that". And I'm thinking, he's controlling, yeah he might not be physically abusive, but he's controlling her life and every time she makes her friends he moves her away. And now he just wants her to set up a business online teaching Thai women English, so that she's isolated and she's just in the house for him, because he said, "you shouldn't need any more than me, I should be enough for you, and if you love me, I would be enough". So she said, "I'm being very selfish to my husband, I'm not respecting him". She was saying "I'm very isolated, I haven't been back to Thailand, with Covid, for four years now, he's saying I don't need to go back". But she said, "I need to see my parents, my father's not well, my father's paying for my degree", and she said, "it's just like, but I understand he should be enough". And I'm thinking, this is controlling, you know? And obviously for her, she just sees it as being disrespectful to him because of the culture she's from as well.

[00:42:15] **Sarah:** Yeah, I was going to ask you about the cultural differences. We've got a lot of, as we've already recognised in this conversation, it's very difficult to understand those domains around coercive control and things like that. Did you note any cultural differences in understanding and responding to domestic abuse?

[00:42:31] **Angie:** In terms of the Thai, yes, very respectful to their husbands, there was no mention of equality, they knew their role was in the house. They knew their role was to do the house, to clean the house, it was very traditional in terms of what they saw there was, and they should be grateful for that ...

[00:42:48] **Lesley:** Was that part of what was being sought in the relationship? Or have you not looked into that?

[00:42:52] **Angie:** I haven't really looked into that, to be honest. But it's a good question because it might be something I can carry forward as I go, because I've got more to do, you know? So to see what their ideal thoughts were of what their relationship would be when they came here. But some of them were looking for jobs, and they said there are barriers, because one lady got a job in a call centre, and she said he let her try it to see how she went, but she left because the men in the call centre were saying "we love Thai women, Thai women are very sexy, can you match us up with your friends, are you from the sex tourism?" She says, "no, no, I'm not", and she said they just didn't believe me. She said the innuendo was, and the language, so she left after three weeks. And the other two women said, the Job Centre just said "nothing for

you, love in here", was the words one of them had come out with. For a Thai woman to come out with that it was something she obviously heard. And she said, whenever you go, they just ask if you're from the sex industry, are you a prostitute? She said, "so that's that stigma of the sex tourism", it's following them around, and I think that isolation where people won't talk to them in the street, their neighbours just sort of look at them and don't want them to integrate, I think that's that stigma that's come from Thailand.

[00:44:04] **Sarah:** This research sounds like, I mean you said it's under-researched, under-explored, it's not really known about, you're finding some really important and really troubling things with this project. I know it's early days, because you're still data collecting, but what do you think are the key responses that are needed?

[00:44:24] **Angie:** I think we definitely need some follow up from Government. With migratory marriage they're allowing women to come in who are unknown to the men, they're marrying through an agency, there needs to be some monitoring of these agencies. America's already putting this in place because of the number of deaths of Thai women who married.

[00:44:44] **Sarah:** Domestic homicides?

[00:44:45] **Angie:** One guy, six women he married, there were no checks on him, obviously it's now serial killing because they've been buried around his property. And I think for us in the UK we need to be learning these lessons. And Germany's done a lot of work around it, Finland, Norway, it's just...

[00:45:03] **Sarah:** So there are policy responses in other countries that we could learn and draw from?

[00:45:05] **Angie:** In other countries, Europe, that I'm picking up on. But I think we need to monitor that. How have you met this person? And if they're coming in from an agency, then surely we have some duty of care to check that they are registered with GPs, that they are with dentists, that they are seeking medical help and that there's some type of monitoring because they're so dispersed.

[00:45:25] **Lesley:** It's not just going to be Thai women, is it?

[00:45:28] **Angie:** No, it's got to be other, Chinese, maybe other nationalities.

[00:45:32] **Lesley:** It's got to be bigger than just that particular group, hasn't it? And it does feel like, I just get surprised at times. like why is this a shock? Why have we not got something in place? Do you think there's assumptions there around, oh, well therefore it's a choice.

[00:45:51] **Angie:** It's a choice, yeah.

[00:45:52] **Lesley:** It's a choice and therefore there is no responsibility.

[00:45:54] **Angie:** Yeah. And I think traditionally people would think, well, she's put herself in that position, she's married him, she should have known, you know, she's married him for the money type of thing. Which is wrong in most occasions, because most women are forced into that, it's not a free choice, you know, unless they are fleeing the sex tourist industry. And a lot of them I've spoken to now have masseurs around the city because they've found they've had to set themselves up in business, because it's the only job that people will accept them for. Which is astounding. And I'm not sure if practitioners have, and I know this is a third-sector agency that I was talking to who were supporting women, but they're probably the women who don't come to the attention of the types of social services because of the men's income, I think they've got to earn over a certain amount, they've got to be professional people who are marrying these women to have the thousands to pay these agencies to bring them in.

[00:46:42] **Lesley:** It tends to be a socioeconomic impact on those that become aware of, like the child protection side, that they're actually a lot of the more middle-income and educated people are not then seen in the same way. There's a lot of issues around that. So they won't be 'on the radar'. I'm thinking about the practitioners and I'm thinking they've got piles on their radar anyway, there's not enough resources, and there's not enough time and then support to do what they do anyway. But that doesn't excuse, as a society, that we're ignoring mm-hmm. You know, issues that are there.

[00:47:22] **Angie:** Yep, and I think the other thing is the men speaking for them. Because when one woman who, oh it's horrendous. I don't know how she's still alive to be honest, but she was going to the doctors, but he wouldn't allow her to speak, he had to do all the talking, so she couldn't when she was going for help. And she's now had to have a total hysterectomy because of injuries, and she's suffering, and it's this thing, surely the hospitals have got a

duty to step in, they must understand, they must think there's something wrong.

[00:47:53] **Sarah:** How is it not being seen?

[00:47:55] **Angie:** I know, I really don't know, I really don't know.

[00:47:57] **Sarah:** Because those questions should be getting asked, right?

[00:48:00] **Angie:** Yeah, she's now with a refuge. Yeah.

[00:48:02] **Sarah:** In terms of contacted services, particularly if she's coming in with injuries. Mm-hmm.

[00:48:06] **Angie:** And this is what I'm questioning, is it this 'Thai bride scenario'?

[00:48:09] **Lesley:** Yeah, is there like a perception of it?

[00:48:10] **Angie:** Is there a perception there, is it because these international marriage bureaus are all set up now, I don't know how they're viewing this in terms of that.

[00:48:19] **Lesley:** Obviously there's something happening that means they're not seeing that if it was another, like if it was a local couple, that maybe they would look at it differently. Is there something that's not triggering the questions?

[00:48:36] **Angie:** The women think it's because they're viewed as a prostitute.

[00:48:39] **Lesley:** Right, okay.

[00:48:40] **Angie:** That's just the women's views.

[00:48:42] **Sarah:** So their views, their experiences are disregarded.

[00:48:45] **Angie:** And how they're spoken to, looked at in the street. And the woman who was educated, her family, another member of his family married a Thai woman through a marriage bureau, and she *was* from the sex industry. So they're just assuming she says, "no, I wasn't, and I'm educated", they said, "no,

no, you're obviously not, you're obviously from that background, but you've got this persona of yourself". And she said, "no, no", she says, "so they don't believe me", so she says, "it's pointless really", she says, "because it's the stigma that sticks". And I think that's really awful, because a lot of our Universities have Thai communities, you know, there's people here studying who marry and stay here. And a lot of it they still bring up the Little Britain sketch of the Thai bride, and how that's stuck with people traditionally. And I think, as I say, this is early days, and I didn't go looking for domestic violence, but this is what's jumping out, for everyone I've done there's not one who hasn't got some experience of it.

[00:49:41] **Lesley:** Wow.

[00:49:42] **Sarah:** Wow. There's a lot of work to be done around that.

[00:49:44] **Lesley:** It's huge. It's like you've just opened it all up. I mean, it's important, with what you're doing, that you do open that up, and I suppose that's then why these are quite helpful as well, to do a podcast on it, in order to sort of share with, hopefully our two listeners that we think we've got...

[00:50:02] **Sarah:** Maybe three this year.

[00:50:03] **Lesley:** Maybe three, yeah, you've gone up. But yeah, actually we just want people to hear, we're not necessarily coming up with solutions, but we're coming up with awareness raising of this, and I think these kind of things, to me that's part of what we're doing as well, because that's new from a research perspective, it'd be really interesting to hear from people if they're seeing this in practice, are they seeing an increase in this area, or is it just something that they're not seeing at all because it's then not getting through to them?

[00:50:33] **Angie:** Or they're not looking at it.

[00:50:34] **Lesley:** Yeah, yeah, or they don't just, it's not on their radar.

[00:50:37] **Angie:** But it'll be interesting when I do get eventually done and written up to come back and see what comes out it and talk about our residents and I've got a new point of research from yourself.

[00:50:46] **Sarah:** Yeah, brilliant. I'm conscious of the time and how long we've been talking for, but I do have another question, perhaps the finishing one unless Lesley's got more?

[00:50:56] **Lesley:** I'm looking at my little notes.

[00:50:58] **Sarah:** But just given these two projects, and thinking about your learning across both of them, what do you think the key messages for practice are?

[00:51:07] **Angie:** Very difficult actually. I think we've touched on some of it when we've talked about the coercive harms with how we perceive it and bias, but I think we need to do more with Local Authorities and Governments as well to try and raise the issue of it. And they'll need more resources. I think we can't, I think everywhere at the moment, given the position we're at in terms of a country and austerity, that we know a lot of the third-sector agencies on the ground do brilliant work, and they're the women who probably reach out to initially, and I think we need a greater focus on that, we need more funding for that, but we need to raise awareness much more. And I think, I mean, you said Lesley that their case loads are huge, they physically can't take on anymore, but we have to if we want to help these people. And the more we raise an awareness, the more issues we're becoming aware of, is how do we actually deal and manage with all of these case loads? And I feel for practitioners today, to be honest, given everything they've got to face, but yes, coercive control is vital and it's key because it underpins a lot of violence, but it's prevention, isn't it? How do we get in to prevent that in the first place? And I think it comes back to awareness raising.

[00:52:14] **Lesley:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:52:15] **Sarah:** That's definitely a starting point, isn't it? Because if people are not aware of the issue then no resources are going to be channelled towards it anyway. So it's got to be the start of it, hasn't it?

[00:52:26] **Angie:** Yeah. And I think Local Authorities could do a lot more. Who we've got living in our area. Who have we got? Who's just moved into our area? The Government, this woman's gone to live at this address. We'll link in with services, even if they employed a couple of people just to do wellbeing checks, you know, we've got these people new to the area, I'll look at the doctors. And we've got these, doctors are employing life coaches, so the new,

what's the model that's gone out of my head? Social prescribing. Linking with these women just to make sure they have got access to what they need, they're not being isolated in the home. I think there's some way to go in terms of that.

[00:53:00] **Lesley:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:53:01] **Sarah:** Thank you. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about today?

[00:53:05] **Angie:** No, thank you, I think I've enjoyed it, and it helped to talk about the Thai stuff because I've got a lot of things going on in my head now that I think I need to go away and write down as well. Yeah, yeah. So thank you.

[00:53:15] **Sarah:** Thank you so much, Angie.

[00:53:17] **Angie:** No, thank you.

[00:53:17] **Sarah:** For coming in and talking to us again about your research. It's so important what you're doing and we look forward to hearing more about it as it develops as well.

[00:53:25] **Angie:** Thanks very much. Thank you.

[00:53:26] **Lesley:** Thank you very much.

[00:53:28] **Sarah:** Thank you.

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[00:53:28] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:53:36] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:53:46] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you

want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

[00:53:59] **Sarah:** See you all next time.

[00:54:01] **Lesley:** Bye.