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Title: “They have no right to safety and protection”: Brexit, Eastern European women in the UK and domestic abuse

Author name(s) and affiliation(s):

Carrie Phillips

University of Sunderland, UK

Julia Wysocka

International Community Organisation of Sunderland, UK

Dr Louise Harvey-Golding

University of Sunderland, UK

Dr Diane Simpson

University of Sunderland, UK

Michal Chantkowski

International Community Organisation of Sunderland, UK

Abstract:

Domestic abuse is a prevalent form of violence against women in the UK. Migrant women living in the UK often face an increased risk of domestic abuse, as well as barriers to accessing support to end this abuse, due to multiple intersecting disadvantages. These disadvantages can include lack of social support, precarious immigration and under-employment. In the wake of Brexit, the immigration status of migrants from EU countries has become precarious, and evidence of the consequences of this change in status are now emerging. This study forms part of a larger research project examining the lived experiences of Eastern European migrant women living in North East England, and the agencies that support them. Data were gathered during small group interviews with Eastern European migrant women from EU countries (n=6) and interviews with staff from local voluntary agencies (n=3). Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework. Findings highlight how barriers to accessing domestic abuse support services have increased in the wake of Brexit, yet these women are often invisible to services. Our research offers empirical

evidence about ‘intersectional invisibility’ through a narrative exploring the recent history of changing immigration status for a group of EU citizens living in the UK.

Key words/short phrases:

Brexit, domestic abuse, Eastern Europe, intersectionality, women

Word count: 8960 (with references) / 7574 (without references)

Key messages

1. Eastern European women in the UK often face multiple intersecting dimensions of disadvantage (for example language, socio-economic precarity, lack of social support).
2. Eastern European women from countries in the European Union have faced additional barriers to accessing support since Brexit and the requirements of the EU Settlement Scheme have left increased numbers of women at risk of domestic abuse, or unable to leave an abusive relationship.
3. Statutory services fail to recognise that Eastern European women have different needs to the majority White British population of the UK, but also that they may have different needs to other minoritised women.
4. The Russian invasion of Ukraine increases the urgency of these issues, as visas have been issues to Ukrainian nationals for an initial period of three years and their status beyond that time is not yet decided.

1. Introduction

This paper presents primary research concerning migration status as an intersectional factor impacting the ability of some women to seek and obtain support as a victim-survivor of domestic abuse. Specifically, we explore some of the consequences of the UK’s exit from the European Union (EU) for migrant women from Eastern European EU member states. The EU is an economic and political agreement between 27 countries in the continent of Europe (European Commission, 2022). Citizens of EU member states have the right to free movement, which includes the right to live and work in any other EU member country. The United Kingdom (UK) was a member of the EU, however on 31st January 2020 the UK severed economic and political ties with the other EU member states, in an event known as ‘Brexit’. Brexit has had a direct impact on EU citizens living in the UK as, with the

exception of Irish citizens, migrants from the EU are now subject to increased immigration control (Cabinet Office & Home Office, 2022; UK Government, 2020).

Intersectionality draws attention to the way in which discrimination is often considered in terms of a single hierarchy (for example gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, class) in a way that cannot account for the lived experience of those who experience multiple dimensions of disadvantage, for example Black women (Carbado, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality has been used to understand the differing ways in which individuals experience domestic abuse and access to support services, taking into account the complex and multiple identities that make up the individual (Anitha & Gill, 2022; Chowbey, 2016; Gangoli et al., 2020; Thiara & Roy, 2022; Voolma, 2018). Alongside individual characteristics such as ethnicity, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, or age, migration status forms one of many complex factors that can intersect to create multiple disadvantage for an individual seeking support (Anitha, 2019; Gangoli et al., 2020; Voolma, 2018; Yong, 2023).

This paper provides empirical evidence about what Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008, p378) call '*intersectional invisibility*', the tendency for individuals with multiple marginalised identities to fall between the gaps of research, advocacy and legislation. In this context, '*prototypicality*' refers to the expectations raised by a particular label (Hudson et al., 2024, p9). In the global North, the prototypical person is a white, heterosexual, male, and therefore in the absence of further information, the prototypical LGBTQ+ person for example is still white and male (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Individuals who diverge from the prototypical member of the group in more than one way are therefore rendered socially invisible (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach (2008) explicitly focus on three intersectional dimensions of identity (race, gender and sexuality), providing an intersectional lens through which to understand the dynamics of power, exclusion, invisibility and discrimination. However, they accept these three identities provide a '*narrow focus*' (p389) and identify a number of other possible identities which could contribute to intersectional invisibility. Subsequent authors have expanded consideration of multiple marginalized identities to include disability (Olkin et al., 2019), socio-economic class (Remedios & Snyder, 2018), and immigration status (Yong, 2023), and here we seek to add to these extended understandings of intersectional invisibility.

1.1 Brexit and Eastern European migrants

‘Eastern Europe’ is a contested geopolitical, cultural and social construct, yet one that persists in reference to a heterogeneous group of countries located in the geographical east of the continent of Europe, (very) loosely linked by a century of Soviet communism and emergent capitalism (Parvulescu, 2019). More recently in the UK, the concept of Eastern Europe has been linked to the A8 and A2 members of the European Union (EU), ten countries¹ that joined the EU between 2004 and 2007. Public and political fears of mass immigration to the UK from these countries resulted in initial restrictions on the right to work for A8 and A2 citizens (until 2011 and 2014 respectively), which were not applied to other new EU members. Evidence from the years immediately following the accession of the A8 and A2 countries was of lower-than-predicted levels of migration and of a net benefit to the UK economy (Dustmann et al., 2010; Nygaard et al., 2013). Never-the-less, migration has remained one of the leading policy concerns of the UK government, which has legislated to reduce illegal immigration (*Illegal Migration Act 2023*) and taken measures to reduce legal immigration (Home Office, 2024).

In 2016, a referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU) was held. The result was narrowly in favour of the UK leaving the EU, and reducing immigration was one of the drivers of the public vote (Ipsos MORI, 2016). Following Brexit, EU citizens can apply for ‘settled status’ in the UK after having lived there for at least five consecutive years (UK Government, 2020). Eastern European migrants from EU countries had the right to live and work in the UK but are now at risk of failing to secure their status in the UK (Elfving & Marcinkowska, 2021; Yong, 2023). This means having no recourse to public funds (UK Government, 2020), that is they are excluded from receiving welfare benefits, housing or other public services because of their immigration status, under the *Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*. Policies that restrict access to public services to those who can prove ‘ties that count’ (employment, family), rather than ‘ties that bind’ (feelings of belonging, emotional attachments) (Sotkasiira & Gawlewicz, 2021) can leave women unable to leave abusive relationships due to an inability to prove these ties.

1.2 Domestic abuse and migration in the UK

UK legislation concerning domestic abuse offences and care of victim-survivors has undergone recent change with the introduction of the *Domestic Abuse Act 2021*. Before this

Act was passed, preparatory documents such as the *Domestic Abuse Draft Statutory Guidance Framework* (Home Office, 2021a) explicitly recognised intersectionality by including a chapter on the intersectional nature of domestic abuse and characteristics of perpetrator and victim-survivor. These factors include immigration status, language, economic dependence, community pressures and shame (Home Office, 2021a), all of which may pose additional barriers to seeking support. While many of these factors may also impact White British women, they are more likely to have a significant impact on minoritised women (Chantler & Thiara, 2017), including EU migrants. Significantly, the finalised issue of the *Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance* (Home Office, 2022) has removed explicit reference to intersectionality, and has instead incorporated examples of challenges faced by minoritised groups into the chapter on *Recognising Domestic Abuse* (Home Office, 2022, pp 28-47). Examples include exploitation of insecure immigration status as a form of control, and interference with immigration status to create economic dependence, both issues now potentially faced by migrant women from EU countries.

In ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Council of Europe, 2011), the UK Government has included a reservation on Article 59, which concerns securing the residence status of migrant victim-survivors of domestic abuse (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022). The *Domestic Abuse Draft Statutory Guidance Framework* (Home Office, 2021a, p44) asserted; '*If a victim is referred to the Home Office by the police then the Home Office can help the individual to regularise their status and provide support.*' However, the finalised version of the *Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance* (Home Office, 2022) removed this statement and instead refers to possible routes to regularised immigration status that may not be available to every applicant. Concerns about information regarding victim-survivors and witnesses to crime being used by the Home Office for the purpose of

immigration control has been the subject of a super-complaint (Liberty & Southall Black Sisters, 2018) and review (Home Office, 2021b). Information-sharing between police and the Home Office continues and irregular immigration status continues to be a barrier to victim-survivors of domestic abuse leaving an abusive relationship or reporting the abuse as a crime (Chantler & Thiara, 2017; Latin American Women's Rights Service et al., 2022; Schutes & Walker, 2018; Voolma, 2018).

While the ONS publishes data on domestic abuse and victim-survivor characteristics, including ethnicity (ONS, 2022), this data does not contain sufficient detail to draw any conclusions about prevalence of domestic abuse experienced by EU migrants to the UK. In part, this is because ethnicity is defined in ONS data as White, Asian, Black, Mixed, or other, and does not differentiate according to nationality. In addition, ethnicity is not necessarily a discrete variable, and EU migrants may variously be categorised (or categorise themselves) as White, European, mixed, other, and so on (Fox et al., 2015; Parvulescu, 2019; Borkowska et al., 2023). ONS data also contains information about dimensions of identity, such as the sex of victim-survivors and perpetrators, and prevalence by geographical area, but not about social class or socioeconomic status, and therefore these statistics cannot illuminate experiences of multiple structural disadvantages in a way that leads to an intersectional understanding of domestic abuse.

1.3 Existing Literature

As Brexit took effect in 2020, research looking at the impact on EU migrants is only now emerging. As far as the authors are aware, no post-Brexit empirical studies concerning the impact of Brexit on help-seeking for EU migrant victim-survivors of domestic abuse in the UK have yet been published. After the referendum however, concerns were noted about the complexity of the EUSS (Elfving & Marcinkowska, 2021), that the EUSS would have a

gendered impact, that women would be less likely to meet the conditions of the scheme (Shutes & Walker, 2018; Duda-Mikulin, 2020) and that the experience of domestic abuse would increase this impact (Shutes & Walker, 2018; Sumption & Kone, 2018; Yong, 2023).

More generally, migration status can significantly negatively impact victim-survivors of domestic abuse, through weaponized use of insecure immigration status by the perpetrator (Bredal, 2022; Gangoli et al., 2020; Vasil & Segrave, 2024), by inadequate legislative protections for victim-survivors of domestic abuse who do not have an established right to remain in their country of residence (Gangoli et al., 2020; Graca, 2017; Stoyanova, 2018), or through a fear (whether realized or not) that reporting abuse to the appropriate authorities would lead to deportation (Voolma, 2018).

Furthermore, insecure migration status intersects with other characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and fluency in the local language, to compound the difficulties that victim-survivors may face when trying to access support (Anitha, 2019; Tipton, 2017; Voolma, 2018). EU migrant women are likely to be under-employed (Přivara et al., 2019) and may not be fluent in English, and newly-insecure immigration status caused by Brexit intersects with these existing factors to increase the difficulties these women face if seeking support around domestic abuse. We explore the recent history of EU migrants to the UK renegotiating their immigration status when accessing domestic abuse support services, and argue that Eastern European migrant women from EU countries are invisible to domestic abuse support services, due to intersectional invisibility.

2. Methods

Two members of our research team work for a voluntary agency supporting migrants to the UK. They observed that many of the people they support, in particular Eastern European migrant women, were reporting significant difficulties accessing statutory agencies. The

voluntary agency commissioned a local university to work jointly on a project to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the lived experience of Eastern European migrant women living in North East England, including their experiences and concerns in relation to hate crime and discrimination, and their wider needs in relation to local services. The project was then widened to include various support services in the statutory and voluntary sector, inviting them to share their observations about the services provided to Eastern European migrant women.

Firstly, an online survey was developed to gather descriptive statistics and initial qualitative information from women living in North East England who identified themselves as Eastern European migrants. The survey contained questions about experiences of hate crime, discrimination and access to services, and the resulting findings about discrimination and violence outside of the home are reported elsewhere (Harvey-Golding et al., 2024).

In the second phase, a framework for small group interviews was developed, with broad open questions about experiences of discrimination, hate crime, and access to services.

Interviewees were identified by asking survey respondents if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. In the event, all of the participants were originally from EU countries (Poland and Bulgaria), and changes due to Brexit were of significant concern to the interviewees, hence the focus of this paper.

To also elicit the views of service providers, 22 local voluntary and statutory services were purposively sampled and invited to take part in interviews. Purposive sampling enables participants to be chosen who 'best fit' who the researcher wants to speak to (Clark et al., 2021). Again, an interview framework was developed using open questions about the work the agencies did and their observations about support provided to Eastern European migrant women.

All interviews took place via Microsoft Teams (due to Covid-19 restrictions) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted around 1 hour each. Transcripts were read and analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis (familiarisation, coding, seeking themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and seeking exemplars). Two researchers facilitated small group interviews with the women who volunteered for interviews, and one of these researchers transcribed and coded these transcripts. Another researcher carried out interviews with service providers, transcribed and coded these transcripts. Researchers then worked together to further develop themes and sub-themes through a process of reflexive reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying repeating patterns and differences between respondents.

In this paper, we explore some of the themes that emerged in the interviews, that is domestic abuse, and specifically how Eastern European migrant women from EU countries have experienced simultaneous minoritisation and invisibility, and the change of immigration status brought about by Brexit, when seeking support. Interviewees spoke about barriers to formal support in the form of interpreters; access to social support; discrimination from services; and the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU). The change in immigration status of migrants from A8 and A2 countries has exposed hitherto unseen gaps in the services available to a largely invisible minority within the UK.

2.1 Positionality

Within the research team there was a mix of gender (five women, one man), nationality (two Polish, three British, one British-Irish), and experiences as service users and as professionals (across voluntary and statutory services, and in higher education). This is significant because the heterogenous experiences of the group helped to illuminate different aspects of the data from insider, outsider and partial-insider status (Berger, 2015).

2.2 Participants

All participants have been given pseudonyms. A final sample of $n=6$ migrant women who self-defined as Eastern European agreed to take part in 3 small group interviews (2 participants per interview). The women were Magda, Alicja, Viktoriya, Lena, Natalia, and Ilona. Five of the women were originally from Poland and one was from Bulgaria. The mean length of residence in the UK was 13 years (range 5 to 20 years). Individual pseudonyms have not been linked with nationality or length of residence, to preserve anonymity. While interpreting support was offered, all participants were confident in speaking English and declined this support. Their experiences therefore may not reflect those women who have been in the UK for a shorter period of time, are less fluent or less confident speaking English, or who come from other countries in Eastern Europe. While the majority of Eastern European migrants to North East England are originally from Poland, our research appears to underrepresent significant populations, particularly women from Romania.

Following purposive sampling via email invitation, a final sample of $n=4$ participants from three local voluntary agencies agreed to take part in two individual interviews and one small group interview. The group consisted of two members of staff from one service provider, who preferred to be interviewed together due to a self-expressed lack of confidence in their own knowledge. Interviews took place August - October 2021. The fact that no statutory services agreed to take part is a limitation of this study, as the researchers had wanted to hear from a wider range of service providers.

Service Provider 1 provides support for local migrants of any background, focusing on social support, advice, and signposting to other services (community worker Eva).

Service Provider 2 provides targeted support to minoritised women, including advocacy and services for women who are victim-survivors of domestic abuse (advocacy manager Anita).

Service Provider 3 provides services for all victim-survivors of domestic abuse (support workers Sarah and Christine).

2.3 Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of Sunderland ethics committee. To ensure valid consent from participants who may not speak fluent English, consent and information sheets were available in multiple languages, and interpreters were available to support group interviews if required. All participants provided written consent and were reminded that they could withdraw their consent at any time up to transcription and anonymising of their contributions.

3. Findings

3.1 Access to support

The women described difficulties in accessing support services that they attributed to their changing status in the UK following the Brexit vote, although some were uncertain about whether to frame these experiences as discrimination. All the service providers described supporting migrant women from Eastern Europe who were experiencing domestic abuse, and described barriers or experiences that they felt were different for Eastern European migrant women as compared to White British women, *and* as compared to other minoritised women.

3.1.1 Language and interpreting

Language and access to interpreters was a significant concern. Service providers described a lack of access to interpreting services, especially in urgent situations. Family or friends were sometimes asked to interpret, something which the women also agreed was both commonplace and inappropriate:

'Obviously if it's domestic violence, sometimes you don't want your family to be involved in it because they could take sides, but it's just like a kind of probably normal way of doing things. So we wanted to have someone who is impartial in this situation...how does it work for both sides, how much you'll lose actually in interpretation, 'cause that's another problem. That's a lot of things which could be read from body language and everything.'

Alicja

Service providers raised concerns that, often, the interpreter assigned to support a meeting was already known to the service user, or that service users would be worried about disclosing personal details to someone from the same community. This was a particular concern in relation to sensitive information such as a disclosure of domestic abuse where there might be concerns about impartiality of the interpreter:

'We regularly get women talking about like, fear of confidentiality and interpreters potentially being a part of the Eastern European community, particularly in [local area], are very close-knit, and there is a fear that information might get out to the wider community, and we find that actually impinges on women disclosing the full extent of the abuse that they're experienced... there's still that fear that actually they're from the same communities, they might be making judgements about what I'm disclosing.'

Anita, Service Provider 2

The dynamics of a three-way conversation are also more difficult than speaking on a one-to-one basis, particularly when using a telephone interpreting service.

The women talked about service providers making assumptions about their fluency in English, which was a source of frustration, for example:

'Once I had the midwife ringing me, I'm speaking, I'm speaking right now and she kept asking me if I need a translator. No, you need a translator pet! She must have asked about five times, and five times I replied, no, I translate myself, but as my job.'

Ilona

However, communication in a second or additional language can become more difficult at times of heightened stress:

'The police are pushed for time and I think that language barrier, particularly it might come through, they're "in the moment" incidences, where the woman has got heightened anxiety, she's got the language barrier, she's got male police officers standing in front of her and she doesn't know that system.'

Sarah, service provider 3

Sarah and Christine went on to describe situations where they had experienced difficulties in following up actions with the police, due to being unclear about what exactly had been said. Interpreting serves an important function for service providers seeking clarity and specificity that may be better expressed in the service users' first language, but raising the possibility of involving an interpreter can be a sensitive question when an individual generally speaks fluent English. Multi-lingual ability can obscure communication needs, either by alienating women who feel their abilities are underestimated, or by missing important information by overestimating the precision of what is being communicated.

3.1.2 Social support

Another concern was the lack of social support, particularly when a woman has moved to the UK while family and friends are back in their country of origin. Sarah and Christine described some of the women they supported moving to the UK on their own, or with just

their partner and children, and this made it much more difficult for them to draw on social support when trying to leave an abusive relationship. For example:

‘When social workers want [contact] between the dad and the child (I’m going to refer to the perpetrators as dad most the time) and when mum who’s working with us doesn’t have any other friends or family network in the UK, you haven’t got that third party they can rely on to do that contact so that makes it extremely hard for them.’

Christine, service provider 3

Voluntary services go some way towards helping women to make new social connections, by providing opportunities to meet people who speak the same first language, who have similar experiences in terms of moving to the UK and supporting each other with information-sharing:

‘The women’s group is kind of a space for, they can still meet new people who speak the same language as them, so that’s the way how it reduces isolation, loneliness for them. There has been some women who, you know, who speak English quite well but it’s just been a way for them to meet other peers and kind of support each other.’

Eva, service provider 1

Some women who had lived in the UK for many years described no longer spending much time with other women from their country of origin, but they did talk about how useful it was to have those connections when they first moved to the UK. They described having a local community of Eastern European migrants helped them to share information about services and sources of support:

'I think that's where you get, usually, information from your friends and then you just build like a support group around yourself... I'm not sure if it's still working like that 'cause I'm not so much around Polish community at the moment.'

Alicja

A further consequence of Brexit and the end of free movement between the UK and the EU is that fewer EU nationals move to the UK, and there is therefore a loss of these initial informal supports for newer migrants.

3.2 Discrimination in domestic abuse service provision

Service providers recognised both direct and indirect discrimination (as defined by the *Equality Act 2010*) within domestic abuse services. Eva described supporting a young woman living in a refuge, who reported that she was treated differently to the White British women at the refuge.

The women highlighted the impact of skin colour and accent on how they are treated, by both public and professionals. For example, Viktoriya spoke about reporting harassment to the police, and feeling like she could at times be minoritised by members of the public due to her accent, but simultaneously that minoritisation be rendered invisible to the authorities due to her skin colour:

'I think skin colour is a big issue as well, I think because we see it as White, very similar to what the English skin colour is....Uhm, I think because they see us as White they think, well, you're not really being discriminated against.... they can't be bothered or they're not taking it as seriously because she's blue-eyed blonde hair... so when she's reporting hate crime or racism, they're going, what racism?'

Viktoriya

Viktoria's difficulties in trying to report a hate-crime describe how she is not a proto-typical victim of racism, in the minds of the police service, on account of her skin colour. Other people perceive her as White, and therefore they cannot easily understand that she has experienced a racially motivated hate-crime. Furthermore, some participants appeared to have internalised these perceptions of what racism is and whether their experiences could be said to amount of discrimination or hate crime.

While Viktoriya's example was about reporting hate crime rather than domestic abuse, the invisibility of EU migrants as a minoritised group was also a concern for the service providers. Anita described a lack of understanding, on the part of statutory services, of risks faced by some women due to assumptions about how domestic abuse manifests in different cultural or ethnic groups. She referred to the perception that abuse such as forced marriage occurs in South Asian cultures, and this leads to stereotyping of women of South Asian heritage, but also to an underestimation of risk to other women who do not fit the profile that support services expect:

'For many of the women that we work with from Eastern European communities, we observe the same sort of patterns of violence that we would maybe observe in other communities... but often when we're engaging with statutory services, that identification and that risk is not assessed properly because it's not seen to be a type of abuse that would happen within those communities and they're not given the necessary support that they need.'

Anita, service provider 2

Anita spoke about the importance of representation and how people often find it easier to seek support from services staffed by people from a similar background. She recognised that her organisation, supporting minoritised women, did not at that time employ anyone from

Eastern Europe or of Eastern European heritage. Eva also recognised the importance of visibility and familiarity when seeking to support migrant women:

'I realised that many women actually, at first they would message me over Facebook, they'd be like "would you be able to help me with this? I've got this kind of problem", maybe because I'm a trusted person in the community, and they don't know where to look for support.'

Eva, service provider 1

Recognition of abusive behaviour such as coercive control may also be dependent on social constructions, as Magda explained in the context of her majority-Catholic home in Poland:

'Our culture is like a patriarchal culture and women are supporting them. Polish and Slavic women's supporting because many of them are under the boot of men and are doing what [the men] want. I'm not saying that all of them, but I'm saying that I know plenty of women here ...15 years here and they still don't speak English, they are still not working because their husband is working and that just showing that we are like easy to be under a man's shoe.'

Magda

3.3 The impact of Brexit

Brexit was felt to be a significant event by the women interviewed, and while they did not mention access to domestic abuse support services specifically, they did talk about increased barriers to accessing things like healthcare, or the difficulties of applying to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). Some women were reluctant to call this discrimination

'The thing is, I wouldn't call it discrimination. I think there's just confusion because I felt like they, I don't know, I'm just trying to like the benefit of the doubt.... but I kept on being asked [for documentation] just because I wasn't British or like from UK.'

Lena

Some women experienced the paradoxical situation of being sent correspondence to their home address, requesting proof of their home address:

*'We had the proof of the address from National Insurance Number because they are sending me the letter. But that's not a proof of the address. Was like sorry, you need a letter but not **this** letter.'*

Natalia

Difficulty in obtaining documents for applications to the EUSS could be compounded by domestic abuse. Women may have moved in and out of refuges and so could not provide utility bills for example. Abusive partners may have restricted their employment, or may have taken passports or identity cards, limiting the women's ability to leave an abusive relationship, or causing them severe hardship if they were able to leave. As Anita summed up:

'Our biggest concern, something that's regularly coming from the women we work with is the impact of Brexit and the Settlement Scheme, and how that interlinks with the hostile environment, and knowing that Brexit is going to create a whole new category of women that have no recourse to public funds, women that have absolutely no status in the UK. We know that that's going to escalate the risk and the violence they're experiencing because, there's this perception that they have no status in the UK and therefore they have no right to safety and protection, from perpetrators and from services that regularly turn women away from refuges or from mainstream support.'

Anita, service provider 2

Providers described some women being told that their best option was to leave the UK, despite having lived in the UK for years and maybe having children born in the UK. The

women also spoke about the length of time it can take to apply for regularised status through the EUSS and the feeling of being in limbo during that time:

'Some people don't have [settled status] yet. They did apply. But they haven't received any decision yet on their settled status. And now they don't have access, they're not eligible for anything pretty much. They're ineligible for benefits. There are vulnerable. They can't apply because [the government] keep on asking for all this. So they're waiting for the status, but it's been taking two, three, four months, but during this time you can't even work if you don't have the status.'

Lena

4. Discussion

4.1 Eastern European migrant women are the same and different

Findings indicate that Eastern European migrant women from the EU can face different barriers to White British women when trying to access domestic abuse support services, most significantly in terms of access to interpreters and other support with communication.

However, these findings also indicated that they may also face different barriers to other minoritised women (for example those of a Black or Asian heritage) due to their perceived 'Whiteness', assumptions about their needs, and a self-perception that seeks to minimize or underplay the impact of the barriers. These barriers have changed as a result of Brexit and the complexity inherent in the EUSS.

Migrant women from A8 and A2 countries are at risk of becoming invisible to services, leaving them with unmet needs. Indeed, this invisibility was demonstrated by some of the difficulties we had in recruiting service providers for this research. Some services, particularly statutory services, felt unable to contribute to this research due to having 'nothing to say', that is, they either were not aware of supporting any migrant women from Eastern

Europe, or were not aware of any challenges faced by Eastern European migrant women in relation to their service. If services are not aware of their service users' needs, then they cannot begin to address the issues with access reported by participants in this study. The fact that two members of staff from one agency agreed to participate but chose to be interviewed together due to a lack of confidence is interesting in this context, because both participants contributed insights into the difficulties that are sometimes faced by migrant women seeking support around domestic abuse. In particular they were able to speak at some length about women they had supported from countries such as Poland, and the challenges that these women faced.

Intersectionality can help to explain some of these experiences, enabling us to map the multi-dimensional exclusion and precarity of Eastern European migrant women in the UK. Chantler and Thiara (2017) make a powerful argument for keeping intersectionality grounded in its Black feminist origins, and we would stress that many of our findings will not be news to anyone familiar with existing research around domestic abuse experienced by minoritised women who are visibly different to the White British majority. However, we would also argue that maintaining a focus only on visible difference obscures the needs of other women who may have the hidden disadvantages of socio-economic deprivation, insecure immigration status, English as a second or additional language, social isolation and anti-migration public sentiment, as predicted by intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Our research highlights the experiences of Eastern European migrant women as an invisible minority within UK society, and the impact of Brexit on those Eastern European migrant women from EU countries.

Carbado (2013) outlines the evolution of intersectionality and describes Crenshaw's original formulation as coming from a place where Black women were '*too similar to be different and too different to be the same*' (Carbado, 2013, p813) as women in general, or as Black people

in general. This is the crux of our argument – that Eastern European migrant women are considered to be *‘too similar to be different and too different to be the same’* as the majority White British population, but at the same time, they are *‘too similar to be different and too different to be the same’* as visible minorities in the UK, for example Black women. This leaves them invisible and underserved by both mainstream and by-and-for services.

4.2 Invisible dimensions of disadvantage

We will now go on to consider (some of) the dimensions that intersect to create the difficulties that Eastern European migrant women often face in relation to help-seeking for domestic abuse. The gendered nature of domestic abuse has already been explored extensively by numerous researchers and theorists, and the authors accept the evidence of the ONS (2022) – that domestic abuse can impact anyone regardless of sex, gender or sexuality, yet in intimate relationships, abuse of women by men is the most prevalent pattern.

Communication and English as a second or additional language was an area of disagreement between the women we interviewed, and the service providers. Some of the women felt that service providers make assumptions and underestimate their proficiency in English.

Addressing language proficiency can be a sensitive subject, particularly at times of heightened stress, however code-switching (sometimes speaking their first language and sometimes English) and inadequate interpretation can pose a significant risk that what a victim-survivor is trying to communicate is lost in translation (Gangoli et al., 2020; Tipton, 2017, 2021). Service providers gave examples where it had been more challenging to follow up on police actions due to being unclear as to exactly what the victim-survivor had been told. None of the interviewees felt the need for interpreting support, and in this respect they may represent a group of Eastern European migrants who are fluent or near-fluent in English, who can enact code-switching, and therefore effectively choose whether to identify themselves as majority English speakers, or minority (in the UK) speakers of their first

language. In this way, they are rendered invisible to services through an underestimation of interpreting needs at times of heightened stress, but also through potential overestimation of interpreting needs, which can lead to alienation.

Migration, insecure immigration status and political attitudes towards migrants were of significant concern to interviewees. Changes to the immigration status of EU migrants following Brexit was a source of disadvantage and precarity, and service providers spoke about women being told that their best option would be to return to their country of origin, even though they may have many practical and emotional ties to the UK. Fear of deportation can be a significant deterrent to women reaching out for support to leave an abusive relationship (Stoyanova, 2018; Voolma, 2018) and our research supports findings that EU migrants are experiencing similar concerns in the wake of Brexit (Schutes & Walker, 2018; Yong, 2023). Being advised to return home may represent a realisation of these fears, further deterring victim-survivors of domestic abuse from seeking support. While the Home Office (2022) states that reporting domestic abuse can be a route to support and regularisation of immigration status, the requirements of the EUSS can be difficult to fulfill for women leaving an abusive relationship. If women are unable to provide documentation needed to obtain settled status or are unable to obtain such documentation from a controlling partner or ex-partner, then their precarity and invisibility are increased (Schutes & Walker, 2018). The women we interviewed described their frustrations and worries about obtaining the 'correct' documentation for services. Our research therefore supports the contention that immigration policies such as the EUSS have a gendered impact that disadvantages women migrants (Schutes & Walker, 2018; Yong, 2023).

Related to migration were concerns about poverty and social isolation. Coercive control often includes controlling finances (Home Office, 2022; Postmus et al., 2012), and this lack of financial independence can be a significant barrier to leaving an abusive relationship (Anitha,

2019; Bostock et al., 2009; Postmus et al., 2012). Several studies have shown that Eastern European migrants to the UK tend to be underemployed as compared to their UK-born peers, Eastern European women are more likely to be responsible for childcare than Eastern European men, and are therefore more likely to be employed part-time or on zero-hours contracts (Duda-Mikulin, 2020; Guerenio-Omil et al., 2019; Khattab & Fox, 2016; Přívara et al., 2019; Shutes & Walker, 2018). Combined with under-employment, financial abuse may leave some Eastern European migrant women without access to a reliable source of income, further limiting their ability to end a relationship. Socio-economic class has been shown to intersect with other marginalised identities to increase intersectional invisibility (Remedios & Snyder, 2018).

Service providers reported that many women they support have moved to the UK alone and therefore lack family support and friendships, at least initially. While voluntary agencies were helpful in helping to establish networks and provide an opportunity for developing friendship and mutual support, much of this was disrupted due to Covid-19 restrictions (see also Anitha & Gill, 2022; Thiara & Roy, 2022). Participants also spoke about the importance of by-and-for services. These services have the potential to provide tailored support and to mitigate some of the difficulties faced by women when they access generalist domestic abuse support services (for example language needs or detailed understanding of immigration processes). Such agencies however need proper funding in order to work in partnership both with generalist support providers, and with the women they support, and these services have been eroded by more than ten years of neo-liberal policies (Chantler & Thiara, 2017). In addition, some consideration is needed around how representation or inclusion are achieved. If Eastern European EU migrant women experiencing multiple dimensions of disadvantage find it difficult to identify with the proto-typical 'woman', 'migrant' or 'victim-survivor', then it is difficult for them to feel confident about accessing services for these groups. The

women we interviewed found it difficult to frame their experiences in terms of discrimination, and furthermore when they did, they reported that services did not see their experiences as discrimination either. If services find it difficult to identify the needs of these women, then they more easily fall into the gaps between generalist and by-and-for services, again rendered invisible.

5. Limitations and areas for further research

The response rate from service providers was low (3 providers out of 22 approached), and two of the three services provided support specifically to victims and survivors of domestic abuse. This may have elevated the significance of concerns about domestic abuse as compared to the issues raised by the women we interviewed. However, domestic abuse was not specifically mentioned in the participant information sheets or interview frameworks, and the fact that service providers wanted to speak about the challenges they had in supporting or finding support for Eastern European migrant women is significant.

This study focuses on a small area of England, and some of the issues uncovered may not be as prevalent in areas with a greater Eastern European population, however significant areas of the UK have similar or lower percentages of population originally from Eastern Europe, and may recognise some of the concerns explored here, as may other countries with significant Eastern European migrant populations.

Like previous research, the majority of interviewees were from Poland. We made efforts to contact women of other nationalities, for example Romanian women, as well as Roma women (who face structural disadvantage across Europe (James, 2020; Schultz, 2012)), but unfortunately none responded to our invitations to interview. As noted above, none of the participants required English language support, and their experiences may not resonate with Eastern European migrant women who do not speak fluent English. Fluent or near-fluent

English will reduce many of the barriers to accessing support for domestic abuse, and therefore these concerns are likely under-emphasised by these findings.

Statutory services were invited to participate in interviews, but none were included in the final sample. Some services declined to participate on the grounds of insufficient time, and some were not included because the research team did not have the capacity to complete additional ethical applications within the timescale of the research project. However, as already discussed, some services declined to participate, stating that they do not support any Eastern European migrant women, or that they are not aware of any difficulties in their service supporting this group. This may, in itself, evidence the invisibility of Eastern European migrant women to both mainstream and by-and-for services. Future research should look at the provision of statutory services such as health, social care, education, or policing.

6. Conclusions

Eastern European migrant women from the EU form a small but significant minority in North East England, and indeed across the UK. They face challenges that are different to their White British peers, in terms of social connection and language support. They have also recently found themselves with potentially insecure immigration status. However, they are often not perceived, by themselves or service providers, as ‘different enough’ for dedicated services. As such they may fall into the gaps between mainstream generalist services, and specialist services targeted at minoritised women. They risk being invisible, and their specific needs missed.

Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach’s (2008) model of intersectional invisibility provided a useful framework through which to examine the experiences of Eastern European migrant women in the North East of England. Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach’s (2008) model focuses on the

intersectional impact of androcentrism, ethnocentrism and hetrocentrism, with multiple subordinate identities rendering individuals invisible. Our research extends this model of intersectional invisibility by demonstrating that gender, ethnicity, skin colour, language and migration status all form part of individual identities for Eastern European migrant women that render them non-prototypical and therefore invisible when accessing domestic abuse services. The concept of intersectional invisibility may therefore provide a way to articulate the needs of Eastern European migrant women to service providers to position these women within the purview of statutory services.

For these women to become visible, service providers need to provide a wider range of information translated into various languages. This may include information about domestic abuse support services, such as that provided in other settings such as GP clinics. Interpreting services need to be factored into funding calculations, including for statutory and voluntary service providers, to minimise the exclusion of minority and marginalised groups based on language.

By-and-for services need recognition as a complement and partner to generalist and statutory services, not as an alternative. Generalist services need a greater awareness of the rights of EU or other migrants with settled status, and, the authors would argue, a healthy skepticism when it comes to Home Office claims for the benefits of information-sharing about victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

These actions can only become more urgent given global unrest, including the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. As of July 2023, 182,800 Ukrainian nationals have arrived in the UK under various visa schemes (Home Office, 2023), and already concerns are being raised about exploitation of women and children coming to the UK (Elgot & Syal, 2022). Visas for Ukrainian nationals initially last 3 years, and an end to hostilities is likely to lead to public

and political expectation that Ukrainian migrants can safely 'return home'. However, the longer this conflict continues, the more likely it is that Ukrainian migrants will develop ties that bind them to the UK, and the more vexed the concept of 'home' becomes.

Finally, this research supports evidence that social policy concerning migration to the UK places many migrants at risk by making it more complex to leave an abusive relationship. The UK government needs to do more to support migrant victim-survivors of domestic abuse, by increasing access to language support; securing funding for by-and-for services as a complement to mainstream services; reducing ambiguity about who is and is not eligible for health and social care support; and sending clear and genuine messages to migrant victim-survivors of domestic abuse about what they can expect if they seek support from the authorities.

Notes

¹ The A8 countries are Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (accession to the EU 2004); the A2 countries are Bulgaria and Romania (accession to the EU 2007)

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