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Females perpetrating honour-based abuse: controllers, collaborators or coerced?

Abstract

Purpose

This paper addresses an emerging international debate about the involvement of females in perpetrating honour-based abuse (HBA). Presenting new empirical data, this study profiles the different roles played by women, discussing them in relation to gender and their relationships to victims, and argues that acknowledgement of female perpetrators does not fundamentally challenge a gendered interpretation of HBA.

Design/methodology/approach

Some 1,474 case files flagged as HBA were gathered from one police force in Southern England and 50 domestic abuse agencies across England and Wales. Descriptive statistics explored which victim, perpetrator and abuse characteristics were associated with female perpetration. Case narratives were thematically analysed to profile the different roles females played. Findings were explored in eight key informant interviews with caseworkers from the services data came from.

Findings

This paper finds that: (1) females are more involved in perpetrating HBA than other forms of domestic abuse, but primary perpetrators are still mostly male; (2) victims are overwhelmingly female; (3) the context for abuse is maintenance of patriarchal values on gender roles; (4) female perpetrator roles vary, meriting further exploration; and (5) female perpetrators can be conceptualised within a gendered framework.

Originality/value

This paper presents important new empirical data to advance the debate on the role of women in perpetrating HBA. Findings will be of interest to academics, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners alike.

Keywords

Honour-based violence

Forced marriage

Gender

Mother

Mother-in-law

Patriarchal bargain

Article classification

This is a research paper.

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Special Issue

This paper is particularly relevant to three aims of the journal special issue:

- Honour crimes from perspective of female and male perpetrators
- Victimisation
- Analysis of official (e.g. police) data

Honour-based abuse (HBA) is usually framed as a form of gender-based violence (Siddiqui, 2014). This is supported by empirical evidence, which shows HBA, in common with other forms of gender-based violence, most often involves female victims and male perpetrators (Hester *et al.*, 2015). However, the involvement of female family members in perpetrating HBA has been documented as a distinctive feature (Sen, 2005).

In the past couple of years there has been a fledgling but growing international debate about the role of women as perpetrators. A 2015 police inspection in the UK noted that female family members (in particular mothers and mothers-in-law) were quite frequently involved in carrying out or facilitating the abuse of (mostly) younger female family members (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), 2015). Recent empirical research has suggested that mothers, in particular, may play a more active role in perpetrating HBA than previously thought (Aplin, 2017).

This paper contributes to that debate. Presenting new empirical data, it profiles the different roles played by women in perpetrating HBA, discussing them in relation to gender and the relationships between female perpetrators and victims. It asks and answers four questions, in the context of England and Wales. Firstly, how common is female perpetration? Secondly, who are female perpetrators? Thirdly, what roles do women play in perpetrating abuse? Fourthly, can HBA still be conceptualised as gendered abuse?

Background

Female victims and female perpetrators

While HBA sometimes involves female perpetrators and male victims, the abuse is gendered as most victims are women and most perpetrators men (HMIC, 2015; Hester, 2013; Sen, 2005). In England and Wales, latest data from the Forced Marriage Unit showed that 80% of cases were female and 20% male (Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), 2016). Latest Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) data (for 2016-17) found that 72% of victims in HBA cases where gender was known were women, and 28% men (CPS, 2017). Kazimirski *et al.* (2009) found that 96% of victims of forced marriage were women, and 4% men.

Within an overarching violence against women lens, involvement of female perpetrators is often cited as a distinctive feature of HBA (Aplin, 2017; Her Majesty's Government (HMG), 2014; Sen, 2005). This poses a potential challenge with conceptualising and responding to HBA as a form of violence against women (Roberts *et al.*, 2014). Sen notes that "not only men but also women play a central role in ensuring that women adhere to gender norms [...] women

are key in ensuring these limits and can also be party to decisions to kill women” (Sen, 2005, p.50). In 2016-17, 86% of defendants in HBA prosecutions were men and 14% women. The equivalent figures for domestic abuse were 92% and 8% (CPS, 2017). While the perpetration of HBA crimes remains heavily gendered (men against female victims), women are more often involved than in cases of domestic abuse.

How might women’s involvement be explained?

Women have been involved in several high-profile ‘honour killings’. Some have played an active role—for instance the mother-in-law of Surjit Athwal. Surjit was a 26-year old British woman who disappeared in India during a visit in 1998; her husband Sukhdave and his mother Bachan were convicted by a UK court nine years later for her murder. In other cases, women’s roles seem to be more complex and the line between ‘perpetrator’ and something more akin to a ‘coerced victim’ blurred. For instance, the case of Tulay Goren, a British Kurdish girl who disappeared in 1999 from her home in London. During the trial of Tulay Goren’s father and uncle(s) for her murder it was shown that her mother, though on the face of it ‘colluding’ with the murder, was herself highly-controlled, severely abused and intimidated by her husband, who had attempted to kill her at least twice (Bingham, 2009). It was only the testimony of Tulay’s mother and sister which led to the conviction.

Thus, there may be questions over the extent to which women ‘perpetrators’ have an active choice in their actions. There may be nuances to their roles which have as yet been insufficiently explored—for example, might they be operating tacitly to mitigate or disrupt male-perpetrated violence within the family? Similarly complex roles negotiated by women are described by Giovannini (1987) who found that Sicilian girls meeting secret boyfriends were routinely exposed by their sisters to the family. He concluded that the implications for the sisters of having a ‘ruined’ sister motivated them to betray the secret, for fear of being tainted by association. Analysing roles of female family members in three ‘honour’ killings in Sweden, Elden noted that “the women, sisters and mothers, all act in different ways” and that women “have been more or less invisible in this debate, as have internal power relations within the family” (Elden, 2011, p.128ff.). Interviewing survivors, she found that women (especially mothers) often secretly helped their daughters (e.g. to conceal a pregnancy or to report abuse to the police), but that they suffered a high price themselves for doing so if found out (e.g. harassment by community members, abandonment). She suggested that female ‘solidarity’ could be limited, with women willing to help one another until the point that it impinged their

own reputation—the same notion of ‘infection’ by association with a ‘bad’ woman as observed in the Sicilian context.

A key theory is Kandiyoti’s ‘patriarchal bargain’. She argued that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, and that different forms of patriarchy call for different strategies to maximise security and optimise their options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988). The notion that women’s participation in patriarchal family structures gains them influence has been developed to show that age (and associated status) may be as powerful a dividing line as gender. Payton suggested that “patriarchal structures do not just unite men against women, but the older generation against the younger. Older women may be included in family councils and take a role in conspiracies, provided they have internalised the gender roles of the ‘honour’ system and play a masculine role in enforcing them on the younger generation” (Payton, 2011, p.75). Rew *et al.* argued for the existence of a “culturally specific form of ‘patriarchal bargain’” in Indian society, and showed that mother-in-law to daughter-in-law violence can be conceived within feminist frameworks (Rew *et al.*, 2013, p.147). Gangoli and Rew suggested that “woman-to-woman violence not only serves male interests in dividing women, but also uses older women to control younger ones in the family” and that “social and familial benefits accrue to women who accept, and are complicit in, these relationships” (Gangoli and Rew, 2011, pp.420-421).

In sum, the literature shows that, while female perpetrators are often a feature of HBA, their roles are varied, and can be conceptualised within an overarching framework in which women negotiate their own roles and power in relation to patriarchal norms and family hierarchies relating to age and status.

Methods

Data on victims, perpetrators and abuse profile were collected from 162 case records flagged as HBA by specialist caseworkers in one police force in South England and two domestic abuse services in the North and East Midlands of England. Data comprised profiles of people involved, case notes, narratives of incidents, and interventions offered. The 162 cases were supplemented by 1,312 pre-coded victim, perpetrator and abuse profiles from HBA cases reported to national charity SafeLives by 48 other domestic abuse services across England and Wales. Cases spanned the period 2010 to 2015.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and Pearson’s chi-squares for significance) were run on key variables across the combined dataset of 1,474 cases, to identify which victim, perpetrator and

abuse characteristics were associated with female perpetration. Additional narrative information from the 162 more detailed case records was analysed thematically, to consider the nature of female perpetrator roles. Emerging findings were explored in eight 'key informant interviews' with police and victim caseworkers specialising in HBA from the three sites the 162 detailed case records were extracted from.

In constructing the 162-case dataset, the police force was sampled opportunistically, being the only one out of seven initially approached where research access was granted. Case records were added from two specialist domestic abuse services supporting HBA victims, one in North England and one in the East Midlands of England, selected because they were in different parts of England to the police force (i.e. to sample more areas), and because they supported sizeable numbers of HBA victims (as reported in data returns to SafeLives). All 162 cases were tracked from report to the police/support service to the point that the police/support service closed the case. Data were extracted, coded and anonymised by the researcher from databases at each site. Anonymised data were transferred to the secure server of a University in Southern England via encrypted memory stick, as per Data Agreements signed with each site. Research ethics permission was granted by a University in Southern England.

Findings

How common is female perpetration?

Across all cases, HBA was heavily gendered. Some 48% of the combined dataset of 1,474 cases involved a male primary perpetrator, and only 4% a female primary perpetrator. In the remaining 48% of cases the gender of the primary perpetrator was unknown. Thus, where primary perpetrator gender was known, 92% were male, and 8% female. To look in more depth at perpetrator gender and roles, further analysis was conducted on the 162-case dataset where the relationship of the perpetrator to victim could be mapped in detail (these case narratives contained records of all the known perpetrators, not just the primary perpetrator as recorded in the 1,312 case dataset). Once women in secondary perpetrator roles were also counted, 50% of these cases (81/162) involved a female perpetrator in some role (either primary or secondary). Figure 1 shows females as a proportion of all the primary perpetrators (inner ring) and any perpetrators (outer ring), where gender was known.

Figure 1: Female primary perpetrators (inner ring) and secondary perpetrators (outer ring) (n=162)

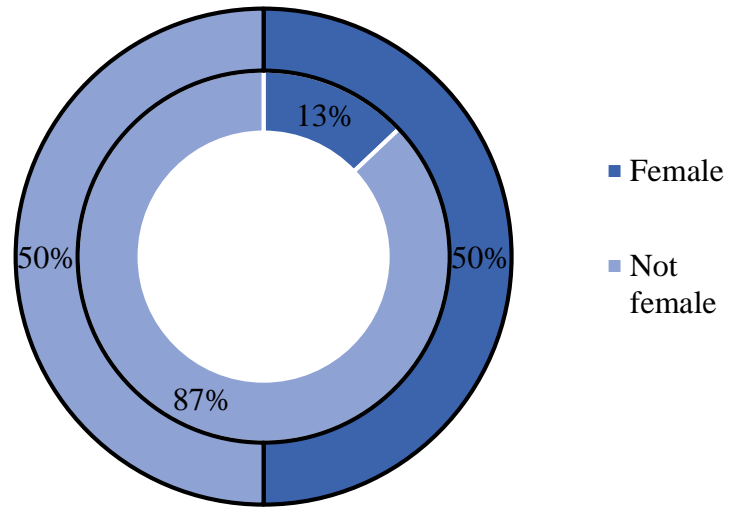


Table 1: Who are the female perpetrators?

Relationship to victim	Number	Percentage
Mother	42	52%
Mother-in-law	23	28%
Sister(s)-in-law/aunt(s)-in-law	10	12%
(Ex) wife/girlfriend	7	9%
Sister(s)/aunt(s)	5	6%
Total cases	81	

Note: 81/162 cases involved a female perpetrator in some role. The table sums to more than 81 because seven cases involved females from more than one relationship category.

The finding that women were involved most often alongside other perpetrators (usually men), rather than acting alone, was tested using Pearson's chi-square statistic in SPSS on the 162 cases. This showed a highly statistically significant association ($p < 0.001$) between involvement of a female in some role and the involvement of multiple perpetrators. In total, 95% of cases involving a female also involved one or more other perpetrators; in only 5% of cases were they acting alone.

Who are the female perpetrators?

The cases sampled involved a mixture of abuse from a (current or ex) intimate partner, and from family members, all flagged by the reporting agency as honour-based. Across all cases, approximately one-third of cases involved abuse perpetrated by a current or ex-intimate partner alone, one-third involved abuse from family members, and one-third a combination of both intimate partner and family members. The distinction is important, because the data show that involvement of a female in perpetrating abuse was (significantly) associated with cases involving violence from family members, and not with intimate partner abusers who acted alone. In cases which only involved an intimate partner perpetrator, only 7% of perpetrators were female. In cases which involved an intimate partner perpetrator plus family members, 65% included a female perpetrator. For those which involved family members only, this was 67%.

Who were these women? Table 1 profiles who the females were in relation to the victims in the 81/162 cases which involved a female perpetrator. Most commonly they were the victim's mother (42 cases, 52%), acting alone or sometimes with the victim's aunt or sister. The female perpetrator was a mother-in-law in 23 cases (28%), again acting alone or with the victim's sister(s)-in-law or aunt(s)-in-law. The victims' aunts(s) or sister(s) accounted for a further five cases (6%) and the victim's aunt(s)-in-law or sister(s)-in-law another ten cases (12%). Only seven cases (9%) involved a female current or ex intimate partner perpetrator (a wife or girlfriend).¹

Insert Table 1 here

The nature of the abuse differed. Abuse from mothers commonly took the form of controlling behaviour and emotional manipulation, including threats to harm to kill themselves or crying/pleading with victims not to shame them. Less physical violence was recorded from mothers; this tended to come from fathers and brothers. By contrast, mothers-in-law were more associated with trapping victims at home, physically preventing them from leaving, domestic servitude and carrying out physical abuse—including slapping, pushing, beating.

¹ The total does not sum to 100% as a few cases involved more than one of these women.

What roles do women play in perpetrating abuse?

The narrative detail available varied considerably in the 81/162 case records involving female perpetrators. For all 81, the case notes were re-read to see if there was a description of the nature of the female's involvement. Some simply recorded that one or more women were involved, but did not specify the nature of the woman's role separate to that of the male perpetrator(s). For instance, several recorded risks from the parents without specifying whether the mother was actively involved. Other records specified the nature of the abuse, and who had done what.

To explore in more depth the different roles played by these women, the 19 cases (one-quarter) which gave fuller description of the roles of the females were pulled out. For each, the role of the female(s) was thematically analysed to see: first, to see if they were leading or directing the abuse (for instance, if the victim reported to the caseworker that they were); second, whether they were carrying out certain abusive acts (e.g. restraining the victim, reporting on their behaviour to the lead perpetrator) but following another person's lead or acting jointly with them; and third, if there was any record of the female being coerced, intimidated, or acting to resist or protect the victim.

Based on these measures, three different roles emerged. In some cases, women took a lead role, orchestrating or directing others—most often mothers-in-law towards their daughters-in-law (these were named “controllers”). In other cases, women acted in support of a male perpetrator, commonly their husband or son: there was a record of them carrying out specific abuses but generally in support of their husband or son (these were named “collaborators”). A third group seemed more passive, coerced or intimidated (e.g. they were victims of domestic abuse themselves, or in fear for their own safety or reputation) (these were called “coerced”). Of the 19 cases examined, 5 were observed to be “controllers”, 11 “collaborators” and 3 “coerced”. Case studies for each are given below.

“Controllers”. In this role, the female took the lead, organising or directing other family members to abuse. Across all 19 cases examined, mothers-in-law most often took this role, though there were some cases involving mothers.

Case 1: A 30 year-old Muslim Indian women experiencing domestic abuse from her husband (verbal, physical, coercive control and rape). She said the assaults were ordered by her mother-in-law, some carried out herself, and some by the victim's husband under the mother-in-law's direction. (*Domestic abuse service, East Midlands*).

Case 2: A 25 year-old Sikh Indian woman experiencing severe physical abuse from her husband. She asked for a divorce and he threatened to kill her if she left. She feared violence from her mother-in-law, who she said orchestrated the abuse. There were bail conditions against the mother-in-law and husband. (*Domestic abuse service, East Midlands*).

“Collaborators”. In this role the female was actively involved, either taking a lead from male relatives, or acting jointly with them—but the case notes make clear that they played a specific role in the abuse.

Case 1: A 24 year-old British Asian woman who had fled a forced marriage from her brother and mother. There was physical abuse from her brother, and policing from her mother who prevented her wearing make-up and checked on her whereabouts constantly. She was locked in the house, not allowed out on her own and not fed for periods of time. Her mother had threatened to kill herself if the victim ever left home. (*Domestic abuse service, East Midlands*).

Case 2: A 20 year-old gay Qatari woman claiming asylum in UK in fear of violence from her family including both parents and brothers, who believed that her atheism and homosexuality were mental health issues and wanted to force her to marry a man. Qatar imposes the death penalty for homosexuality and atheism. Her brother and mother were trying to track her down. (*Domestic abuse service, East Midlands*).

Of the cases reviewed, “collaborators” was the largest single group by frequency (11/19 cases). This profile seemed particularly to involve mothers, often acting alongside fathers or brothers.

“Coerced”. In this role, the female perpetrator(s) seemed to be coerced, intimidated and/or victims themselves, often of previous domestic abuse from their husband. For this group, evidence of antecedent domestic abuse in the record was used as one indicator of coercion.

Case 1: A 20 year-old British Pakistani women whose parents were preparing to marry her to a cousin in Pakistan. Her father was physically and verbally abusive and controlling, and had tried to strangle her. Her mother was suspected of passing information to the father about the victim, but police records show her to be a repeated victim of previous domestic abuse herself from her husband (the father). (*Domestic abuse service, East Midlands*).

Case 2: A 19 year-old British Indian male forced by his parents to get engaged to his cousin in India. He believed the marriage was intended for his wife to care for his disabled sisters. His parents were emotionally blackmailing him to marry, threatening to send him to Africa to live

with family if he refused. His father had strangled him; but there was also a recorded history on file of physical domestic abuse from his father to his mother which suggested she may not have agency herself. (*Domestic abuse service, North England*).

Discussion

Interpreting female roles

Literature shows that perpetrators of HBA are commonly male (HMIC, 2015). However, both theoretical discussions (e.g. Sen, 2005) and empirical work (e.g. Dyer, 2015; Glick *et al.*, 2016) identify the involvement of female perpetrators as a key feature of HBA, especially compared with other forms of gendered violence. The study presented in this paper found that perpetration was heavily gendered, with 48% of all cases involving a primary male perpetrator, and 4% a female (92% and 8% respectively of cases where gender was known). However, it also found that, when females acting alongside a male perpetrator (i.e. in a secondary role) were also counted, half of all cases involved a female perpetrator in some way. When a female was involved, it was most commonly the victim's mother (42 cases, 52%), or their mother-in-law (23 cases, 28%), other female in-laws (10 cases, 12%) or female blood relatives (5 cases, 6%). Only 7 cases (9%) involved an (ex) wife or girlfriend (table 1).

These data support the literature in finding primarily male perpetrators, but also certain roles taken by female perpetrators, often alongside men. The finding that mothers were the most common female perpetrator (52%) is in keeping with Aplin's recent empirical research, which found that mothers were perpetrators in 64% of cases involving a female perpetrator (Aplin, 2017), and contributes to the argument she makes for understanding better the risks posed by mothers in these cases. However, this study found much greater involvement by mothers-in-law (28%) compared to Aplin (6.4%).

Specialists in HBA (the eight 'key informants') from the data sites interviewed for this study described the roles and motives of female perpetrators as varied. They said that women sometimes directed abuse; in other cases, they might not intervene to prevent it. Women were described as not always having a choice. Potentially they were in fear for their own safety, and having to consider the risk to their own honour, standing and reputation: mothers from the potential shame from a 'wayward' daughter, mothers-in-law for the implications of failing to train a daughter-in-law properly. While this study has not investigated in-depth the motivations or agency of female perpetrators, it has found some emerging evidence in the case file

narratives of such varying roles. It has described three roles in particular, as follows, setting them out to invite further debate.

First, the “controllers”. These were cases in which women seemed to actively abuse their female in-laws, often a daughter-in-law or sister-in-law. These roles were clearly delineated by power hierarchies—they were the older, matriarchal figures, and often the in-laws against a younger bride joining the family. As Gangoli and Siddiqui have argued, this reflects the power and organisation structures of extended (South Asian) families. These cases provide evidence for the intersection of age and status within the family being as important a power dynamic as gender (Payton, 2011; Rew *et al.*, 2013, on a culturally-specific form of patriarchal bargain). Key informant interviewees identified domestic servitude of a daughter-in-law and control (sometimes leading to abuse) by a mother-in-law as quite typical, especially because this reflected common division of duties in the household, with a mother-in-law in charge of the household and daughter-in-law holding specific domestic duties. These cases often occurred in joint family households, where a son and daughter-in-law lived with his extended family.

Second, the “collaborators”. Here, women seemed to actively collude and collaborate in abuse of their natal family members, or in-laws, but alongside other perpetrators. It is not clear why, but arguments advanced about self-interest or fear (Payton, 2011), about female relatives distancing themselves from shame by association (Giovannini, 1987) or about the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) may apply.

Third, the “coerced”. In the handful of these cases in this sample, the narrative suggested that the female (often the mother) may perhaps have been a victim of abusive or controlling behaviour from male relatives herself; in some she was listed as resistant, or even as a protective factor to the victim, perhaps advocating on her behalf. This role exists in the literature, especially around previous high-profile cases (e.g. Tulay Goren’s murder) where women’s roles in the family and abuse were complex (Elden, 2011). These raise further questions: can we be sure that women are always active in the abuse? Might they be ‘guilty by association’, or indeed trying to mitigate the actions of male family members?

Can HBA still be conceptualised as gendered?

So far this paper has examined the question of perpetrator gender, and found that HBA involves primary male perpetrators but that female perpetrators are more represented than they are in other forms of domestic abuse, especially when secondary perpetrators are considered. This section considers what the greater involvement of female perpetrators means for a

gendered conceptualisation. First, however, to address fully whether HBA is gendered, in addition to perpetrator gender, we must consider three related questions: whether victims are gendered, whether the context and motives for abuse are gendered, and, whether the nature of abusive behaviours carried out by females differs from that from males.

Victims are mainly female. Previous research has shown that victims are predominantly female (HMIC, 2015), but that there are male victims too (Samad, 2010). Estimates of the proportion of male victims vary from around 4% (Kazimirski *et al.*, 2009) to 28% (CPS, 2017). This study found strong evidence of HBA victimisation as gendered. Across all 1,474 cases, 94% of the victims were female—a higher rate than has been reported before (HMIC, 2015; FCO, 2016). Only 4% were male (2% were unknown).

Context and triggers for abuse relate to gender roles. The literature identifies triggers or justifications offered for perpetration of HBA against women and men. Government guidance states that both genders can be victims of forced marriages to prevent relationships deemed ‘unsuitable’ by family members, and as a means of controlling unwanted sexuality, which might include LGBT relationships, but that this particularly relates to the sexual behaviour of women (HMG, 2014). Men are also exposed to abuse including forced marriage to control their sexuality or relationships deemed ‘unsuitable’ (Hester *et al.*, 2008; Jaspal, 2014; Khan *et al.*, 2017; Samad, 2010).

This study supports the triggers/justifications previously identified in literature for both female and male victims. Females were victims because they were seen to transgress expected gender roles and behaviours. They were abused by their own family members for either rejecting a marriage desired by their family, choosing their own partner who their family disapproved of (e.g. three cases involved Asian girls dating white boys), or for having a westernised lifestyle. For females, there was evidence of sexual orientation being a trigger for abuse—including the ‘punishment’ of women for being lesbian/gay. Women were abused by their in-laws where their in-laws rejected the victim for being an inferior match to their son/brother (e.g. one victim was rejected by her Asian male partner’s family because she was a white woman; another was rejected by her in-laws for their perception that she was of an inferior ethnic caste).

Males were victims where they were seen to transgress the family expectations of marriage, but again this often related to expected gender roles. Like the women, they suffered abuse from their own family members for either rejecting an arranged marriage desired by the family, or making a love match deemed unsuitable (e.g. for being the wrong ethnicity, culture or caste, or

for having children from a previous relationship). Some men were forced to marry to ‘correct’ them for being gay.

The nature of abuse from female perpetrators. Analysis of the 162 cases in SPSS using Pearson’s chi-square statistic showed that certain forms of abuse were statistically associated with involvement of a female perpetrator in some role (primary or secondary). Physical violence was significantly less likely in cases involving a female ($p < 0.01$); it occurred in 72% of these cases, compared with 97% of cases which did not involve a female perpetrator (this does not mean a female was carrying out physical abuse in the 72%, just that someone was). Similarly, sexual abuse was significantly less likely ($p < 0.01$). Control, harassment, stalking and emotional abuse were not statistically different between cases involving a female and those which did not. Less sexual abuse is to be expected, since most female perpetrator cases were not those involving intimate partner relationships; but the findings on physical abuse are interesting. Do they suggest that females are just more likely to use emotional and verbal abuse and coercive control, rather than physical force; or is it possible that their presence in an abusive situation in some way reduces other perpetrators’ use of physical violence? Both possibilities are somewhat at odds with recent findings by Aplin of mothers using not only ‘hard psychological abuse’ and condoning violence from male relatives, but also themselves using physical force against daughters (Aplin, 2017). This study has not been able to qualitatively unpick these questions, but further work would be useful to explore the difference in findings between these two studies.

Do female perpetrators mean HBA is not gendered? We can see, then, that on three key measures HBA is clearly gendered: the victims are overwhelmingly female; the context for abuse is control, correction or punishment of perceived transgressions of gender roles and/or the gendered expectations that women will conform to the family’s wishes; and the involvement of a female perpetrator changes the types of abusive behaviour. Yet the findings presented in this paper also raise questions about how to interpret women’s roles in honour-based abuse within a gendered framework. There is some evidence here for a rebalancing of how we view HBA perpetration to recognise better the roles played by women. The cases in this sample provide qualified support for arguments that women can be drivers of HBA, and that the risks they pose may have been somewhat overlooked in a focus on male violence (Aplin, 2017; Glick, 2016; Khan, 2018).

However, examining HBA from a starting point of violence against women by men (i.e. an assumption of male perpetration), there is a risk that identifying female perpetrators serves to make the males invisible. In identifying female perpetrators, the males involved in the same case must not be ignored, and how those roles interplay must be scrutinised. In addition, whether perpetrators are male or female, the gender of the victim must also be centre-stage.

This paper suggests that, in theorising this area, there has been some ‘essentialising’ (Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2010), in which the roles and motives of female perpetrators have been flattened together to become one-dimensional. This can create a falsely dichotomous discourse, where it is tempting to see women as either wholly innocent or wrongly whitewashed. In fact, these data suggest that women’s roles are more varied than current conceptual and policy understandings allow, and that female perpetrators are no single, homogenous group. There is evidence of female solidarity and advocacy on behalf of the victim, as well as of females actively acting against the victim. As Elden (2011) has argued, women perpetrators play different roles—and these roles may point to as-yet not sufficiently understood power relations within families. Rather, this is support for an intersectional argument that ‘women perpetrators’ should be seen as not a single group, but multiple individual actors on which operate different influences (Anthias and Yuval-Davies, 1992). We need to look critically and in a more nuanced way at the variety of roles they play. It is possible to have that debate in a way that avoids the temptation to make all women bad, or all women blameless.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, drawing data from particular agencies (police, victim services), and from three geographic areas of England, means it is not known whether the 162 cases profiled on female perpetrators are representative more widely, either nationally or internationally. The figures from the overall dataset (1,474 cases) reflect a wider range of geographical areas within the UK, but remain limited to victim service and police data. Secondly, these data were not specifically collected for the purpose of qualitative exploration of meaning and motives on female perpetration. Not all the 162 case records captured in-depth the complexities of the roles played by women. Accordingly, this paper does not claim to be able to analyse in full all of the nuanced roles played by women, or make claims about the proportion of cases which fall into the three female perpetrator roles observed. Rather, it profiles those cases where detail was available, and starts to draw out different roles, which are offered up for discussion. Further work could explore the nuances of women’s roles, and the

risk or protective factors that women may represent in such cases, through richer qualitative methods such as focus group discussions or interviews.

Conclusion

The evidence in this paper strongly supports a continued interpretation of HBA as gendered, arising from strongly patriarchal cultures and values which privilege men's status and value over women, involving primarily female victims and primarily male perpetrators. Even where female perpetrators are involved, the primary perpetrator is still most often a male, and the victim most often a female. Critically, the patriarchal context of HBA, and the gendered nature of most cases, must be kept centre-stage. However, within these parameters, these data provide evidence of greater involvement of females alongside males in perpetrating abuse than other forms of domestic abuse. This paper has started to explore the varied roles women play, suggesting three possible roles for further exploration. More research is needed to unfold these roles, using methodology better designed to explore meanings and motives (e.g. qualitative interviews), but these cases show that the debate cannot be essentialised: not all women act the same. Most importantly, seeing the women should not mean we stop seeing the men.

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