

'You can't go home because you are at home': Critical reflections on capturing and reflecting the trauma of domestic violence work during COVID-19

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Abstract:

Drawing on video data collected between June and September of 2020, this piece reveals the unique challenges presented by COVID-19 frontline domestic abuse workers in the UK and provides critical reflections from the authors in the form of a collective interview. This innovative study uses participant-led data collection (in the form of self-recorded video diaries) and filmed focus groups with CEOs of UK charities, parliamentarians, the Police, and NHS professionals. The authors produced a film, *Lifeline*, drawing on the knowledge produced from these focus groups and video-diaries, foregrounding the voices of the women who work in this sector. The conversation presented here unpacks the complexities of representing domestic violence provision both in creative and academic outputs. Furthermore, the conversation reveals the epistemological challenges that come with representing and understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the domestic violence sector.

Key messages:

1. Feminist knowledge production through film
2. Complexities of representing domestic violence provision
3. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the domestic violence sector
4. Academic filmmaking as activism

Keywords: Feminist Methods; Documentary Filmmaking; Representation; Domestic Violence

Drawing on video data collected between June and September of 2020, this piece reveals the unique challenges presented by COVID-19 frontline domestic abuse workers in the UK and provides critical reflections from the authors in the form of a collective interview. This innovative study uses participant-led data collection (in the form of self-recorded video diaries) and filmed focus groups with CEOs of UK charities, parliamentarians, the Police,

and NHS professionals. The authors produced a film, *Lifeline*, which draws on the knowledge produced from these focus groups and video-diaries, foregrounding the voices of the women who work in this sector. The main themes detailed in the film included the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private spheres, experiences of vicarious trauma (in particular, distressing calls ‘contaminating’ their homes), the gendered nature of domestic abuse work as vocation and as a feminist act, and funding challenges exacerbated by COVID-19. This piece seeks not to simply ‘present’ the findings of the film, but rather opens up critical and reflexive dialogue between the producers of the film about the process of creating the film and the challenges involved with representing such important work.

We critically reflect not only on the findings from data collection, but importantly the *mode* of data collection from a feminist perspective. We consider the emancipatory potential of film making in the production of knowledge, not only for advancing understandings of the victims/survivors of domestic violence but importantly those who support victims/survivors and advocate for an end to domestic violence. We consider how the filmmaking process provides an opportunity for feminist solidarity and consciousness-raising in a context where the conditions of lockdown were making connections between service-providers all the more difficult.

In March, a SafeLives survey of frontline domestic abuse organisations for COVID-19 (SafeLives, 2020a) assessed the extent to which the pandemic impacted on the sector. Services highlighted both the increased risk to clients and the significant challenges they face in responding effectively to vulnerable people under the current circumstances. This survey provided us with statistics that are thought-provoking, including a 74% reduction in service delivery. Women’s Aid had similar findings in their April report (Women’s Aid, 2020a). All these were happening during the time when Karma Nirvana, the UK charity that supports victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage, reported an almost 200% increase in the calls they received since the beginning of the lockdown (Karma Nirvana, 2020a). Respect, Men’s Advice Line, saw 57% increase (Respect, 2021), and Galop which supports LGBT+ communities had to announce that they could not carry on with their services as effectively and had to reduce services (Galop, 2020). In July 2020, Jess Phillips, Labour MP and Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence, told us about how she spoke to a small organisation with 4 support workers in Liverpool, and how they had over 750 domestic abuse cases, some of which were very high risk. So the idea of *Lifeline* came about at this moment in time. With a desire to capture an historical moment, we wanted *Lifeline* to amplify the experiences of key players of the domestic abuse services in the UK from their own voices and images (following Dhanraj we see films as ‘tools’ in revealing “the structural conditions which cause oppression” (Bandi, 2014 :226)). Two keyworkers, Gina Pruett¹ (DVA Car Advocate, Aurora New Dawn) and Shelly Whitby (Senior Support Worker, Pandora Project) recorded their own footage and voices for the film as participant-filmmakers while they were working from home, became an integral part of the filmmaking process. But, of course, asking them to send video/audio diaries is fraught with ethical considerations and challenges commonly encountered when undertaking feminist research (see Gordon, 2019; Redmon, 2019). There are institutional hoops to jump through to achieve ethical clearance, but there are also the feminist ethics of care that we bring to not only our participants and their communities, but to ourselves and each other too. This project was granted ethical clearance by the University of East Anglia’s Faculty of Arts and Humanities Ethics Subcommittee. Potential participants were approached via email using snowballing sampling. In this instance, they were provided

¹ Participants agreed for their names and professional positions to be added to the film.

with the research protocol, participant information sheet and consent documents including participant release forms. When editing revealed the need for further footage that goes beyond ‘talking-heads’ we used existing contacts to reach out to key workers delivering domestic abuse provision in the context of lockdown following the same ethical procedures adopted above. However, our ongoing concern has always been to adopt a reflexive approach to ethics as operating *beyond* formalised ethics boards, recognising that “formal consenting would always already be inadequate based on shifting discursive influences and occupation of multiple subject positions” (Bhattacharya, 2007: 1102). This is particularly important when creating films that represent participants in their day-to-day lives and we were keen to follow the tradition of feminist documentary film-making by foregrounding “voice, choice and self-representation” (White, 2015: 217). As such we also implemented an informal, ongoing process of consent through the sharing of rough cuts with participant-filmmakers so that they could offer feedback on how they were represented to ensure that they were comfortable with what we were producing (we provide an example below of what that looked like in practice).

Further ethical considerations involved reflections on how much interference could we have with what participants could produce for us to use in the film? What impact might our role in the film-making process have on the knowledge produced and the experiences (re)presented? What might the consequences be for those who shared their experiences on film? This conversation unpacks the difficulties of interdisciplinary collaboration, revealing the role researchers and film-producers make in (re)presenting complex experiences, as well as highlighting the affordances that come with participant-led data collection. The conversation is held between EA the project manager, whose work straddles academic theory and creative practice, KP an experienced documentary film-maker and VC, a feminist theorist and activist.

Karoline Pelikan (KP): This documentary is entirely filmed via Zoom (video calls) and with the use of mobile phones. Even though we had excellent expert contributors, our key domestic abuse frontline workers Gina and Shelly are the heart of the film. Through their voices we get a glimpse of what the helpline work during lockdown entailed and how it impacted their everyday lives: taking calls in the bedroom; talking to distressed mothers with children in abusive relationships while your own children are having a fun movie night in the living room, and missing the drive home to and from work in order to leave any emotional baggage in the workplace. Ethically we wanted to avoid any sensational storytelling and picked genuine and honest family moments over dramatic scenes such as frontline work/police shift. We also did not feel like we were in a position to tell our contributors what to film. Instead we asked questions such as “What do you usually do at home? Is there a way of portraying your children without revealing too much and invading their space? Where do you work, in what room of the house?” Visual answers to those questions were the images we used in the film.

Victoria Cann (VC): And just to interject, from a perspective of feminist epistemology it's really interesting that that is what leads you in producing this form of knowledge in this manner, or to use Letherby and Jackson's phrasing “how what researchers *do* effects what they *get*” (2003: 100). It shifts based on what you as filmmakers need, as well as what is being said by participants, which I think is a really interesting dynamic that you wouldn't necessarily see, perhaps in more ‘traditionally’ feminist research. So this idea that you have all these hours worth of footage and it is condensed down into 20 minutes and you have to

decide like what is that *narrative* going to be. Within traditional academic research you don't ordinarily need to look at your data and say 'this needs to be more human' but you did need this from a filmmaker's perspective. Ordinarily, in my research I would say 'I have 27 hours of rich data, that's enough to say something meaningful in a journal article', so it's interesting that from a film-making perspective we needed more, and in getting more the story we were able to tell shifted, again producing a very different form of knowledge. That speaks more broadly to knowledge production, epistemology and how we tell stories through our research.

KP: Indeed, one of the difficulties of the project was to find a narrative structure in over 27 hours of footage. Even though similar questions were asked to all participants, we needed to find emotional connections in order to get across the message of the film. We had to think of our potential audiences and how to engage a wider audience to this special issue within the domestic abuse reports. We knew that our main, maybe even target audience, were academics, survivors and victims and frontline workers in the domestic abuse sector. However, we also hoped that the film could reach a wider public through the emotion and human message that is captured in the film and that is universally understandable.

Eylem Atakav (EA): I think that really highlights the tension between academic filmmaking and creative filmmaking (see also: Atakav, 2020). We wanted to speak to as many audiences as possible, but it is an academic, essentially a research project. Where do we stand then? That in-betweenness, I find, challenging and yet exciting as it pushes you to be more creative. One other important aspect was the sense of responsibility we felt towards those we interviewed. We kept asking ourselves the same question throughout the post-production process: what if we can't do justice to their voices? For every single interview we had long discussions. Who will feature in the film, who will not. Editing is a tough process as you are putting together a narrative while having to take out a lot. It is an ethical 'minefield'.

KP: We discussed this over weeks and found different narrative arcs that were important to discuss. While the main focus was the impact of lockdown on domestic abuse frontline workers and organisations, there was also the theme of domestic violence in BAME communities, the suffering of migrant women and refugees... a couple of campaigners mentioned this theme. Another question was if we should only use female voices and characters? Those were the first questions that we had around the filmmaking part. Finding the narrative structure, finding the characters that would finally make it into the film. Each narrative arc would have set a different tone for the film. Despite acknowledging the participation of men, we decided to focus on women on the frontline, choosing a variety of organisations representing a diverse female lead. Another difficulty was to avoid a talking-heads - purely interview-based- film. In dialogue with our two domestic abuse frontline workers we asked them to film their everyday lives and situations that reminded them of conversations with victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Through this we received some insights into intimate family lives during lockdown.

VC: In terms of the nuances of the themes that emerged it's interesting to hear you reflect on the filmmaking process because I do think that kind of coding is very much what we typically do in 'academic' research as well. Trying to find narratives and themes and then the struggle to try and find those quotes to include in your writing that encapsulate it in some kind of way. And oftentimes, because we're writing for text, you know books and journal articles, emotion is something that you can't easily convey in writing, so that can get lost in translation as you move from source to output. But just to come back to what you were saying a moment ago I just found it really interesting to reflect on how we represent difficult or challenging

experiences for different audiences. And actually, I think what that really highlights is the limitations in traditional feminist academic kinds of writing in terms of its activist potential and its emancipatory potential as well, because of *who* we're speaking to or how *few* people we might be speaking to in different ways. For an activist academic we thinking about how we can capture and engage with the widest possible set of people in a range of accessible ways (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2006), particularly people who might not be interested or kind of had even considered or thought about what it's like to actually deliver domestic abuse provision in in these times. Whereas I think in an academic article, you're often speaking to a group of people who are already invested in some kind of way, or they've already got institutional access, and therefore they're already engaged.

Another thing that I was struck by was the visuals and the sounds and the emotion in the recordings. In terms of the actual content, there were lots of themes around vicarious trauma, being exhausted, missing those breaks in between starting work and coming home, and also just an overwhelming sense of responsibility and needing to be able to switch off in different ways. But what I really appreciated about watching all the interview footage, which is just something that you don't get when you're delivered transcripts, are the more intimate things like dogs barking outside or kids walking into the background. Obviously those aren't the sorts of things that you can show like in a documentary for lots of reasons (not least ethical ones), but methodologically it's really interesting to me to see all those moments because those sorts of things will be happening when they're taking a call or when they're running a training session, the quotidian nature of domestic abuse provision was really apparent across the footage and the final documentary.

But I guess my primary interest is the epistemological and methodological one, in terms of how this particular form of engaging with research subjects was impacted by the mode of data collection and vice versa. I think it mattered massively that everything was filmed over Zoom and everything was filmed on phones and on what people had to hand, because that is exactly what the pandemic was like and that medium therefore really captures that historical moment. I think in a way that glossy headshots and people talking in front of carefully curated bookshelves would be lost in a more highly produced film, we would have lost that element of life in the pandemic for this workforce. By asking participants to use materials they already have, such as laptops, mobile phones and the like, you capture the domesticity of their work under these conditions and in a way the intimacy of it all.

KP: One of our contributors saw the first rough cut and decided that she wanted her children either blurred or not included in the film. We talked it through and she filmed new footage that wouldn't reveal too much of her children and anything else got blurred. This was part of our ethical guideline to make sure our contributors felt safe and had the power to decide with us what to show and what not to show. This is a good example of how collaborative and participatory research provides agency to the participants so that they can co-create knowledge.

EA: Just to add to that we were always conscious of the nature of the work and how they were affected by working from home. Sue Penna, Creative Director of Rockpool, exemplified this as she revealed that the reason she chose this profession was because she was a domestic abuse survivor, who wanted to help others: 'I realised actually that I was almost 'contaminating' my room. I wasn't sleeping... The stuff you get on the calls can be really really distressing. You can't go home and reflect on it, because you *are* at home for work as well. When you're at home and you're on the phone and you're hearing stuff and taking in

some of the trauma and the abuse, it does go in more, and it's sometimes because you're in your home setting, you do have to remind yourself this isn't happening in your home, this is somewhere else.' The blurring of boundaries of work space and home space is not unique to the sector, of course, but the implications of it for these key workers have been major. And of course the other aspect is the gendered nature of their work. As one of the interviewees reminded us: 'the reality is, we always end up in this profession because of our own experiences, we don't trip into it.'

VC: But also because this whole thing is bound up with care, like that seems to me to be central to the kind of work that the practitioners in the VAWG sector are doing. COVID was all about care, it's just care and vocation that are the threads that bind us as feminist academics but also all of the people doing the work on the on the ground as well.

EA: It is crucial for feminism academics to use creative practice as a tool to highlight, interrogate, fight for feminist issues (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2006). Within an academic context feminism can be understood both as theory *and* practice (Leavy and Harris, 2019), and feminist researchers' position as one in which they are part of the process of discovery and understanding at the same time as being responsible for attempting to contribute to change. I always invite feminist scholars to start thinking about making media as a form of activism. The strategies developed within the frame of creative practice are alternative ways of promoting change and embedding feminist goals of equality via work with public and private partners. And film as a research output has got significant value. It travels really quickly compared to, for example, an academic article which takes quite a long time to write, takes quite a long time to publish. And takes quite a long time to be acknowledged and distributed as such. A film, on the other hand, you can immediately put it up on social media. And this has been our strategy. We made the link to the film public so that everyone can watch it.

VC: Yeah, and I think that's at the crux of it, right? Feminist activist work in whatever kind of fields we're speaking to should be accessible, and it should be able to shift the paradigm if only slightly in the direction of gender equality. I think that working with you both and seeing this process has been really valuable because I don't think of myself as a creative person at all, but I do often think creatively about how we might widen the reach of the kind of work that we do within the academy, or wherever is. I think one thing that illustrated to me was the failures of feminist academic writing to actually be accessible and to actually engage in a way that is kind of at the at the heart of feminist work. I think in the focus on the day to day, no agenda just showing the realities of these women working in this field, this film *is* political but not in an overt and explicit way. This could have been a Sisters Uncut film about the exploitation of women who do vocational work in the violence against women sector, or it could have been much more heavily pushing for funding because one of the things that came through in the raw data is all of these people working in the sector are exhausted. Their funding is precarious and writing the funding bids is part of that exhaustion of work, work that needs to be done, but is actually very difficult to get done on top of the increased calls they were getting. So again, all of those kind of decisions that one has to make in producing the film have had consequences. Therefore exactly what it is that you're able to say and how you're able to represent, as well as those ethics of care to research participants comes through in these conversations about how we represent in film, in the same way that we think about how we represent in academic outputs. But at the very least, I think it's been a really eye opening activity in terms of thinking about those ethics of representation and how you tell

those stories. I wonder if you have reflected on the impact that this has had for you, because actually you have to take care of yourself as well. Because there's so much anxiety that comes with thinking about how we represent experiences, particularly with being so committed to improving conditions that you forget about the weight that you carry on your own shoulders and as well as the vicarious trauma of the pandemic, and so I wouldn't want you to just think about how you're representing other people but it's also about how you take care of yourself with the weight of that work. How did you achieve that?

EA: We took care of each other. That was the main thing. Collective mindset that brings us together and made the work as successful as it has become and it shows now how, which is not the bragging part at all. But I'm really genuinely excited to see how it's been accepted to lots of international film festivals including Toronto International Women Film Festival (2021); Lift-off International Film Festival (Finalist, 2021); Crossroads International Film Festival (Quarter Finalist, 2021); Kismet Virtual Short Films Festival (2021); Awareness Film Festival (Honourable Mention, 2021); The Feminist Film Festival Romania (2021); and, International Women Filmmakers Festival Turkey (Academic Achievement Award, 2021). And so it's been travelling and without the collaborative work, we wouldn't be able to achieve the impact it has achieved.

KP: The international festivals that picked us are female-lead and feminist-focus festivals. As filmmakers with this very special theme we needed to create our own space of distribution. The organisations and contributors helped us to spread the word on Twitter and other social media channels. Until today our film has over 1500 views and counting. It was all our own distribution. There was no agency or anything behind it.

EA: As academics and filmmakers we are responsible for collecting stories and experiences, and equally responsible for creating visible evidence of the present. With COVID, we are all acquiring new emotions, and new ways of expressing them. We need to take time to understand each other's stories so that we can become more empathetic and inclusive. *Lifeline*, we hope, celebrates these stories, and highlights the great work done by the sector in the most challenging of circumstances.

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Filmography

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