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# International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women – it's been 43 years and yet...

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On the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, a [news report](#) captured my attention about a woman who had been found dead in the boot of a car, in east London; she had been identified by the police as Harshita Brella, but few other details had been released at the time.

Although at the time the police were '[keeping an open mind](#)' about who might be the perpetrator, the first thing that came to mind, as probably did for many who work with victims of domestic abuse, was whether this could be a 'domestic homicide', that is, committed by a current or former intimate partner or family member of the victim.

This reasoning proved to be true and the expectation that those in the fields of criminology and law enforcement (and true crime podcast aficionados) that the most likely murder of a woman is a current or former partner is well borne out in evidence.

For those working in the area of domestic abuse, Harshita's story is sadly unremarkable. The [Killed Women](#) project, that keeps a tally on the women who die at the hands of a current or former partner, reminds us of it. This does not make Harshita's death any less heart breaking or meaningful. Her death and the circumstances surrounding it remind us of the complexities of domestic abuse and violence against women more broadly and that, despite numerous changes and mechanisms introduced over the past years to address it, there are still important lessons to be learnt.

Harshita was 24 years old, married since August 2023. She had moved from India to the UK with her husband at the end of April 2024 ([BBC](#)). The police [believe the perpetrator was her husband](#), who would have hidden her body in the boot of a car before fleeing the country. Before we jump to conclusions regarding ethnicity or nationality (we don't know enough yet to know this), let's be clear that domestic homicide is not a 'cultural issue', brought to the UK by foreign communities (read, non-White, non-European, for example). Although victims of domestic abuse from certain ethnic minoritized backgrounds may be over-represented in the statistics regarding domestic abuse, [the majority of domestic homicide victims in the UK are British \(followed by those of Polish and other Eastern-European nationality\)](#).

We also do not know whether her husband actually killed her, so all considerations need to be balanced with the presumption of innocence and that the burden of proof is on the prosecution. We do know, however, that many other women have died in circumstances akin to Harshita's and that their husbands were the ones who ended their lives.

It is now well acknowledged that police intervention is not enough to adequately support victims of domestic abuse. Successive governments have, for decades, stated that a collaborative, multiagency approach is needed to meaningfully address VAWG (eg, the 2021 [‘Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls’](#)).

‘On paper’ and judging by the information publicly available, it seems that the appropriate procedures were followed. Harshita was known to the police and had been referred to a Multiagency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), indicating that she had been found to be ‘high risk’, after a risk assessment of her situation had been conducted. [It, therefore, is not a case of police officers not identifying or grading risk appropriately.](#)

As a result of undergoing MARAC, a safety plan would have been developed to support her, involving different agencies ([see Home Office, 2011 ‘Specialist Domestic Violence Court Programme Resource Manual’ p.26; SafeLives](#)), she was provided with space in a refuge and a [Domestic Violence Protection Order \(DVPO\) was issued](#). Her husband was [arrested and released on bail](#), with conditions. Harshita eventually resumed contact with him. What happened, then, that led to such a terrible outcome?

Domestic Violence Prevention Orders (DVPOs) were introduced by the [Crime and Security Act 2010](#) and have been available to the 43 police forces since 2014. They are civil orders, issued by Magistrates Courts on application by the police, with a view of allowing victims of domestic abuse [‘breathing space’](#) to consider their options and secure further strategies to ensure their safety (which can include applying for other civil orders, for example). They also allow the police more time to investigate the allegations of abuse when there is not enough evidence for charging a suspect. Suspects may be ordered, for example, and as [seems to have been the case with Harshita’s husband](#), not to contact victims or ‘molest’ them, during the 28-day period in which they are in place.

Evaluating the success of such interventions is not straightforward, and there is [some evidence that DVPOs are not effective in long term disruption of domestic abuse](#); we do not know what the outcome of the police investigation in Harshita’s case was but clearly the her situation was not improved by the provisions put in place. Is it a case of reviewing the use of these orders?

DVPOs are expected to be replaced from 2026 by Domestic Abuse Protection Orders ([DAPOs](#)), after a two year pilot and wider [consultation](#). They would not have such strict time constraints (providing they are regularly reviewed) and allow for more restrictions to be put on the suspects. They are not uncontroversial, as there is an obvious need to balance the protection of a victim, the rights of a suspect and allow the police time to investigate. Whether they will have a longer lasting impact and help better protect women like Harshita, time will tell.

Media [reports](#) say that Harshita felt isolated at the refuge she was living in, which eventually led her back to her husband. If this is the case, then it raises questions not of whether there are adequate (or strong enough) mechanisms in place to support victims of domestic abuse but whether these are appropriately deployed or not. Chronic underfunding of public services for many years may have contributed to this; again, we do not know much about the case yet, but Harshita’s sister claims that she was [not provided with counselling, for example, and that](#)

[she miscarried while in the refuge](#). Indeed, her experience was so bad that it contributed to her resuming a relationship with her husband. If this is true, then it is not a matter with the law or the procedures but the way that they were (or in this case were not) put in place (regardless of whether her husband is found guilty of her murder).

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) will be assessing Northamptonshire Police's handling of the case and a [domestic homicide review](#) will be held. Hopefully lessons will be learnt but none of these measures will help Harshita. More needs to be done before we arrive at a situation when we are assessing what went wrong.

Women are still killed at the hands of a current or former partner at alarming rates, indicating that this is a wider cultural and structural problem. None of this is new to those researching this area and working with victims. What seems to be missing is a wider societal conversation about why this is still happening, despite numerous provisions, champions, leads, [commissioners](#) and high-ranking officers acknowledging it.

The [National Police Chiefs Council](#) (NPCC) said that it wants to address VAWG as seriously as it does terrorism, a position that was not met without criticism for its [potential to further criminalise minoritized communities](#) and [lack of appropriate funding, including for specialised services](#) but is, nonetheless, meant to heighten the seriousness with which the problem is viewed and, hopefully, lead to improvements to how it is addressed. [The Government has pledged to halve the rates of VAWG within one decade](#). An ambitious task, no doubt, considering the scale of the problem.

2024 marks 10 years since the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence came into force. The 25th of November marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. At the same time, the United Nations' runs the '[16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#)' campaign, an annual event which ends on the 10th December, the Human Rights Day.

Yet, the sad truth is that, globally and in the UK, women are still much more likely to be killed by an intimate partner or family member than men. The [ONS](#) tell us that, in 2022-23, seven out of 10 victims of domestic homicide in the UK were women, a figure representing just under half of all the homicides on women in the same period (45%). All but one were killed by a man. The most common was for these women to having been killed by a partner or ex-partner, followed by a family member. [Harshita was strangled](#), a form of inflicting death that affects women who were murdered almost three times more often than men ([13% compared to 4%](#)).

[UN Women](#) estimates that 60% of all femicides were committed by an intimate partner or family member (with about one woman or girl being killed every 10 minutes). These are striking numbers that do not cease to shock, even though we know for many years that domestic homicide, like domestic abuse and many other forms of interpersonal violence that disproportionately affect women, are part of cultural, societal and structural factors that make up and sustain violence against women.

Despite instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)) having been adopted in 1979, there is still a clear need to look at human rights from a gendered perspective. Crimes like these do [affect women](#)

[disproportionately](#) and have a huge [wider detrimental impact to society](#). It is time we move on from reflections, apologies and promises. How many more women will have to die for this situation to change? Worryingly, what can we do to avoid a regression and eventual dereliction of the progress made?

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