

Title- *Living by a Love Ethic: A Black Feminist Exploration into the role of Love, Care, and Community in Resisting Gender-Based Violence Among Women with Precarious Immigration Status*¹.

Introduction: The scale of gender-based violence in the United Kingdom

In 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council declared gender-based violence, particularly violence against women and girls, a national emergency. This reflects the endemic nature of such violence, with an estimated two million women in the UK affected annually (Dodd, 2024). The range of gendered and sexual violence affecting women's lives is extensive, encompassing sex trafficking, domestic abuse, forced pregnancy, female genital mutilation, dowry-related abuse, forced marriage, and the increasing prevalence of online abuse such as 'revenge' pornography and cyber-stalking (European Commission, 2023).

In this context, it is critical that scholarship not only acknowledges the scale and impact of gender-based violence but also urgently investigates how survivors resist and cope. Existing academic work often focuses on formal state solutions such as legal action or police intervention, systems that not only fail to adequately protect survivors but also frequently perpetuate gendered violence themselves (Hall, 2023). As this proposal later argues, this creates a significant gap in understanding alternative, informal forms of resistance that take place within communities, rather than in courtrooms.

My proposed research addresses this gap by exploring informal, everyday resistance to gender based violence rooted in love; a radical Black feminist approach informed by bell hooks' concept of a love ethic. In the context of pervasive gendered violence, the love ethic is framed as an urgent and essential means of resistance.

Research Aims, Importance and Original Contributions

This research draws on Black feminist theory to examine how love, community, and informal care serve as everyday resistance and coping strategies for survivors of intimate partner violence with precarious immigration status. This study is important because, by centering everyday practices, it expands sociology's understanding of resistance among marginalised groups beyond organised forms and outside the carceral institutions that have traditionally dominated the field.

Central to my theoretical approach is bell hooks' concept of a 'love ethic', which frames love as essential to resistance. For hooks, a 'love ethic' involves incorporating care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge into everyday life (hooks, 2000). This research builds on hooks' work by examining how survivors embody these values and utilise them as active forms of resistance. Through a radical Black feminist lens, this PhD research offers an original approach to studying gender-based violence by reinterpreting often-overlooked acts of care (Shepard, 2019; Renzetti et al., 2012), such as mothering, sisterhood, and community support—as powerful resistance strategies. Additionally, abolitionist feminist perspectives guide the study by emphasising community-led, non-carceral responses to harm and justice. Focusing on love and community as forms of resistance is especially pertinent for survivors with precarious immigration status, whose experiences are compounded by fears of deportation, limited legal aid, and social isolation. State institutions often exacerbate these women's experiences of gender-based violence, as evidenced by incidents of rape in immigration detention

¹ Precarious immigration status refers to individuals who do not have indefinite leave to remain in the country. This includes asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claims, people on temporary visas (such as work or student visas), individuals whose immigration claims have been rejected but who have overstayed, and those with limited leave to remain, where their permission to stay is temporary and conditional (Homberger et al ,2022).

centres (Kalokoh et al., 2024; Wadia, 2015). In response, these survivors turn to community networks to navigate both interpersonal and state-inflicted violence, filling gaps left by inadequate state support.

Studying the intersection of gendered violence and immigration status reveals how these women resist harm in ways often overlooked, offering valuable insights into their agency in contexts where formal support systems are inaccessible or harmful.

Primary research question:

How do survivors of intimate partner violence with precarious immigration status draw on love, care and community to resist gender-based violence?

Secondary research questions:

1. In what specific ways does precarious immigration status shape women's experiences of intimate partner violence? (e.g. vulnerability, access to support, and reliance on community networks)
2. In what ways is love a central factor in resistance to intimate partner violence by survivors with precarious immigration status?
3. How can acts of care, such as mothering and sisterhood, by women who have experienced intimate partner violence be understood as forms of resistance?
4. In what ways does a Black feminist framework offer new insights into everyday practices of resistance to intimate partner violence?

Literature Review

Although much research addresses various forms of gender-based violence, its prevalence and impacts (Siddiqui, 2018; Williamson, 2012; Phipps and Smith, 2012; Ali et al., 2023), there is a significant gap in literature on resistance to gender-based violence and survivors' coping mechanisms.

Most scholarship on gender-based violence overlooks the aftermath of abuse and fails to consider resistance (Gangoli, 2020), neglecting survivors' agency and how they may resist and cope outside formal frameworks. This reinforces harmful stereotypes, such as the 'helpless battered woman' (Allard, 1991). In *Talking Back – Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks critiques this erasure of agency, arguing that 'It is as though the experience of being repeatedly violently hit is the sole defining characteristic of a woman's identity' (hooks, 1989, p. 264). Moreover, studies that disregard resistance also fail to recognise how marginalised individuals draw on their unique social locations to embrace marginality as a 'radical site of possibility' (hooks, 1989, p. 20), rather than solely a site of despair. This research will build on hooks' assertion that marginal spaces offer "radical perspectives to create and imagine alternatives" (hooks, 1989, p. 20), reframing marginality as an active site of resistance.

While some literature on resistance to gender-based violence exists, the concept of community care as resistance is notably absent. Existing research prioritises visible acts of defiance, limiting understanding of 'hidden' resistance, particularly among marginalised groups like women with insecure immigration status. Sarah Gordon's (2017) study on resistance to gender-based violence in South Africa focuses primarily on overt actions, such as a participant creating a physical barrier between her parents, overlooking subtler forms of resistance like caregiving and community solidarity, which do not involve direct confrontation with one's abuser. Drawing on Black feminist theory, particularly hooks' love ethic, will enable me to address these gaps by highlighting subtle, everyday acts of resistance.

Mwedzi and Phipps (2024) explore the 'community power' framework for preventing gender-based violence, emphasising community self-governance and local knowledge. However, they overlook how communities cope with gender-based violence outside state structures, focusing on community power-

sharing within carceral systems. My research aims to address this oversight by using a love ethic to highlight the power of communities in resisting gender-based violence through everyday acts of love, independent of state systems.

Scholarship on community-driven resistance to gender-based violence is limited, with most research focused on Indigenous communities in the United States (e.g., Richie, 2020; Wilson, 2010), and a notable absence of work on women with precarious immigration status. Mack et al. (2019) adopt an abolitionist, decolonial feminist perspective to explore resistance to gendered violence in Indigenous communities, framing it as a response to both settler-colonial and gender-based violence. They argue that alternatives to state structures 'shift conceptions of sovereignty away from juridical state politics and onto healing, self-determination, and community-based public ceremony and stories' (Mack et al., 2019, p. 358). While their research is among the few to examine community-based resistance, it, like much of the literature on resistance to gender-based violence, emphasises visible, organised acts, such as protests for missing Indigenous women, neglecting informal, everyday resistance.

In sum, my proposed research will draw on Black feminist theory to address the critical gaps in gender-based violence scholarship identified in this literature review, with a focus on highlighting resistance.

Methodology

I will recruit 20-25 adult women of varying ages living in England who have experienced intimate partner violence and have precarious immigration statuses. Through my role in the xxx, I have built relationships with NGOs and grassroots organisations that support women with insecure immigration status who have experienced gender-based violence. These organisations, including Refuge, Karma Nirvana (which supports South Asian women), and the Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation (MEWSO) as well as Sistah Space for Black women, will assist in identifying potential participants who meet the criteria for this study.

bell hooks (1991) conceptualises the home as a site of resistance, where mothering creates 'homeplaces'—safe spaces of love that shield children from domination. She exemplifies this through the resilience of her mother and grandmother, who, despite enduring racist, gendered abuse as Black domestic workers, cultivated such spaces to protect their children from further oppression. I extend this concept to survivors of intimate partner violence with precarious immigration status, proposing that their acts of care in mothering similarly resist intersecting forms of oppression and serve to protect their children. To explore this, I will include at least 10 mothers in my study to examine how their everyday acts of care function as resistance to gender-based violence.

My use of Black feminist methods challenges the 'white logics' of traditional positivist approaches that have 'assumed a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite Whites, while condemning the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity' (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2007, p. 241). By grounding my research in the Black feminist epistemological principles proposed by Patricia Hill Collins (1990), including the ethic of caring and the valuation of lived experience as legitimate knowledge, I aim to embrace alternative ways of validating truth. I will employ Black feminist methodologies such as story circles, alongside semi-structured interviews and participant observation. These methods will be conducted in settings like community drop-in groups and homes, allowing me to observe how everyday acts of love and broader resistance strategies serve as responses to gender-based violence.

Story circles, rooted in Indigenous and Black oral traditions (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011), promote active listening and mutual sharing in non-hierarchical spaces, encouraging researcher reciprocity and reflection on violence and resistance. Given the sensitive nature of the research, I will ensure that my interviews adhere to trauma-informed principles (Alessi, 2022), complementing my Black feminist approach.

Conclusion- From Lived Experience to Knowledge: Integrating Black Feminist Epistemology in Action

As Ellis and Adams write, 'If our task as researchers is to study people, the creators of "social life," then we should try to include as much of the person as possible and not relegate parts of ourselves to the periphery' (Adams and Ellis, 2020, p. 365). This aligns with Black feminist epistemology, which values lived experience as legitimate knowledge in academia. My journey with gender-based violence, as an Afro-Arab woman, has profoundly shaped my academic and professional practices. During my first year of undergraduate study, following a lengthy trial and my perpetrator's imprisonment, I realised that my identities within 'the matrix of domination' (Hill Collins, 1990) showed that carceral systems alone did not help me resist or cope. Instead, love, care and community became my sources of comfort, driving my resistance and supporting me through my experience. Hill Collins asserts that 'individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences' (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 257). My lived experience, therefore, serves as embodied knowledge, enabling me to connect authentically with participants and mitigate alienation or marginalisation.

In *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, hooks asserts that theory and practice should be inseparable, reflecting the realities of everyday life. My own journey, from studying Sociology to founding a multi- award-winning grassroots campaign in 2022 to address intimate partner violence among under-18s in Britain, exemplifies this integration of theory and action. The campaign, which gathered nearly 100,000 signatures, led to landmark legal and policy changes, ensuring education on domestic abuse as a key prevention strategy in addressing violence against women and girls.

My personal and professional experiences, combined with the rigorous academic training I received at xxx, have prepared me to pursue a PhD and advance my work at the intersection of advocacy and academic research.

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