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**Author(s):** Piippo, Sisko; Notko, Marianne; Husso, Marita; Carter, Anand Janet

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# Framing Social Work Discourses of Violence Against Women. Insights From Finland and India

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Sisko Piippo<sup>1</sup> , Marianne Notko<sup>2</sup>,  
Marita Husso<sup>3</sup> , and Janet Carter Anand<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) is a global social problem. In India, its high prevalence is connected to gender inequality, whereas Finland suffers from the so-called Nordic Paradox—that is, the existence of both gender equality and a high prevalence of VAW. This qualitative study employed a critical constructionist approach and frame analysis to analyze data from interviews with Finnish ( $n = 20$ ) and Mumbai ( $n = 18$ ) social workers. We asked how social workers frame their response to VAW and how ways of framing elucidate institutional practices that facilitate the interventions. Anti-oppressive, juridical, procedural, and collaborational frames revealed institutional practices mirroring how societal dismissal of VAW and neglect of survivors' experiences travel across cultures. However, in contrast to Mumbai, ways of framing in Finland revealed little evidence of a feminist approach to VAW. Although gender as a social category might not have stood out in the Finnish data, there was evidence of how gender works through ethnicity. Findings raise questions for both countries about how to develop VAW interventions, for example, to address the complexity of VAW affecting individuals, families, and communities, engage different stakeholders, and attend to social positionality as well as axes of diversity.

## Keywords

gender-based violence, domestic violence, social work practice

## Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is a severe social problem and human rights violation. It can take the form of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse and include controlling behavior

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

## Corresponding Author:

Sisko Piippo, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, P.O. BOX 1627, Kuopio FI-70211 Finland.

Email: [sisko.piippo@uef.fi](mailto:sisko.piippo@uef.fi)

(Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2011). Although VAW is observed globally, it is expressed, experienced, defined, and responded to divergently at the intersections of social stratification and institutional differences (e.g., Anthias, 2014; Hearn, 2013; Husso et al., 2017; Myhill, 2017). Social work has universal goals to promote social change and empower people, and different countries with divergent contexts, including distinct histories, population sizes, social service systems, and ranges of diversity, seek ways to address VAW. We used frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) to investigate the VAW-related discourses of Finnish and Mumbai social workers. Frames are understood as social constructions shaped by imbalanced power relations that illustrate shared and socially formed ways of interpreting and orientating to some situation (Goffman, 1974; Lorino et al., 2017; Schön & Rein, 1994). This research aimed to analyze the framing of professionals' institutional practices—namely, their habitual and sometimes tacit actions that stem from organizational procedures, guidelines, routines, and perhaps taken-for-granted standpoints (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Specifically, this study aimed to shed light on institutional practices that facilitate responding to VAW and points of similarity and divergence between Finland and Mumbai in this regard.

Importantly, cross-cultural studies are fraught with challenges, such as whether similar issues exist in the countries under study (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2007). The first author spent three months in Mumbai, India, as an independent research scholar to familiarize herself with social work carried out in the area. Her field visits directed her research interest toward encountering female victims of violence, including the social reality and contextual forces framing the event of intervention as an institutional action. Initially, Finland and India seemed like two extremely different countries, for example, in terms of culture and social structure. While discussions with local professionals in the urban area of Mumbai revealed conceptual differences and various institutional orders, they also unveiled surprising similarities reflecting the global nature of VAW as a gendered social problem. As India is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with a unique mix of religions, languages, and cultures, we recognize that practitioners from other states or rural areas may have divergent views. In addition, we do not intend to argue that women in Finland and India are exposed to violence in similar ways. Instead, we understand VAW as intersectional (Crenshaw, 1993), underlining that violence involving an imbalance of power is socioculturally structured by different societal divisions, “which are themselves socially constructed” (Etherington & Baker, 2018, p. 61), such as gender, race, class, ability, and age, and their varying institutional contexts (e.g., Anthias, 2014; Bubar et al., 2016; Hearn, 2013). Societal divisions include intragroup divergence; however, it must be stressed that women are not a homogeneous group and their positions cannot be named unequivocally as either privileged or oppressed (Clarke, 2011; Etherington & Baker, 2018; Mehrotra, 2010; Mohanty, 1995).

This enables us to address the so-called Nordic Paradox (Clarke, 2011; Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Lundgren et al., 2010; Pease, 2019)—the simultaneous existence of gender equality and a high prevalence of VAW. To that end, we question whether the position of women in a welfare state, which is seen as righteous and where women's social location is privileged and they are assumed to have equal access to resources and opportunities, can be widened and re-discussed to approach VAW from a cross-cultural perspective. Similarly, we do not want to reproduce stereotypes and oppressive discourses of Indian women as a monolithic, subordinated, and dependent group (Mohanty, 1995). Societal divisions, such as caste, age, religion, and class, intersect with gender and affect both women's vulnerability to abuse and experiences of violence.

As in previous research (e.g., Hearn & McKie, 2010; Menon & Allen, 2018; Myhill, 2017; Nikupeteri, 2017; Notko et al., 2021; Pandya, 2014; Piippo et al., 2021; Virkki & Jäppinen, 2017), we investigated professional practices for responding to VAW but with a focus on constructing a contextualized understanding of practices that facilitate responding to VAW in two different contexts. To this end, we asked how social workers frame their response to VAW and how their ways of framing elucidate institutional practices that facilitate interventions.

## Responding to Violence Against Women

### *Finland*

Despite Finland's high rates of VAW, its development as a Nordic welfare state adhered to the principle of gender neutrality, which resulted in neglecting gender as a category especially in public speech and legislation (Clarke, 2011; Lahelma, 2012; Husso et al., 2017). The position of women in a welfare state can be seen as a privileged one, but this does not preclude them from experiencing violence in intimate settings. Indeed, an individual can simultaneously occupy both privileged and oppressed positions (Dominelli, 2009; Etherington & Baker, 2018). As an example of a national conceptual framework, instead of the term "violence against women," the Finnish discourse shows a preference for "family violence" (Clarke, 2011; Pease, 2019; Virkki, 2017). Oppressive relations between men and women are not approached through concepts of patriarchy or gender inequality; consequently, ideas of male dominance and men's privileged societal position are neglected (Lundgren et al., 2010; Pease, 2019). Accordingly, violence is seen as a family dispute between two equal actors, and the responsibility for ending the violence falls on both the victim and the perpetrator (Hearn & McKie, 2010; Pease, 2019; Virkki, 2017). Furthermore, a national policy against VAW was not implemented until the 1990s in response to international pressure from the United Nations and European Union (EU). For example, marital rape was not criminalized until 1994. The invisibilization of gender is problematic when we consider the high rates of sexual and physical VAW (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015). According to research by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 38% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment in 2017 (Tasa-arvobarometri, 2017). In addition, almost 20% of women experienced threats of violence and/or concrete physical or sexual violence in 2017 (Danielsson & Näsi, 2018). According to data from Official Statistics of Finland (2019), of the 10,600 domestic violence (DV) cases reported to police, 77% were female-targeted offenses and more than 80% of the suspects were men. Moreover, intimate partner homicide victims are predominantly female (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

The Social Welfare Act was revised in 2015 as part of the ratification of the EU-wide Istanbul Convention. Commitment to the Convention obligates signatory countries to prevent and combat DV and VAW and bring perpetrators to justice. Finnish government obliges municipalities to organize services and develop professional competence in dealing with cases of violence especially in early-stage interventions and referrals to shelters. In its assessment of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe Expert Group on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) highlighted several issues needing improvement. These included, in particular, issues related to gender mainstreaming, position of immigrants, training of professionals, and a victim-centered approach to implementing the Convention (GREVIO, 2019).

Most social workers are public officials exercising public authority. Although Finland's comprehensive public service system includes fields like social and healthcare, services for victims are fragmented and their availability varies by region, since non-governmental organizations (NGOs) primarily carry out the interventions (Husso et al., 2020). Several national studies have mentioned professionals' inadequate skills, personal attitudes, and excessive workloads and a lack of care pathways as obstacles to combating violence in the public service system (e.g. Hearn & McKie, 2010; Nikupeteri, 2017; Piippo et al., 2020; Virkki et al., 2015).

### *India*

Domestic Violence Act 2005 names physical, emotional, sexual, verbal, and economic forms of abuse as violence. The law was a significant milestone in Indian legislation and in the campaign for women's rights, even if its implementation has been challenging (Pandya, 2014). VAW is interwoven in social divisions such as caste, age, and class. Rigid norms of "purity and pollution" define

and restrict social interaction and, for example, prohibit inter-caste marriage (Ghatak & Udogu, 2012). Caste-based sexual violence manifests, for example, as gang rapes perpetrated by higher caste males against lower caste females. The position of women in lower castes is associated with poverty, low education, and low socioeconomic status, with a high risk of exposure to violence and limited avenues for seeking help, even from parents (Anitha et al., 2018; Ghatak & Udogu, 2012; National Crime Records Bureau, 2016). When meeting practitioners, the first author noted that dowry-related violence was a visible social problem that professionals encountered in their practice. Dowry—in the form of cash, jewelry, or property given to the groom’s family by the bride’s parents—especially in North India, has traditionally been a part of marriage negotiations and arrangements (Anitha et al., 2018). Although the Dowry Prohibition Act has banned the practice since 1961, it persists. States differ in the prevalence of dowry, and since the 1980s, anti-dowry movements have campaigned to make dowry-related violence a matter of public concern. It should also be noted that not all women experience the practice as oppressive (Anitha et al., 2018). However, a young bride from a poor family that cannot fulfill dowry expectations, on moving into her husband’s house to live in a joint family, may be at severe risk of facing harassment and torture that may lead to murder or suicide (Barik, 2011; Kethineni et al., 2016; Menon & Allen, 2018).

From 2011 to 2015, reports of VAW in India increased by almost 44%, with more than 300,000 reported cases in 2015 (National Crime Records Bureau of India, 2016). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2016), 28% of Indian women aged 15–49 years had experienced violence perpetrated by their husband. However, these statistics have been critiqued because rates of violence are underreported and also vary from state to state and between urban and rural areas (Hackett, 2011; Kim, 2018).

Although MA-level social work education exists in India, social work is not a registered profession in the country. A social work degree is required only in rare places; volunteering plays a key role both in community and social development and in responding to VAW (Dash, 2017; Kethineni et al., 2016). Employment in social work in India differs from that in Finland. Rao (2013) emphasized that Indian social workers prefer the non-governmental sector and only interact with various levels of the public sector in situations where governmental action or inaction affects their clients. Furthermore, service providers in formal agencies are considered more likely than professionals in women’s organizations to exhibit patriarchal ideology and a victim-blaming mindset (Menon & Allen, 2018). In situations of conflict, approaching formal governmental agencies for help is rarely an option. Owing to traditional cultural norms, social workers are sensitive to maintaining family cohesion

**Table I.** Premises of Violence Interventions.

	Finland	India
Definition of domestic violence	Not associated with VAW	Different categories of VAW
Rate of violence against women	High	High
Definition of social work	Clearly defined area staffed by uniform professional groups	Less clearly defined area; several different professional and non-professional groups can be counted as social workers
Role of the state in organizing services	Traditionally minor, currently increasing	Minor
Active in response to violence	NGOs	NGOs
Social work education	Academic discipline	Academic discipline

Note. Based on Meeuwisse and Swärd (2007).

and unity rather than upholding the independence of family members (George & Krishnakumar, 2014; Pandya, 2014; Payne, 2005; Piippo et al., 2020). Moreover, India's public sector is characterized by political mistrust and lack of transparency, which may conflict with social workers' ethical and professional principles (Kethineni et al., 2016; Rao, 2013).

The premises of violence interventions are summarized in Table 1.

## Theoretical Considerations

The starting point of this study was to adopt a critical constructionist view in approaching social realities and social categories as things that are produced and reproduced in interaction (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1991), with a focus on power and processes of inequity as the context in which this interaction unfolds (Kincheloe, 2005). Although Goffman (1974) considered framing as an individual's cognitive experience and did not emphasize institutional processes behind the framing, he recognized that individuals' experiences of reality are linked to social situations, and every social situation has a relatively well-established framework that shapes a culture-bound perception of reality. According to Lorino et al. (2017), "Frames are neither structural determinations of the meaning of situations, nor are they individual schemes of cognition or stabilized routines" (p. 36). Instead, frames offer meaning perspectives; they do not predict participants' actual actions but can evolve according to the social situation. Social work interventions involve professionals making sense of a victim's complex living conditions and interacting not only with the victim but also with the societal, organizational, and ideological contexts (Dominelli, 2009; Payne, 2005). Accordingly, a frame as a flexible and evolving concept is suitable for identifying professional practices in sensitive cases of VAW and shared elements and differences in how Finnish and Mumbai social workers make sense of VAW interventions.

Every social situation has a relatively well-established primary framework that makes acts of daily living understandable, referring to *guided doing* (Goffman, 1974). According to Schön and Rein (1994), frames are social constructions and structures for "selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality to provide guidelines for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting" (p. 32). Individuals may maintain and reproduce frames, but they cannot create them, as frames are constructed socioculturally when individuals share the meaning of a particular phenomenon (Goffman, 1974). Frames are not always activated consciously but through different socioculturally divided meanings (Goffman, 1974). Framing contains a moral judgment, a definition of the problem under consideration, and an assessment of the possible causes of the problem. In other words, frames define what we focus on or ignore (van Gorp & Vercruyssen, 2012), such as whether VAW is a problem requiring action.

## Method

### *Focus Groups and Individual Interviews*

We utilized focus group interviews both in Finland ( $n = 20$ ) and Mumbai ( $n = 14$ ) and personal interviews in Mumbai ( $n = 4$ ) to collect qualitative data. Interviews give participants control, enabling them to make clarifications or address issues about which the interviewer would not have asked otherwise (Liamputtong, 2010). A researcher-guided focus group provides a tool for exploring different attitudes and opinions concerning a specific topic within a homogeneous group of persons assumed to have the best information regarding that topic (Fern, 2001). The focus group discussions with social workers were facilitated by one to three researchers who are very familiar with the focus group interview method and experienced in interviewing professionals. All interviews were audio-

**Table 2.** Interview Themes.

Encountering DV in the interviewees' profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• definitions and conceptions of DV</li> <li>• frequency and relevance of DV-related tasks</li> <li>• emotions related to these tasks</li> <li>• practices, instructions, and guidelines</li> </ul>
Educational and professional training regarding DV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• previous training (education and/or during one's career)</li> <li>• content and duration of training</li> <li>• forms of training (voluntary/mandatory)</li> </ul>
Training needs relating to DV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relevant topics for future training</li> <li>• needs and wishes for forms and content of future training</li> </ul>
DV and interprofessional cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• defining the most frequent collaborators</li> <li>• challenges in cooperation</li> <li>• good practices in cooperation</li> <li>• factors facilitating or hindering effective cooperation</li> </ul>
Three wishes to a good fairy: this would be the best way of intervening in violence in our work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• key aspects that would help in optimally resolving issues relating to DV</li> </ul>

Note. Adopted from Notko et al. (2021).

taped and transcribed. In the extracts, G refers to the focus group, P to the participant, and I to the individual interviewee.

### Interview Themes

A similar thematic structure was used for collecting data in both countries. Table 2 presents the main themes covered in both the focus group and individual interviews.

### Data Collection

Finnish data were collected from May 2017 to February 2018 as part of a large national research and development project titled *Enhancing Professional Skills and Raising Awareness on Domestic Violence, Violence against Women and Shelter Services (EPRAS)*, funded by the EU and conducted in cooperation with the University of Jyväskylä, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the Police University College, and several municipalities and shelters (Niklander et al., 2019). The research plan was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Jyväskylä. 10 focus groups comprised social and healthcare professionals and police officers ( $N = 57$ ) and lasted approximately 90 min each. Discourses of all social workers' ( $n = 20$ ) who participated focus groups were used in the analysis of this study. Data from Mumbai were collected from February to April 2018 during the first author's three-month research visit to the TATA Institute of Social Sciences. After exploring local NGOs working with women, she contacted them for more information. Subsequently, she discussed possible NGOs to recruit with her colleagues. With the help of local scholars, participants were recruited from NGOs located in the urban area of Mumbai and specialized in working with victims. There were two focus groups comprising six and eight participants, respectively, and four individual interviews. The informants represented a total of five different NGOs (Piippo et al., 2020). The data collection complied with the ethical guidelines of the University of Eastern Finland and the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012). Table 3 presents the participants' demographic information.

## Ethical Considerations

As authors, we are aware of feminist discussions concerning the power relations between the researcher and the researched as well as the shadow of colonialism, and we want to avoid the unquestioned application of Western ideology to “empower” women in the Global South (e.g., Mohanty, 1995; Pandya, 2014). A challenge in conducting cross-cultural research between the Global North and Global South is developing an approach to differences without adopting an oppressive position (Brant Castellano, 2004; Liamputtong, 2010). Therefore, ethical issues were considered carefully with the aim of building trust through the principles of respect, relationships, collaboration, confidentiality, and reflexivity. The first author presented her research plan at a symposium in India and sought comments from several local scholars. The plan clarified the research procedure and possible risks, damage, or harm to participants (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012). The host university accepted the research plan. The first author requested collective consent from managers, who then informed their personnel about the possibility of participating in the study. On the one hand, consent could be seen as organizational-level involvement in data collection, which may have lowered the threshold for employee participation. On the other hand, focus group participants were asked to participate by the managerial level, which may have put pressure on participants to answer in a specific way (Liamputtong, 2010). Therefore, in the interview situations, the first author emphasized that participation was voluntary, and oral, informed consent was sought from participants, who were explained the research aims and their right to withdraw their consent at any stage without consequences. Another example of hierarchical tensions can be differences in class, ethnicity, and education (Liamputtong, 2010; Padgett, 2008). However, all participants in the interviews were educated professionals (Table 3), and the interviews occurred in their work environment. In addition, to forge relationships, the first author explained her position as a learner and researcher, not an evaluator. She was also candid about the duration of her stay (3 months), her accommodation with local students, and her efforts to learn Hindi. She explained how information would be used and offered participants the possibility of commenting on early drafts of manuscripts. The means of storing data were explained and participants were contacted afterwards to thank them and to ask for some detailed information during data transcription (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

## Analysis

ATLAS.ti software was utilized to perform the analysis. We remained cognizant that employing a frame provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied (Goffman, 1974) and searched the data for excerpts concerning interventions in VAW. We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify and code extracts illuminating both barriers to intervening in VAW and institutional practices that facilitate responding to VAW (e.g., implementing legislation and

**Table 3.** Finnish and Mumbai Social Workers’ Demographic Data.

	Mumbai data	Finnish data
Participants	17 females, 1 male	20 females
Educational background	15 MSW 3 BA and BE	20 MSW
Work experience (average)	10 years	13 years
Workplace (number of participants)	NGO (18)	Shelter (3) Child protection (10) Family counseling (3) Adult services (4)



following agency procedures). We took a critical perspective (Kincheloe, 2005) on the analytical question, “What elements of women victims’ lives are considered most essential?” and identified four themes: women’s unequal societal position, women’s rights, women’s service needs, and women’s relationships and living environment. Further analysis unveiled the diverse and evolving approaches (e.g., human rights, law) that would enable intervention (Piippo et al., 2020; Virkki et al., 2015). With the critical lens, ways of framing affected definitions of the situation at hand, if and how a woman’s contextual position was considered, and professionals’ orientations to clients (Kincheloe, 2005; Lorino et al., 2017). Finally, anti-oppressive, juridical, procedural, and collaborative frames were constructed (Table 4).

## Findings

### *Anti-Oppressive Frame*

This frame focused on discussions reflecting institutional practices of recognizing oppressive power relations and promoting human rights and social justice in providing sensitive services. This structural understanding is important in responding to VAW because it illustrates the contextual factors associated with experiencing violence and seeking help and questions the cultural acceptance of male domination, a victim-blaming mindset, and stigma connected to VAW. In the Mumbai data, social workers sought to understand structural causes, like patriarchy and social acceptance of violence, as root causes of VAW.

**I3:** In most of the cases, we found women are coming from slum community. Hardly they have economic independency. They’re bound to live with joint family, most of time, having children. Economic dependency on her husband... even to think to go out of the house and do something on their own was very challenging. You can imagine a family where the head of the family is the husband. He is earning. Sometimes, he is an alcoholic and he is drinking all... but since the power of money comes from him, so the entire dynamics in the house is predominantly managed by man. (Mumbai)

**I2:** In fact, there was a woman who told me that “I can deal with the dog in the house, but I cannot deal with the wild dogs outside.” (Mumbai)

The above extracts exemplify intersections where sociocultural norms and values normalize a man’s right to use violence, rendering violence an inevitable part of a woman’s life within or outside the home. A young bride at the intersection of gender, caste, and age, for instance, can be highly vulnerable and bound to her matrimonial home and in-laws in a complex way (see Anitha et al., 2018). Family privacy and the walls of the home are associated simultaneously with scenes of violence and a safe place that actually protects women from more acts of violence at the public places.

In the Finnish data, gender as a social category was not highly visible and the discourses represented a gender-neutral construction of violence. A comment made by a social worker from Finnish child protection—“There are quite a lot of provocative women as well” (G10P6)—shows neglect of the asymmetry of power, placing the responsibility for the man’s violent behavior on the woman (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Hearn & McKie, 2010; Virkki, 2017). Yet participants recognized women’s vulnerability to violence in situations where gender intersects with ethnicity. In general, social workers discussed VAW as a severe problem among Roma people and immigrant families, but their discourses reflected the service system’s inability to respond adequately.

**Table 4.** Organization of Frames Governing Intervention in Violence Against Women.

Frame	The essence of institutional practices	Positioning of gender in institutional practices	Focus of institutional practices carried out	Finland	Mumbai
Anti-oppressive frame	Human rights	Women's unequal societal position	Recognizing gendered and structural inequality	Recognizing vulnerability of immigrant women	Recognizing vulnerability of female gender
Juridical frame	Law	Women's rights	Implementing violence-related legislation	Legal duty to intervene in VAW	Legal power to intervene in VAW
Procedural frame	Service structures	Women's service needs	Following agency procedures for interventions	Violence integrated in general work process	Violence-specific work process
Collaborational frame	Networks	Women's social relationships and living environment	Working with multi-professional and communal networks	Inter-professional work	Community work

**G9P2:** When there are such harsh experiences, they have seen killings and they have been raped. That violence is so different from what ... intimate partner violence is generally experienced here. So, I thought of that kind of trauma expertise [would be needed]. Because we also don't have places to send those people to. Because the shelter does not accept them, because it is not about intimate partner violence. (Finland, child protection)

**G1P01:** There are no tools for how to deal with these [immigrants] differently from others. That's how those things can be affected. Could we also have groups or something, so that they can get support from each other? (Finland, shelter)

These particular women's experiences of violence, affected by the intersection of multiple categories of inequity, were defined as differing from the experiences of "local" women. Although women's special needs were identified, at present, tools to help were limited. Several groups considered community as essential and reflected on how kin networks and neighbors actually shape women's experiences of violence and how this affects victims' agency and everyday lives. The possibility of launching group-based programs was discussed as an idea for development. In addition, immigration status and the importance of understanding the marginal position of asylum seekers and undocumented victims as service users emerged. Besides structural factors, such as lack of language skills, barriers such as fear of deportation complicate access to services. In addition, asylum seeker legislation includes short-term acute crisis help and excludes all further interventions. This underlines the need to raise awareness of appropriate NGOs and foster genuine collaboration in providing services.

### *Juridical Frame*

The juridical frame represents recognizing violence as a juridical issue and implementing legislation as an institutional practice. For participants in both countries, the criminalization of violence communicates that the society does not accept violence. This viewpoint challenges patriarchal power and male privilege as legitimate reasons for VAW and promotes an understanding of violence as a public issue and a social problem. From the perspectives of the non-governmental and governmental sectors, legislation gives different mandates for taking action.

In Mumbai, legislation represents the *legal power to carry out interventions* targeting VAW (see Dominelli, 2009). Domestic Violence Act 2005 was undoubtedly a deeply significant achievement toward improving the status of women, although activists and academics have criticized it for failing to protect women and acknowledge VAW as a human rights issue (Ghatak & Udogu, 2012; Kim, 2018; Pandya, 2014; George & Krishnakumar, 2014). However, for participants, the Act justifies professional practices with victims and is the basis of their advocacy work for women's rights in a society with deeply rooted societal acceptance of male privilege.

**I1:** When we see a woman getting empowered, she becomes aware of her rights and laws related to her. She becomes aware of her dignity as a woman. (Mumbai)

Participants highlighted that to implement the law, all professionals have a duty to inform a victim of her legal rights concerning residence, among other things, and her rights to services, such as free legal services, and to file a complaint under the Indian Penal Code. However, in discussing their practices, social workers recognized the societal atmosphere of impunity and inaction of governmental institutions as obstacles to holding perpetrators to account. Furthermore, the comment, "But this woman knows well that she has to spend entire life with him" (G2P7), exemplifies victims' fear of retaliation by the perpetrator or in-laws if she reports the violence to police.

Similarly, Finnish data showed the relevance of legislation in increasing awareness and shaping attitudes toward violence. Stalking has been criminalized in Finland since 2014 with a maximum

penalty of two years in prison. Social workers discussed how criminalization itself enhances the conceptual understanding of violence by naming stalking, for instance, as a criminal offense.

**G1P3:** I think it's been around all the time, but it's kind of got the name that it's stalking. And today, it is spoken of as a form of violence.

**G1P1:** So, when the criminal law has come, and SHADOW project [a national development project] has influenced, that when I have been trained, and so (...).

**G1P2:** Yeah, really, after the law, and then came these materials also, what to give clients. (Finland, shelter)

Although participants discussed implementation as a lengthy process, they had observed progress. However, in Finnish public sector organizations, institutional practices originating from legislation focus more on legal duties. Intervening in cases of violence is approached as an action that the *law makes necessary to carry out* (see Dominelli, 2009). Finnish social workers discussed their role as public officials exercising public authority stipulated by law. The illusion of gender equality (e.g., Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Virkki, 2017) and the notion of parties of violence as equal actors were challenged because the law recognizes women as a vulnerable group and requires practices to protect them. Thus, intervening in violence was viewed not only a right but also as a duty. This was characterized as a mandate to work and a "tool" to cope with some ethically demanding situations when intervening in family privacy.

### Procedural Frame

Law and legislation, on which the previous frame focuses, are translated into operational policies by local agencies performing statutory duties (Dominelli, 2009). The procedural frame refers to institutional practices involving instructions for work in the form of established models for taking action in cases where violence has occurred. Two different courses of action were identified relating to the type of service provided. First, violence intervention practices can be integrated into the *general work process*, more common in Finnish public service organizations. A more focused *violence-specific work process* was reflected in Mumbai NGOs.

In Finnish social and healthcare organizations, violence interventions are not the primary task, and the duration of treatment can be short. The work process deals with an individual work orientation involving recognizing violence, asking about violence, and making necessary referrals. As stated earlier, pre-established, routinized questions for screening clients are essential for identifying violence and they also reduce discomfort in asking about violence (e.g., Kethinen et al., 2016; Myhill, 2017; Virkki et al., 2015). However, social workers discussed the significance of more detailed procedures after violence has been recognized. A need for structure in handling information that clients have divulged and to facilitate assessing what to prioritize and how to progress was expressed.

**G10P1:** We've got instructions for how it works. But the situation can come suddenly; it may come suddenly even during your home visit, when a child or someone else begins to tell you. Yes, there is always a little bit of something like "Help me with how to work here". What to ask and what to do. It is not a routine for me. And it is always a bit of a surprise situation, although it's common. (Finland, child protection)

The extract above demonstrates a situation where existing models for action are inadequate. Social workers discussed the need for separate work process models both for cases where the victim's life is threatened, thus necessitating immediate action, and cases that can be referred, for instance, for

further treatments. This more detailed violence-specific work process with a deeper understanding of contextual factors affecting the victim's life was visible in the Mumbai data in the form of a woman-centered orientation.

Mumbai practitioners recognized women as a marginalized group, and adopting a woman-centered orientation enabled them to approach women's personal goals and interpretation of their surroundings, which are characterized by social interdependence.

**G1P1:** See, we use woman-centered approach. We don't say, "This is the goal." It depends on woman; what does she want. (Mumbai)

**G2P8:** And taking into account, you give her four or five options. If she takes option A, there still is like B, C, D. So, all options are open. And then she has to make a final decision. And whatever this decision she makes, then we support her. Selection of plan B: Give her time to understand, and then she goes. Then it may be that she goes with plan C. Okay, that is it. Helping her, persuading that, so that is when she is satisfied, you're satisfied. (Mumbai)

As shown above, social workers illustrated that a woman-centered orientation emphasizes the woman and her expressed needs and lived experience as a member of her community. A woman-centered orientation as an institutional practice does not include assumptions of organizational goals and linear progress, which are typical of the public sector (e.g., Menon & Allen, 2018; Pandya, 2014; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Highlighting the relationship between the client and her surroundings, social workers considered their role in clarifying the woman's situation, negotiating a shared starting point, and anticipating the possible consequences of the woman's decision.

### *Collaborational Frame*

As a Mumbai social worker put it, "Working with violated women is not my individual thing" (14). Accordingly, this last frame underlines intervening in VAW as a collaborational endeavor. In the Finnish data, institutional practices were related to *successful interprofessional interventions*. Mumbai participants also mentioned the importance of fluent and flexible cooperation with healthcare professionals, police, and lawyers, for example. However, echoing findings from earlier studies (e.g., George & Krishnakumar, 2014; Kethineni et al., 2016; Pandya, 2014), Mumbai social workers placed more emphasis on practices of *activating communities* and informal networks in a woman's life sphere.

In line with earlier studies (e.g., Husso et al., 2020; Myhill, 2017; Nikupeteri, 2017; Notko et al., 2021; Virkki & Jäppinen, 2017), Finnish social workers specified a shared understanding of VAW as a relevant problem to address, clear division of work and responsibilities, and an awareness of tasks in other professions as prerequisites for collaboration. They also highlighted existing models and structures supporting cooperation.

**G8P2:** Yes, I think MARAC [Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences] is a really good example of that. That has been received and clients have informed us that they have been really satisfied with that.

**G8P1:** I think I have good experience with MARAC and with the police, for example. I think that in MARAC, the police say, "Give the client my phone number directly," and the client can call right away. And when you can tell that the police are giving this and these kinds of safety instructions, and if you feel like it, call, here is the number of the police. So, I guess it's from the client's perspective. That the client then felt that so many people were thinking about her case, that now she realizes how serious it was. (Finland, child protection)

As shown above, social workers reflected on positive experiences of MARAC, a form of interprofessional cooperation that originated in Great Britain and was established in Finland in the 2010s by the National Institute of Health and Welfare. According to participants, an expert group of professionals from different fields can help to meet women's individual service needs arising from complex life situations and different backgrounds. Regular, pre-ordered meetings create an arena for sharing information, identifying and assessing risks regarding the situations of victims and perpetrators, providing smooth consultations to make necessary referrals, formulating safety plans, and conducting follow-ups that directly benefit clients.

Mumbai participants reflected on the importance of interprofessional collaboration especially in cases where women need medical or legal help to report abuse or to initiate a divorce. Unlike in the Finnish data, however, community-based orientation and building interconnections in women's informal networks were discussed in both the focus group and individual interviews.

**I3:** So, who is the first responding is the community—other people who are there in the periphery. First, we formed groups. With the group members, we actually registered a women's organization within the slum, managed by women. What happens afterwards [office hours]? You have to create a system which exists in the community. No matter how much I try to convince you... But when your neighbor tries to tell you, it will have much more impact. They were trained, like, in what services are provided, if there are any police cases happening, filing complaints with the police, and so on. And that really helped. (Mumbai)

Participants indicated the importance of working with violated women in their informal networks and local communities, especially in slums and rural areas. Social workers ran awareness-raising programs in communities, launched media campaigns, trained community volunteers, and organized self-help groups beyond office hours to respond to violence.

## Limitations

We are aware that Finland and India have significant institutional differences and divergent sociocultural backgrounds. However, the Indian non-governmental sector and the Finnish public sector are the most typical professional environments of social workers in these countries. This was a small-scale study, and Indian data were collected in the urban area of Mumbai, in the state of Maharashtra. Therefore, although participants with wide-ranging work experience were recruited from violence-specific units and, thus, can be assumed to have the best possible information on the topic, the transferability of results cannot be taken for granted. However, the results do foster an understanding of social workers' response to VAW in the Indian context, which has been an under-researched area thus far.

## Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study identified and analyzed the *anti-oppressive, juridical, procedural, and collaborative frames* in social workers' responses to VAW. Each frame revealed different institutional practices that facilitate professionals' action but may also create barriers in responding to VAW, with variations in meaning-making of VAW and negotiations of different responsibilities and priorities in action. The following institutional practices were identified: *recognizing gendered and structural inequality; implementing violence-related legislation; following agency procedures for interventions; and working with multi-professional and communal networks.*

Findings from both countries mirror how deeply embedded responding to VAW is in structural factors. In Finland, ways of framing revealed little evidence of a feminist approach to VAW, in contrast to Mumbai. Institutional practices emerging from The Finnish data represent an individual-centered work orientation and state-based, “woman-friendly” policy implemented by welfare state professionals, whereas Mumbai data paint visible community mobilization and grassroots campaigns. Although Finland has a welfare service system, NGOs have had a central role in providing services to victims. The welfare state has been cited as a project-based society (Husso et al., 2020), where the responsibilities of welfare provision are distributed broadly and professionals’ skills in responding to VAW are enhanced through short, project-based development programs.

Analyses of data from both countries indicated that institutional practices under the juridical frame highlight that a legal response and criminalization with more severe sentences for perpetrators resonate with the principles of carceral feminism (Mehrotra et al., 2016). However, some Mumbai participants also questioned whether prosecuting male perpetrators will help victims, if adequate support to ensure the victims’ safety and recovery from traumatic experiences are not provided. As anti-carceral feminists (e.g., Kim, 2020) have argued, increased penalties may have unintended consequences for people at the intersection of already oppressed positions, such as low-caste victims or undocumented, low-income women of color. Informal courts for rural women, such as the Nari Adalats established by India’s government, are good examples of using local socio-cultural practices to address age-old cultural practices of discrimination against women (Kethineni et al., 2016).

Ways of framing expressed by Mumbai participants demonstrated normalization of VAW at the attitudinal, communal, and societal levels. At the same time, the frames were characterized as gender-sensitive. The analysis of Finnish data revealed gender-neutral rhetoric and “genderless gender” in institutional practices (Clarke, 2011; Hearn & McKie, 2010; Lahelma, 2012; Pease, 2019; Piippo et al., 2021; Virkki & Jäppinen, 2017). In line with findings from earlier studies (e.g., Clarke, 2011; Hearn, 2013; Lundgren et al., 2010; Virkki & Jäppinen, 2017), we can investigate the extent to which neglect of gender has contributed to the tendency to ignore and bypass the violence experienced by women in Finland and if this can be seen as normalization of VAW as well. Accordingly, we postulate that dismissal of VAW as an issue and neglect of violated women’s experiences travel across cultures and occur in both Mumbai and Finland (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Hearn & McKie, 2010; Virkki, 2017).

While gender as a social category might not have stood out in the Finnish data, there was evidence of how gender works through ethnicity, thereby exposing women’s vulnerability. On the one hand, this can be seen as cultural sensitivity, which allows for recognizing VAW (e.g., Pease, 2019). On the other hand, there might be a risk of so-called culturization (see Anthias, 2014; Mohanty, 1995), referring to the way in which the existence of VAW may somehow be easier for professionals to recognize and name as a human rights violation *somewhere else*, like in countries in the Global South, or among migrant women in the welfare state, while they may simultaneously reject the idea that either Finnish or non-Finnish women living in Finland can be exposed to violence.

Our findings stress the importance of understanding social categories and communities as contextual factors beyond victims’ behavior, especially in cases where victims are reluctant to leave their abusers or report violence to police. Notably, sexuality as a social category in relation to exposure to violence was neither discussed in the Finnish nor Mumbai data. Homosexuality was not decriminalized in India until 2018, and although the societal atmosphere in Finland is more open to homosexuality, violence among LGBTQ people is clearly an under-researched topic.

In sum, changes in framings and practices require changes at multiple organizational levels, including at the individual level with staff and the system level with policies and procedures, resulting in a more effective environment for identifying and helping victims of VAW. Our study opens the

arena in both countries for debating questions, for example, concerning how to develop survivor-centered VAW interventions that look beyond the survivor–perpetrator binary and pay attention to the complexity of violence affecting individuals, families, and communities (Mehrotra et al., 2016); how to engage multiple stakeholders and address social positionality and axes of diversity (Hearn & McKie, 2010; Mehrotra, 2010; Strier & Binyamin, 2014); and how to foster understanding of paradigms beyond race, class, and gender and include processes of oppression, such as colonization, migration, sexuality, and ability in social work education to equip students for practice (Bubar et al., 2016; Mehrotra, 2010).


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### ORCID iDs

Sisko Piippo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4289-7509>

Marita Husso  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3714-8477>

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## Author biography

**Sisko Piippo**, (MSSc) is a project researcher at the University of Eastern Finland and Tampere University. Currently, she is finalizing her PhD thesis, which focuses on social work response to domestic violence. Her publications include articles on this topic in Finland and in India. She works in the developing project focusing on the child protection services and the services for the elderly and in the research project aiming to address gender-based violence in schools.

**Marianne Notko** (PhD, Title of Docent) has studied experiences of domestic violence, health and social care responses to domestic violence, and children's everyday lives in family context and in educational settings. She has been working in several projects funded by the Academy of Finland, EU Commission and foundation research grants at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, and at the Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä.

**Marita Husso**, (Ph.D.) is an Associate Professor of social policy at the faculty of Social sciences at Tampere University. Her recent research focuses on interpersonal violence, welfare services, social theory, care work, embodiment, and gendered agency. She is the first editor and author of anthologies *Interpersonal Violence—Differences and Connections* (Routledge, 2017) and *Violence, Gender and Affect—Interpersonal, Institutional and Ideological Practices* (Palgrave 2021).

**Janet Carter Anand** holds a PhD from the University of La Trobe, Melbourne and is currently a Professor of International Social Work, University of Eastern Finland. She has published internationally on the topics of global mindedness, migration, inclusion and quality of life, critical cultural competence, cross cultural research and international social work education.