Using Art-based Participatory Approaches to Research Experiences of Polygamy with Middle Eastern Women in London

Elena Vacchelli

The paper draws on a recent research collaboration with the London based women's organization MEWso (Middle Eastern Women society organization). It discusses the importance of storytelling and other creative and participatory approaches, such as the World Café, to co-produce knowledge on polygamy involving a different range of social actors such as third sector organizations, academics and women involved in polygamous familial relationships. The paper focuses specifically on one of the workshops where the researchers used body-map storytelling, which is particularly appropriate for helping participants share their story with the rest of the group. This approach has been called "visceral methods" because it draws on the sensory and affective experiences mobilised to reveal discursive, material and structural aspects of research participants' stories (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2014). Body maps have also been understood as cognitive maps representing a mixture of spatial cognition, place representations and spatial imagination that can provide information not only about places themselves, but also about people's identities and behaviours in relation to them (Vacchelli 2018). Body maps, similarly to cognitive maps, have the potential to convey ideas and images of individuals' economic, political, cultural or social contexts with an emphasis on their emotions and feelings (Mendoza and Morén-Alegret, 2013).

Keywords
Art-based Methodologies; Participatory Research; Body-mapping Storytelling; Migrant Women; Polygamy.

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Introduction

The research project presented here builds on the work of the Applied Sociology Centre at the University of Greenwich in the UK. It was carried out in 2018 to bring together academic researchers and third sector organisations' practitioners to stimulate a reflection on polygamous practices through innovative methodologies informed by a participatory ethos. The project uses a range of participatory methods and practices aiming to give migrant women in polygamous families a creative space to have their voices and opinions heard through strategies that specifically foster a bottom-up type participation. This pilot research project was carried out in collaboration with the London based women's organization MEWso (Middle Eastern Women society organization) and its research findings are summarised in the co-authored research report *Polygamy matters. Creative workshops with women in polygamous relationships* (Vacchelli *et al.* 2018). Through a range of daily activities, MEWso helps Middle Eastern women to overcome isolation, guiding them out from the confinement of the home and making them feel more integrated in the community. These activities range from health workshops to art therapy, storytelling, gardening and group sports (such as cycling and swimming) to support physical and mental health, signposting and accompanying women to the GP to help with language barriers. In partnering with this organisation I build on my previous research (Vacchelli and Peyrefitte 2018) which identifies that women's organisations are particularly responsive to addressing gender, ethnic and class inequalities. Civil society organisations such as MEWso are constantly developing ways to overcome institutional gaps in welfare provision by finding alternative approaches to provide customised support to the women they help. According to recent policy reports on

integration (Casey Review 2016; Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper 2018) the UK is struggling with integrating an increasing number of both intra-European and third country national migrants. At a time when the paradigm of multiculturalism is no longer accepted as a viable route to secure successful integration (Vacchelli 2017), it is important to implement new frameworks for integration, ensuring that grassroots approaches developed by civil society organisations are used to explore and tackle hidden problems such as polygamy among migrant populations. In focusing on the contested practice of polygamy, the paper discusses the importance of storytelling and other creative and participatory approaches, such as the World Café, to co-produce knowledge involving a different range of social actors such as third sector organizations, academics and women involved in polygamous familial relationships.

Polygamy in the UK

Although it is impossible to establish accurate figures, the number of polygamous marriages in the UK is estimated to be between 1000 and 20.000 (Rehman 2013, 187)[1]. A survey of 900 married Muslim women conducted for the Channel 4 documentary *The Truth About Muslim Marriage*, found that 10% were in a polygamous relationship and 37% of women living in polygamous families had not consented to it (http://truevisiontv.com/films/details/295/the-truth-about-muslim-marriage). In the UK, the existence of polygamous marriages despite their official non-recognition is facilitated by a context of legal pluralism – the parallel influence of state and religious laws that enables the co-existence of civil and religious marriages. Although entering into a bigamous – and by extension polygamous – marriage is a criminal offence, that is only the case if one attempts to enter into more than one civil marriage. A polygamous relationship can still be created by marrying subsequent (or

[1] To date, there are no official statistics on the number of polygamous marriages in the UK.

all) wives only in religious marriage ceremonies (Shah 2003, 398; Charsley and Liversage 2013, 66; Manea 2016, 201-202; Fairbairn *et al.* 2018, 11).

Polygamy in the UK is most commonly practiced among Muslim communities where, even when contracting monogamous marriages, people often undergo a religious marriage ceremony called *nikah* thus bypassing officially recognized civil marriage. Shah describes this negotiation between different legal levels as ethnic minorities' reliance on "their own cultural resources to secure acceptable outcomes for themselves" (Shah 2003, 398). However, this institutionally unregulated agreement leads to a lack of legal protection for women. If they are not considered legally married, Muslim women who have contracted a religious marriage do not have the same rights as married women in case of divorce, nor do they have inheritance rights should the husband die (Fairbairn *et al.* 2017, 4-5; Shah 2003, 398; Sona 2005, 15). Some are not aware that a *nikah* marriage ceremony does not confer the same rights as a civil ceremony and is not valid in the eyes of the law (Manea 2016, 201-202; Fairbairn *et al.* 2018, 6). Often couples are indeed aware of this legal limbo but prefer to be married only Islamically, or postponing civil marriage to a later date. In some cases, they are using this religiously granted interim arrangement to test the relationship, effectively making it a sanctioned form of dating (Manea 2016, 201; Charsley 2006, 1176). Research suggests that there are husbands who deliberately mislead women about legal marriage requirements, either to ensure themselves a favorable position should the marriage break down, or because they are already married or plan to marry another wife (Manea 2016, 202; Fairbairn *et al.* 2018, 6).

An often-occurring scenario when interviewing women in polygamous families is that some women are unaware that their husbands have married another woman or that they are themselves second wives (Rehman 2013, 188). Sometimes there is no public acknowledgement of the new relationship (Rehman 2013, 187; Khan 2013, 59). Moreover, most husbands do not support their multiples wives and their children, effectively making them single mothers (Rehman 2013, 194). A community research project about women in polygamous marriages found that 27 out of 31 women surveyed were not supported financially by their husbands; 21 of those 27 relied on

welfare benefits to survive (Jaan 2014, 8). Rehman highlights that women who enter polygamous marriages knowingly, often do so because they have limited options (Rehman 2013, 192). For example, the position of a second wife can be offered to women who «hold diminished value in the marriage market» (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 68) such as divorcees, single mothers, widows and women over 30 (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 68; Khan 2013, 56).

Rehman argues that polygamous marriages are often «a site for domestic and/or sexual violence, child and early marriage, forced marriage, honor based violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking» (Rehman 2016b). Living in a polygamous marriage and the ensuing competition among wives can have a significantly negative impact on emotional wellbeing, with some women attributing the emotional pain they experience to their own lack of faith and not being a good enough Muslim (Rehman 2013, 192). Finding out one has been in a polygamous marriage unwittingly can have similar effects. According to a qualitative study of polygamy in the UK, 85% of the women who discovered their husband had another wife subsequently experienced depression (Rehman 2013, 193). In some cases, this has resulted in suicide (Rehman 2013, 195-196). There have been no clinical studies looking at the mental health impacts of polygamy in the UK, however there are studies that have researched this elsewhere. A meta-analysis of 22 studies conducted in the (broadly defined) Middle East[2], Africa[3] and Australia found «a higher prevalence of somatization, depression, anxiety, hostility, psychoticism and psychiatric disorder in polygynous wives as well as reduced life and marital satisfaction, problematic family functioning and low self-esteem» compared to monogamous women (Shepard 2013, 47). Of particular interest is that several of the studies in the sample highlighted senior wives as «particularly vulnerable to psychological distress» (Shepard 2013, 60), a finding that resonates with a British qualitative study suggesting that some first wives felt they had failed as a wife

[2] Israel (four studies), the United Arab Emirates (three studies), Kuwait (two studies), Jordan (two studies), Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria and Turkey.

[3] Uganda, Cameroon, Malawi, Nigeria and Tanzania.

or were «burdened by the shame of being a first wife as they knew they were being pitied at one level and judged at another» (Rehman 2016b).

The negative effects of polygamy have been highlighted by the Casey Review into Opportunity and Integration (2016) that called for the registration of all marriages taking place in the UK. The Casey Review states that «a number of accusations, anecdotes and assertions encountered throughout our engagement imply a common acceptance of polygamy – which impact negatively on women (and their children) who have not had a legal marriage, through denial of inheritance and maintenance rights – even if most people would not wish the situation upon themselves. In situations of polygamy, the power imbalance of an unregistered marriage is compounded by the power imbalance of being one of many spouses» (Casey 2016, 133-34). The Casey Review has been seen as controversial for failing to fully acknowledge the two-way nature of integration, for having a disproportionate focus on Muslim communities and for its flawed evidence base (Crossley 2018). It is therefore a questionable source regarding what would benefit Muslim women, especially as there have also been calls from Muslim women themselves to address the protection failings created by this legal pluralism. While some argue that the UK should be able to better accommodate alternative legal systems and that wider legal recognition of polygamy would be the most effective way to safeguard women's rights (Naqvi 2017; see also Shah 2008), others see compulsory registration of all religious marriages with the aim of limiting polygamy as the best response arguing that legal pluralism leads to «a stratified citizenry» (Manea 2016, 236; see also Rehman 2013, 2016a, 2016b).

Dissolving an Islamic marriage does not require civil court proceedings. It instead involves approaching a Sharia Council. Sharia law recognises three types of divorce: *talaq,* where the husband unilaterally terminates the marriages; *khul*, divorce initiated by the wife, and divorce by mutual agreement (Bano 2012, 40; Ali 2016). While it is possible for the wife to initiate divorce, unlike with *talaq*, this will not be granted unconditionally. Sharia courts award women lesser settlements than a civil divorce would, were they married under English law (Rehman 2016b). Even when a

civil marriage has taken place in addition to an Islamic one, husbands sometimes manipulate legal pluralism to their advantage. Some husbands do not grant their wife an Islamic divorce until civil divorce proceedings have been finalised in order to negotiate a favourable settlement regarding financial and property matters or children, or do not divorce the wife Islamically to prevent her from remarrying (Yilmaz 2005, 350).

Polygamy as a migration strategy

In some cases, men marry their second wife in Britain with only a *nikah* ceremony so that they can still sponsor the immigration application of an existing wife abroad (Shaw in Yilmaz 2005, 349). Alternatively, non-British men marry British Muslim women in a civil ceremony and divorce them after acquiring British citizenship in order to sponsor the immigration application of an existing wife abroad (Werbner in Charsley 2006, 1170). While women also sometimes make similar use of legal pluralism by refusing to grant their husbands civil divorces in order to prevent them bringing a new spouse from abroad, this does not prevent them marrying again within the country (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 70). Some men rely on polygamy to allow them to marry a wife of their own choosing as well as a wife chosen for them by their family (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 67; Rehman 2013, 195; Stewart 2013, 1276; Khan 2013, 59), however, this can later lead to the abandonment of one of the wives (Stewart 2013, 1276).

These examples highlight how a context of transnationalism has transformed the practice of polygamy. Charsley and Liversage argue that «contemporary forms of polygamy practised by Muslims in Europe are not simply age-old patriarchal traditions, reproduced in countries of settlement. […] Polygamy encompasses a broad range of family practices, some of which are new constructions arising from the specific conditions of transnational migration» (2013, 60). Migration can create new motivations and opportunities for polygamous marriage, linked to separation from families or attempts to circumvent immigration restrictions. The transnational context

in which these polygamous practices occur, also allows easier concealment of existing or new marriages from other spouses or the authorities (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 64). On the other hand, it can lead to cases of technical polygamy, where the relationship is in practice monogamous, but husbands remain technically married to two spouses. This can occur as a result of the parallel existence of religious and civil marriages in the UK or due to the involvement of marriages in the legal systems of different nation states (Charsley and Liversage 2013, 71).

Another factor contesting the claim that polygamy is simply an immigrant tradition, is that the practice of polygamy is actually increasing (Khan 2013, 56). According to Aina Khan, a solicitor specialising in Islamic family law, «Polygamy is becoming more common here (Britain) than it is even in the parts of the Muslim world. The average man seems to want to exercise his religious right to marry more than once although in my experience they want to do so without taking on any of the attendant responsibilities» (in Yilmaz 2005, 349). Some argue that the increase of polygamy is a result of Islamic revival (Rehman 2016a; Manea 2016). According to Manea the «rise of fundamentalist interpretations of Islam … has mainstreamed polygamy as part of an "Islamic way of life"» (2016, 202). According to Rehman, temporary marriages traditionally practiced only by Shia Muslims, are being adopted by other Muslims in the UK to legitimise temporary sexual relationships. She also highlights the impact they might have on the status of an existing marriage and whether that makes the marriage polygamous, especially in cases where the first wife is not aware of the arrangement (Rehman 2016b). As these practices are being transformed, Rehman suggest that "harmful marriage practices" would be a better term to describe polygamy and other potentially harmful practices than "harmful traditional practices" (Rehman 2013, 198-99). Another recent development that has helped to mainstream the acceptance of polygamy has been the use of print (Yilmaz 2005, 349) and online media to look for spouses willing to consider a polygamous marriage, with the website SecondWife.com being the most well-known polygamy matchmaking site (Rehman 2016b).

Participatory event to frame the project

The project was guided by a participatory ethos that informed the way in which preliminary themes were identified before the actual data collection with women in polygamous families took place. For this reason, an event was organised bringing together academic researchers, third sector organisations practitioners and community members to discuss polygamy and identify the next steps for the project. The participatory event took place at University of Greenwich on 8th December 2017. The event identified the main aspects of a potential campaign in order to raise awareness of the negative financial and emotional effects of familial practices such as polygamy on women and children. The event was divided in three parts: (i) an ice-breaking activity to get to know each other, (ii) a set of presentations and (iii) a World Café activity to identify relevant themes in a participatory manner. The initial ice-breaking activity focussed on exploring together the idea of safety and participants, in groups of two, asking each other questions such as "What makes you feel safe?". At the end of the interaction in pairs, each person had to introduce their partner to the group. At the same time, an illustrator (Paula Rozo) was visually representing the content that was shared by the group, resulting in the image below which highlights family, friends, feeling in control and protected within an intimate familiar space as important sites of safety.

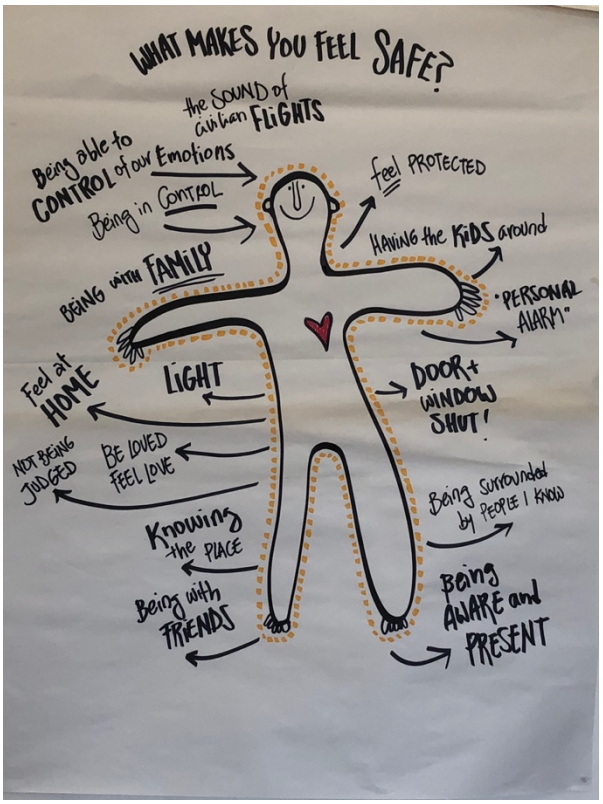

Fig. 1: Visualisation of the ice-breaking activity

The second part of the workshop saw short presentations (10 minutes) which set the scene for the World Café. The presentations involved the author; the CEO of MEWso, Halaleh Taheri; the research assistant for this project, Dr Andreja Mesaric; Yasmin Rehman who has been researching polygamy in the UK for two decades and has interviewed more than hundred women in polygamy; and Tricia Jenkins who is an experienced Digital Storytelling facilitator and whose established group facilitation expertise has been a fundamental guidance and source of inspiration for this project.

In the third part of the event, we used the World Café which was facilitated by Tricia Jenkins and Paula Rozo. Paula was in charge of visually illustrating the outcomes of the discussions. The purpose of the World Café is to draw upon the combined knowledge of researchers and women who are working with migrant women's support organisations, such as MEWso, in order to:

- Use the expertise and knowledge in the room, shining a light onto practices of polygamy in the UK in a supportive environment.

- Inform the ways in which these issues can be revealed during the ensuing field work, through the generation of themes and possible storytelling prompts.
- Identify social justice issues related to polygamy, that will inform or refine further research questions for this and subsequent projects and at the same time identify advocacy drivers that can feed into an active social action campaign in the future, to stimulate real and significant change.

Although the World Café is framed as a movement in the organisational change arena since the early 1990s, this approach is used globally in different disciplinary areas for creating meaningful and cooperative dialogue around relevant questions. Collaborative dialogue is the central feature of the World Café where small, intimate conversations are held as people move between groups sitting around café-like tables and cross-pollinate ideas. The World Café' s structure «enables groups to think together creatively as part of a single connected conversation» (Schieffer *et al.* 2004, 2). Through agreeing on different roles, participants take a range of responsibilities such as café convenor, table host, member/participant. The café convenor ensures that a hospitable environment is created; that questions that matter are explored; that everyone's contribution is encouraged; that diverse perspectives are heard; that collective discoveries are shared and "harvested" at the end of the collaborative discussion rounds[4]. The café host moderates the table discussions, takes notes and does not move from a table to another. Members randomly change table after the allocated time for each question. In the course of our Word Café, three questions were asked. Each question was discussed by every table before the participants could change table to discuss the next question with a different group of people. The

[4] **The World Café etiquette on the wall read:**
1. Focus on What Matters
2. Contribute Your Thinking
3. Speak Your Mind and Heart
4. Listen to Understand
5. Link and Connect Ideas
6. Listen Together for Insights and Deeper Questions *(Playing, Doodling, Drawing are all encouraged!)*
7. Have Fun!

questions lead to the following discussions which can also be visualised through the illustrations produced by Paula Rozo.

Question 1: *Based on your experience, what do you think are the key issues for women in polygamous relationships*?

The so called "harvesting" (i.e. reporting back of the discussions which took place in the individual tables to the rest of the group) for Question 1 suggests the following with regards to the key issues affecting polygamy:

- The psychological impact of polygamy is not easy to measure.
- Polygamy can potentially limit women's agency in a broad sense that goes beyond individual agency (very often this is deeply conditioned by faith).
- Not everyone is the same, as some women choose it. However, legal protection (for instance in case of inheritance, divorce, bereavement…) should be in place.
- Family relationships: often sex of children is an important determinant in decision to marry more wives (males are more desirable in cultures where polygamy is practiced); women who have not been informed of their husband's decision to re-marry feel cheated; relationship between father and children is affected and role of the mother changes in the new family constellation where the husband/father is absent.
- Practice of polygamy depends on belief system in place across cultures, however it is often a matter of human rights and equality.

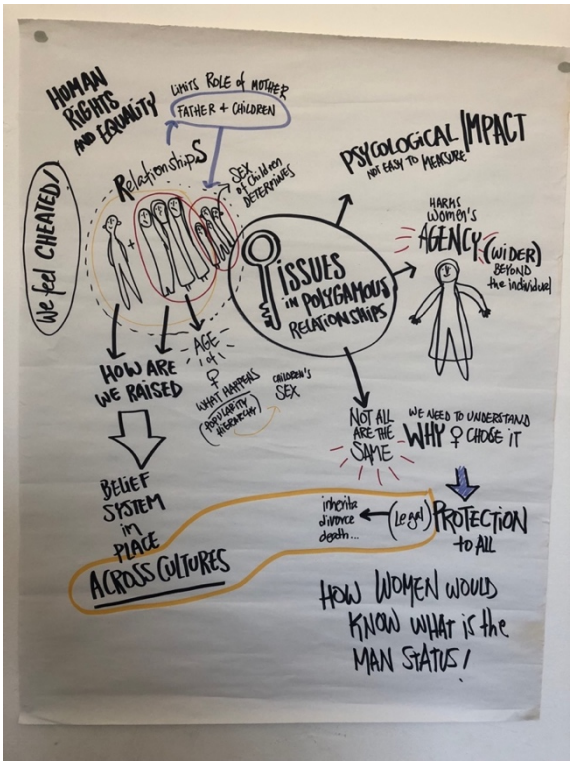

Figure 2: Harvesting for Question 1

Question 2: *What are the main steps to be undertaken in order to change the current situation and ensure women are made aware of their lack of protection if they don't undertake a civil marriage*?

The harvesting for question 2 suggests that the steps to be undertaken in order to change the current situation and ensure women are made aware of their lack of protection if they don't undertake a civil marriage are:

- Talk more about why this type of relationship is important to them.
- Talk widely about privilege.
- Be better informed before accepting a polygamous relationship.
- Importance of registering marriages.
- Reduce all types of potential situations of vulnerability.

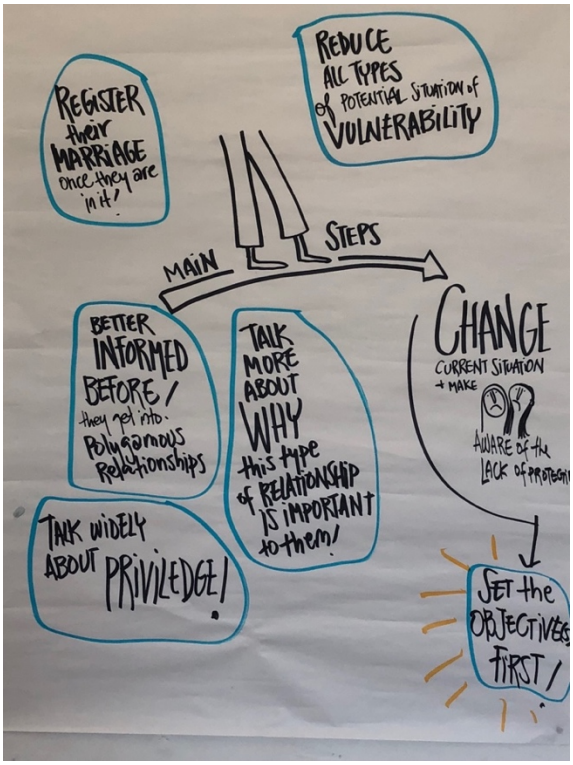

Fig. 3: Harvesting for Question 2

Question 3: *How can migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and their children's personal stories contribute to bringing about change*?

The harvesting for question 3 suggests that paying attention to women's stories can bring about change in a way that places women's stories at the centre, allowing them to decide for themselves what to tell, how to tell these stories, and how to share them.

Fig. 4: Harvesting for Question 3

The themes identified in a participatory manner as part of the World Café served to become aware of personal and advocacy issues in polygamy and be better prepared for the field work. The initial event provided the opportunity to assess a range of different perspectives ranging from community organisations' experiences of assisting women in polygamous families to some of the women themselves and academics specialising in religious marriages and polygamy. The Word Café discussions also served to better frame the participatory workshops that followed in a way which remains sensitive and alert to the needs of women in polygamous families.

Body mapping storytelling with migrant women in Finsbury Park

While the first workshop made use of Digital Storytelling and its outcome and challenges were discussed in Vacchelli (2021*g*), the second workshop took place in March 2018 on two consecutive Wednesdays in Finsbury Park, where the community organization MEWso is located.

Participants of this workshop included Kurdish women from Iraq and Iran and north African women from Libya and Morocco. Most of these service users of

MEWso are mothers who arrived in the UK as refugees on humanitarian grounds and their ages ranges from early 30s to 50s. Two of the women are highly qualified, one has a PhD as a molecular biologist and another one lived for several years in Denmark after leaving Iran at the age of 19 and spending two years in Turkey. While in Denmark, she was a translator of Kurdish children books into Danish. Most of the participants have been involved in polygamous relations in a way or another. Two of them were unaware to be second wives when they married. Three of them were left for another woman when they refused their husband permission to contract a second marriage. In one case, the husband had anyway gone ahead to marry another woman (through religious marriage) while still legally married with the first wife. Most of them were in relationship characterized by domestic violence and other forms of emotional manipulation and blackmailing.

Given the type of participants and the personal nature and sensitivity of the experiences being disclosed during the workshop, body mapping storytelling seemed like an adequate approach to use, because of its interactive and play-like features requiring research participants to engage in the process of creating a body map. In body mapping storytelling, participants draw the contours of their own body on a large paper and use symbols, words, drawings and at times even magazine cut outs, pictures and other material to personalize the body map and communicate in this way their own experience which could be a general experience or in relation to a specific event (Giorgi *et al.* 2021).

Fig. 5: Preparing for the body map

Fig. 6: Drawing the body map

This approach has also been called "visceral methods" because it draws on the sensory and affective experiences researchers mobilise to reveal discursive, material and structural aspects of their stories (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2014). Body mapping-storytelling was initially used in therapeutic domains, especially to work with people affected by HIV-AIDS in South Africa and reflect on the corporeal experience of disease whilst at the same time addressing the stigma associated with HIV-AIDS,

and giving participants the opportunities to tell their story (Morgan 2003). The method then evolved into an established research tool (Gastaldo *et al.* 2012), used in several fields including gender violence (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante 2014; Lykes and Crosby 2015) and the experience of young refugees (Davy *et al.* 2014). Body mapping storytelling is an easily accessible approach which does not require previous experience and is particularly suitable to work with research participants in vulnerable situations, those who experience language barriers or, as in the case of our participants, with people who are sharing emotionally charged experiences. According to Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli (2021), this approach can be used in two ways: firstly, as an exploration of a particular experience that involves material or symbolic aspects of the body. The second perspective is more focussed on the relationship between the body and external objects. In both cases, the researcher asks the participant to explain what they have drawn. In this study, research participants were asked to draw on their body map anything that represents their experiences and feelings of being married. The process of construction of individual maps and the ensuing discussion took place in a group, although initially the women were working in pairs, helping each other in drawing the body map and discussing the meaning of the drawings amongst themselves.

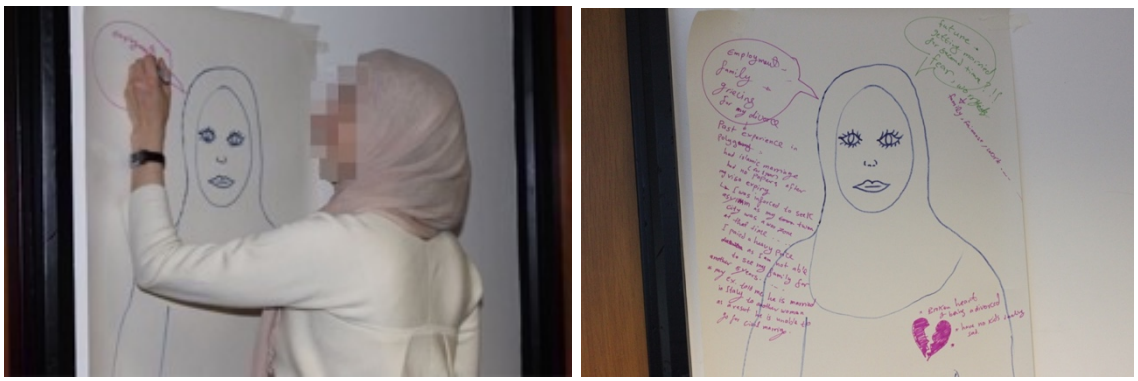

Fig. 7 and 8: Research participant plotting her experience onto the map and the resulting body map

After the drawing, participants were asked to share in the group what they had drawn on the body-map.

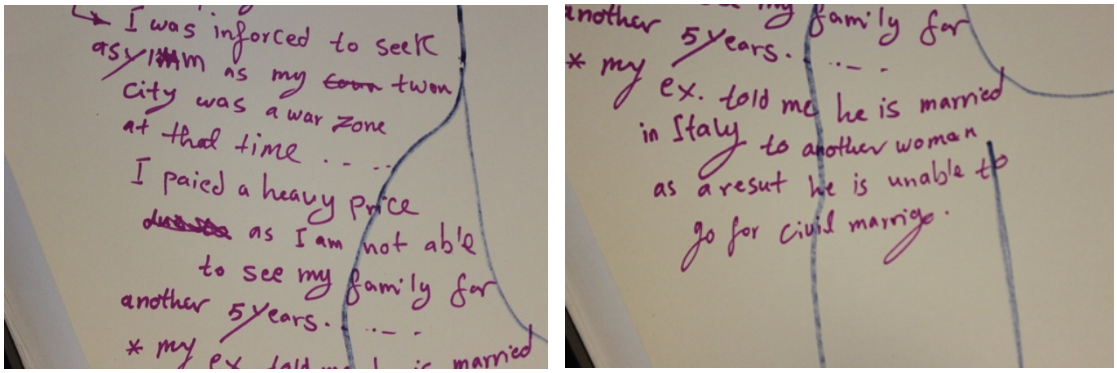

Fig. 9 and 10: Written content plotted in a speech bubble on the body map

Body maps have been conceptualised as specific types of cognitive maps and seen as a mixture of spatial cognition, place representation and spatial imagination that can provide information not only about places themselves, but also about people's identities and behaviours in relation to them (Vacchelli 2018). Cognitive maps are able to fulfil ideas and images of individuals' economic, political, cultural or social contexts with an emphasis on their emotions and feelings (Mendoza and Morén-Alegret 2013, 775).

In the course of the sharing of the body map activity, one of the participants felt upset while recounting the way she was treated by her own family over the divorce she was undergoing after finding out she was a second wife. Her upset was further reinforced by the fact that divorcing at her crucial age would have probably meant missing the opportunity to have children, something which is key in Muslim women's perception of womanhood and acceptance within the community (Charsley 2006). Given the emotionally charged story she was telling and the fact that her feelings were still raw, the participant was overtaken by her emotions during the group sharing. When she broke into tears, the group decided to interrupt the sharing. All participants demonstrated empathy and a few research participants went for a short walk with the woman who was experiencing distress. Everyone tried to give their best advice on how to deal with the situation. After this, we resumed work without expecting the participant in question to complete her story. As discussed in Vacchelli (2021), in this circumstance, as a research team we learnt that the space created during the workshop cannot be fully safe and that sharing often entails exposing one's vulnerability. On the

other hand, the fact that the participant in question felt she could open up and the way the group dealt with the challenge of a participant breaking into tears, demonstrated that the space of the workshop was safe enough for welcoming and addressing the participants' vulnerability.

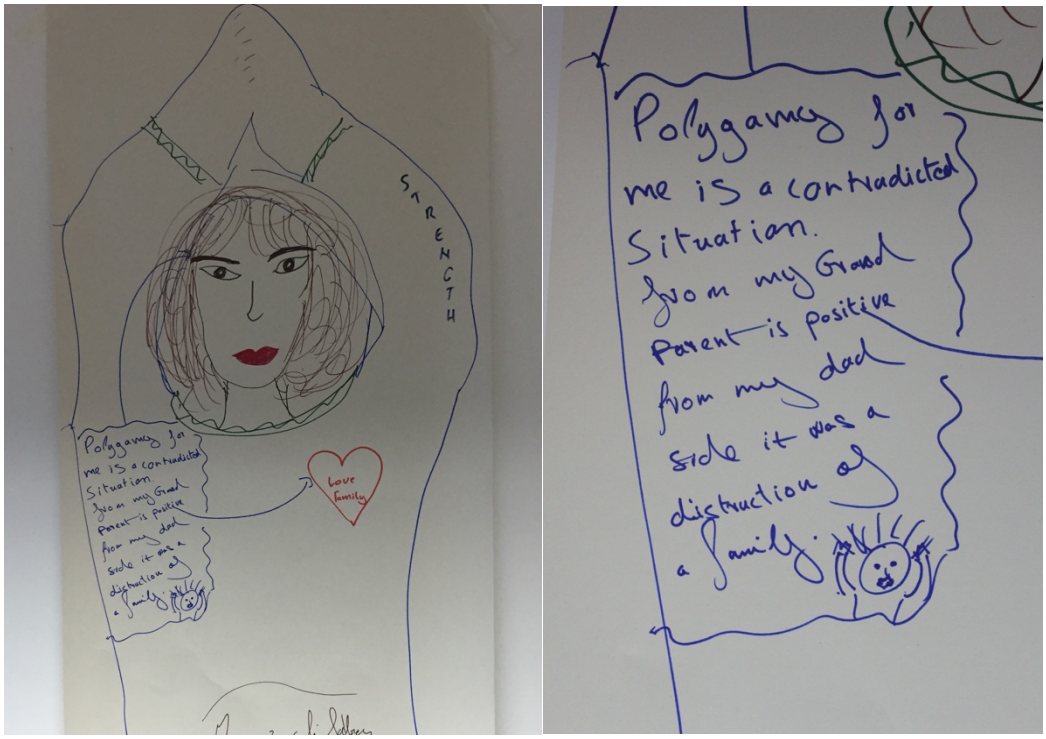

Fig. 11 and 12: Body map and detail of autobiographical experience

The content that was shared in the context of the drawings and the group sharing suggest that most of the women experienced emotional pain, which was depicted through the image of a broken heart. The emotional distress was complicated by the fact that some of the women were put under pressure from their own family to accept a polygamous relationship rather than facing the even greater stigma of divorce. The love they felt for their children was mentioned by a few of the women as an inner resource and strength able to help women in polygamous relations to be resilient in the face of a broken marriage. The participant who found out to be a second wife also discovered she could not be married through civil marriage could not access citizenship rights in the UK through spousal migration. The combination of legal and emotional barriers to create her own family also meant that she had to

give up her life project by missing the opportunity to have children, something that the participant struggled to come to terms with. Her grief for this loss could not be soothed by the love and support of her extended family who instead blamed her for having broken her religious marriage and undergone religious divorce. Several participants spoke about the trauma they had experienced and their inability to live in the present. Time was also mentioned in the context of a group discussion on polygamy where one of the participants shared the successful experience of her grandparents' polygamous family in rural Morocco and the unsuccessful one of her own father, reflecting on how polygamy can be contradictory and not a one-size-fit all situation. However, most of the spousal relationships discussed in this group were highly abusive and traumatic for the women involved, often including domestic violence and other forms of abuse.

Discussion

The findings from the workshops suggest that polygamy can have negative effects on the lives of women and children. Polygamy is framed as a harmful practice in several UN human rights documents. A report commissioned by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights identified polygamy as a form of discrimination against women (Banda in Gaffney-Rhys 2012, 49). The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that «[p]olygamous marriage contravenes a woman's right to equality with men, and can have such serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependents that such marriages ought to be discouraged and prohibited» (Gaffney-Rhys 2012, 53). As highlighted by Gaffney-Rhys, this shows that the UN considers «polygamy to discriminate against women, not simply because women are not permitted to take an additional spouse, but because of the adverse consequences for them» (Gaffney-Rhys 2012, 53). Other UN documents discourage polygamy but do not prohibit it. The Hague Convention on the Celebration and Recognition of Marriages from 1978 allows signatory states to refuse to recognise polygamous

marriages but does not obligate them to do so. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa from 2003 states that monogamy is encouraged as the preferred form of marriage, but should polygamy occur, women's rights in those marriages should be protected (Gaffney-Rhys 2012, 52).

Others have argued that the framing of polygamy as inherently harmful is at best Euro-centric if not racist and that prohibiting polygamy ultimately harms women by othering their lifestyle and/or failing to protect their rights legally (e.g. Shah 2003; Naqvi 2017). This type of critique highlights that the framing of polygamy as uncivilised and immoral implicitly (or in some cases quite explicitly) positions it as failing to measure up to a Western standard of monogamous marriage rooted in Christian values wrongly assumed to be non-patriarchal and egalitarian. This approach argues that polygamy is not inherently harmful but that it is patriarchy, found in both polygamous and monogamous marriages, that is the cause of harm (Calder and Beaman 2014; Brake 2012; Naqvi 2017). The othering involved in framing polygamy as an uncivilised practice is not limited to non-Western and immigration contexts. Some scholars have argued that observing the history of opposition to polygamy in North America reveals the racist underpinnings of anti-polygamy laws that developed in the 19th century (Denike 2010; Ertman 2010). These laws were shaped by the view of Mormons as committing "race treason" for engaging in conduct associated with people of colour (Ertman 2010). In line with these debates, the findings from the Word Café help to frame this contentious matter as human rights issue, re-centering the emphasis around information, consent and legal tools that should be available to women at risk of being harmed within unregulated spousal arrangements. Both the World Café discussions and the workshops suggested that polygamy could potentially limit women's agency mainly due to deeply rooted religious belief suggesting that they should accept a less than ideal marital arrangement in order to be a "good Muslim". Even when women willingly enter a polygamous marriage, legal protection should be in place to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of entering such marital arrangements. It is also of central importance that women

are given a platform to discuss their relationship and the power relations it entails, whilst also becoming better informed of the implications of a polygamous marriage, to reduce possible sources of potential vulnerability. New frameworks for integration of migrant populations should ensure that grassroots approaches developed by civil society organisations such as MEWso are used to identify and tackle hidden problems such as un-consensual polygamous marriages and support women to access available and newly developed legal tools to protect their rights.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the participatory process involved in co-producing data on polygamous marriages in the UK. The preliminary steps for this research were framed in the context of structured discussions among academics, third sector organisations and women in polygamous relations, triggered by the World Café, which served to orient the future direction of the project and identify the themes that were taken on board when planning for the facilitation of the workshops. Several workshops with three different groups of women were undertaken as key sites of data collection for this project. As demonstrated through the analysis of one particular workshop held in Finsbury Park in 2018, a range qualitative data (visual, autobiographical) was co-produced with the research participants. Co-production is a term which has been forged within social practices where welfare beneficiaries are involved in the planning of the services they use. It is referred to as an exchange between practitioners and service users or between academia where professionals and citizens share power and acknowledge the contributions that anyone brings to the table (Rose and Kalathil 2019). Specifically, we used body mapping storytelling with service users of the organization MEWso and the findings emerging from the activities and group discussions highlight that experiencing polygamous marriages had not been a positive or – in most of the cases – a consensual endeavor for the research participants. The sensory and affective experiences mobilised during the workshops reveal discursive, material and structural aspects of participants' stories of polygamous

marriages representing a mixture of spatial cognition, place representation and spatial imagination that can provide information about people's identities and behaviours with an emphasis on their emotions and feelings. Grassroots approaches co-produced by researchers, third sector organisations and service users are a central resource for the identification of potentially harmful familial practices in view to offering support to women in vulnerable situations and increase awareness of the implications of polygamous practices. The bottom-up, multi-layered and co-produced evidence achieved through this work is fundamental for supporting the development of new legal frameworks to protect women and children's rights in non-consensual polygamous families.

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