

# Peace within her borders? Faith discourses in the context of inter-cultural groupwork with women survivors

Janet Batsleer<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* This article presents an experience of inter-cultural groupwork with women survivors of domestic violence, drawing on the author's experience of facilitating a support group as part of a wider research project 'Domestic Violence and Minoritisation: Supporting Women to Independence.' It considers the emergence and significance of religious and faith discourses as part of the groupwork. It explores the potential of such discourses to act as affirming women's rights to live free from violence as well as their potential to act as patriarchal controls on women's freedom. This is analysed in terms of attention to brokenness, to the experience of leaving home and migration and the creation of women's space. Feminist approaches to inter-cultural groupwork with women are elaborated and extended and the importance of the politics of location to feminist groupwork is explored.

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1. Principal Lecturer and Head of Youth and Community Work.

*Address for correspondence:* Dept of Applied Community Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, 799, Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR.  
J.Batsleer@mmu.ac.uk

## **Introduction: A puzzling moment**

I have been puzzled by a moment which occurred in the second week of a group which I was co-facilitating. The moment occurred in response to one of the women - a Bangladeshi Muslim woman - saying tearfully how angry she was with God. S's speaking of God certainly made me uneasy as a facilitator. My co-facilitator and I, though we had discussed many aspects of co-facilitating the group, had not discussed our faith perspectives. It remains the case that it is more permissible to discuss sexuality than to discuss faith in such settings. So - momentarily - I found myself responding to S's expression of anger out of my own faith tradition rather than with the more detached style of a group facilitator. I needed to assure her that God did not want her to suffer or to accept the violence to which her husband had subjected her.

This exchange facilitated an extraordinary development. My co-facilitator spoke about Jesus and his teachings of love and freedom. One of the Irish women participants spoke of her sense of a God of love. Another of the women spoke of the dignity of women to be found in true Islam. After that it was unusual for there to be a session without some talk of prayer and of God and of our different religious traditions.

This moment of groupwork is presented in order to indicate some of the themes in the argument which follows. The aim in the present article is to argue for the significance and meaning of faith discourses in groupwork with women. A second and equal purpose is to present an analysis of a praxis of feminist groupwork which takes faith discourse seriously. Insights arising in the groupwork praxis may then contribute to the development of knowledge about support to survivors of domestic violence.

The significant theoretical starting points for this work are feminist accounts of groupwork and democratic practice, feminist accounts of emotion and feminist liberation theologies (eg Butler & Wintram, 1991; Batsleer, 1996; Ahmed, 2004; Pui-Lan, 2005). It is hoped that this work will contribute to the renewal of interest in religion and spirituality in best practice in social care and related areas. (Moss, 2005). These theoretical starting points all share a commitment to the investigation of commonality and difference in

relationship to gender oppression. They also share a commitment to praxis; that is to theoretically informed and reflective practice. It is therefore part of the purpose in what follows to illuminate the links between key emerging theoretical ideas and the praxis of groupwork.

### **The groupwork context**

The groupwork reported on here took place in the context of a research project 'From Domestic Violence to Independence' (Batsleer, et al, 2002). The group was therefore designed both as a research group and as a support group. Support, which was the theme of the research project as a whole, can be understood in terms of empowerment, autonomy and freedom. It encourages women to gain self-respect and independence, currently the dominant model of support in social care. Support can however also be theorised as a practice of enabling networks of connection. These networks are sources of mutual care, of giving and receiving nurture.

The legal discourse of rights has been and remains very significant for feminists working in the area of domestic violence but it has been found limited in many ways, especially by the practice of the law. There has been a flourishing range of debates in ethics about justice and care and, alongside the still dominant emphasis on rights, another feminist strategy has been to emphasise the particularistic ethic of care (Larrabee, 1993). It can be argued that protection from neglect as well as freedom from oppression are essential to human and therefore female flourishing. Whereas the rights discourse focuses attention on individuals, an emphasis on care recognises the importance of connectedness.

### **Community-based support groups in the context of domestic violence and minoritisation**

Three support groups were established in the course of the research project. The need for culturally specific provision has been established through the work of refuges for South Asian women and

for women from African-Caribbean heritage communities and two support groups were set up on the basis of that culturally specific work. The group reported on here was explicitly established as an inter-cultural group. The method adopted in each of the groups was that of feminist social groupwork, (Butler & Wintram, 1991) and the aim of the groupwork was to enable women survivors to see connections with one another and to speak out about domestic violence. Violence is exerted over women from all classes and ethnicities in the public and private domain. Yet it is also important to recognise that different women experience violence in different forms.

The research project had revealed, through interviews with professionals and policy makers, a number of racialised myths which continue to circulate about women in minoritised communities who experience domestic violence. The term 'minoritised' is used instead of 'minority' to suggest the power relationships at work within which 'Black and Minority Ethnic Communities' are established. The research project documented the stories told in the mainstream about 'the others'. Although there are recognisable patterns, violent relationships are also unique. In domestic violence, different women experience different violences.. When differences are stereotyped and racialised this has an enormous impact on support. Racialised myths obscure the reality of common ground between women (for example, 'honour killings' in some communities are highlighted, and the rate of two murders a week in 'domestics' minimised). Racialised myths also prevent and silence the understanding of specific histories of migration, specific religious traditions, specific experiences of racism and of the UK state, promoting sloganised understandings of 'difference' rather than the steady attention to another from which understanding might emerge.

Some of the myths which were documented follow.

### **Strong Black woman**

This construction, particularly of African and African Caribbean women, can lead to the view that either there is no particular oppression being experienced, or that the woman is staying of her own free choice and needs no particular help. This idea of

strength resonates across poor communities. Many women in poor communities have this 'strength' attributed to them.

### **Poor victimised passive South Asian women**

This construction suggests that the women need extra support (commonly imagined to be above and beyond the scope of existing resources). It is suggested that they need education about their rights as women, that they are especially 'different' from other women and that their community is exceptionally controlling but they cannot function outside it. Such a discourse may effectively prevent staff who do not share a South Asian heritage from making even a preliminary professional engagement.

### **They look after their own**

This construction was applied to all the minority communities who participated in the research. Again, it provides a discourse which limits the potential for professionals from outside the community to engage, to recognise and identify need and believe they can make a difference.

It is necessary to highlight these myths which circulate in professional discourse because they form a major obstacle to be overcome in inter-cultural feminist groupwork. They act as barriers to association and connection and circulate not only in the 'majority' community but within and between minoritised groups in ways which prevent connections occurring. By focussing on minoritisation in relation to histories and experiences of migration, the research and the groupwork work crossed the colour line, attempting to subvert the black-white divide. A very significant starting point for the groupwork was the challenge to such myths, aiming to loosen and unsettle their impact on women survivors. As an inter-cultural group, the group reported on here had particular opportunities for this. The facilitators were concerned with hearing these discourses, understanding and countering their impact.

Feminist support work can be thought of as engaged in a politics of location. A feminist politics of location seeks to change 'women's place' into 'women's space.' This formulation, which draws on work

by Fiona Williams (1997) on community as `women's space` and women's `place` enables us to capture the way in which ideologies of the gendering of private and public space persist. The idea that women's place is in the home, and not outside it, persists across cultures. Feminist practice tries to shift and change boundaries in favour of women's increasing freedom from oppression, redefining at every point what is within their grasp and what is outside their power. Feminist theorising about community has posed the question about gender in terms of community as women's place or women's space. This is intended to capture the contradictory character of community spaces for women. They are highly regulatory spaces. Women's place in the community is only one step from her place in the family. However, this means that places such as playgroups and toy libraries can be acceptable places for women to attend outside the home. When women act as community they do not thereby offer a direct challenge to patriarchal order, are not claiming the symbolic high ground of politics, or theology, and they do not appear to be challenging their designated place. They are, however, making it possible through such community organising for women to name, for example, their 'difficulties', their 'depression' in a supportive environment and for these difficulties sometimes to be named as domestic violence. In this way, through the practices of community organising, women's place becomes women's space – a forum for building up confidence and strength to make changes.

In the work documented here, women were recruited to attend the group from refuges, from local mental health drop ins and from community groups. The group was advertised as an opportunity to 'Speak Out on Domestic Violence', deliberately choosing to name the issues and to challenge the surrounding taboos. It was attended by a core group of seven women and four other women attended at least once. Two of the women were of Irish inheritance, one was Bangladeshi, one was Pakistani, one was Sudanese, two of the women were English. Of the four others who attended, one was of Irish inheritance and three were of Pakistani inheritance. All the women had left violent relationships, and for most this was a relatively recent event, although for one of the Irish women it had occurred fourteen years ago. For two of the women, the violent relationship had ended when their partners died. The facilitators

were two English women, both with Christian upbringings.

The facilitators met with group members individually before the groupwork started, in order to explain the group's purpose and arranged transport to the venue. The method of each session was rooted in the practice of feminist groupwork. Groundrules and expectations were explored, each woman was invited to speak in turn at the beginning and end of each session, to make the links with the week before, to find the links between here and now and there and then in relation to their experiences of domestic violence, and to reflect on their feelings as each session ended. The facilitators planned a series of exercises for the middle of each session to facilitate the process of coming to voice, based on an evaluation and co-supervision after each session. The group ran for six two-hour sessions. Each session was followed by the opportunity to take part in an open drop in, with relaxation, exercise, head massage, and food and drink on offer, and women were encouraged to continue after the groupwork had ended. The drop-in session was part of a well-established community mental health project.

The group came together out of diversity as much as solidarity. Facilitators and group members spoke in their own mother tongues, group members sometimes interpreted for one another and some group members spoke in English as a second language. Explicitly the co-facilitators, who were from different backgrounds devised a common approach to practice. This drew on the tradition of the 'speak out' and ideas of 'coming to voice', democratic group processes, turn taking, the rituals of marking group boundaries through practices of recognition such as remembering and repeating names and sharing news. The facilitators planned and introduced tasks designed to enable generative themes to emerge. All these practices draw from a democratic and emancipatory political tradition with the aim of 'liberation.' (Freire, 1972; Young, 1996).

This was the theoretical understanding which informed and underpinned the establishment and the facilitation of the group on which the current article rests.

## **The impact of domestic violence**

The emotional impact of domestic violence was the centre of the groupwork. Shame and self-blame are powerful controls which prevent women leaving and staying out of violent relationships. 'Don't let the neighbours know ...', 'If the community finds out, the children will never get a marriage partner ...' 'It's my own fault, I married him.' 'My mother would say ... "you've made your bed and so you must lie on it", "Keep your dirty washing in the family".' These shame-making and self-blaming mantras were repeated by members of the group. However, during the groupwork this endless circling was replaced by the image of movement.

During the groupwork the metaphor of a journey of escape emerged, a journey the women in the group defined as moving towards 'freedom' and 'light.' The following summary spells out the obstacles which the women said they faced on their journey, and the overcoming of the obstacles became a focus for groupwork practice.

### **Denial**

Denial of the reality of being hurt, punished or victimised. 'This isn't happening.'

### **Disbelief**

It's hard to believe that it's happening. Easier to pretend that it isn't. Others including close family and professional agencies may be disinclined to believe it.

### **Denigration and degradation**

The experience of being called ugly, useless and stupid or being denied clothes or food or money means that confidence building work and work to counter depression with women who have left violent relationships remains important for a very long time.



### Anger/despair

This may including desire to kill violent partners as well as suicidal feelings.

### Self-hate and self-harm.

The feeling that the experience of violence is at some level deserved - 'she asked for it' - can be very powerful.

I am calling this place – of degradation, anger and self-hate and harm, – a place of brokenness, 'broken.' And it was from speaking this brokenness that talking about God emerged in the group.

## **Talking about God and the question of brokenness**

To return to the moment with which this article began, first...the first talk about God in the group happened from tears and from anger. S., weeping, saying 'I am so angry, so angry with God.' God called on in tears and anger and a stubborn, broken resignation.

Far from talking about God being (or at least being merely, being summed up as) a kind of primitive mechanism for consciousness-raising or repression in a group process, there are good reasons to suppose that responses such as prayer were at the heart of the work, coming out of a response to brokenness. The facilitators made a distinction between prayer – which we saw as central to survival for a number of women - for Catholic women, going to mass; for Muslim women, praying daily; for another woman, her reading of the Bible- and the extreme repressiveness of religious practices with which women were familiar, particularly patriarchal practices concerned primarily with the ordering of marriage and the control of sexuality. It became clear that this distinction would not hold. Women could not easily nor did they wish to separate themselves from their traditions. Migrants cling to 'imagined communities', to roots.

There is a fine line between recognising how speaking brokenness

and suffering opens up God talk and condoning that suffering, calling for its acceptance. One Roman Catholic sister, interviewed prior to setting up the group, explained that many Irish women had been brought up in a church community in which suffering at the hands of a violent husband was interpreted as part of the vocation of marriage. The groupwork occurred, therefore, both in the presence of brokenness and haunted by practices of sanctified masochism.

Speaking in this way of brokenness moves far from the legal discourse which dominates most policy discussions of domestic violence. In particular, brokenness is here understood as part of a dynamic *within* the violence and holds on to both powerful/angry *and* victimised aspects of the experience, speaking of women as survivors rather than victims. Legal discourse separates out studies of victims and studies of perpetrators and suggests patterns, for example, of 'repeat victimisation.' The recognition of brokenness involves a holding on to ambivalence which legal and policy discourse by its nature denies. In the group, both distress and also anger were communicated. 'I would like to kill him' as well as 'I would like to kill myself.' The role of the facilitators involved an acknowledgement of that ambivalence and a commitment to strengthen the boundary between acknowledging and expressing destructive feelings on the one hand and acting on them on the other.

Much feminist work on domestic violence represents this ambivalence as a contradiction, a struggle: a perpetrator/survivor dialectic. The popular idea of collusion in domestic violence is undermined by an analysis of power relationships. Most feminist work rightly draws on the legal and policy discourse which insists on a separation between perpetrator and survivor in order to bring about a cessation of hostilities. However, the cessation of hostilities is not to be confused with peace. This is because the law is predicated on the use of legitimate violence in the form of punishment. For the perpetrator, 'there are no excuses': feminist writers typically insist for example that 'race' and 'class' based understandings of domestic violence must not be used as an excuse for that violence. The victim/survivor is not to be held responsible. The survivor/victim is to be believed, encouraged and supported in drawing on their own creative capacities for survival (eg Kelly,

1988; Humphrys and Kelly, 2000). It makes sense, a great deal of sense, in terms of the practical cessation of hostilities, to tackle the ambivalence inherent in domestic violence in this way, to use the power of the law to check the power to inflict hurt or damage and to exercise control on a daily basis. To reiterate: this, however, does not bring peace.

Brokenness alone is the place from which peace will emerge. Perhaps there will one day be healing, one day be peace. The scars will remain: a phrase used often in the group. For the moment it is the 'broken middle' from which talk of peace and of God emerges, to use a suggestive idea from the philosopher Gillian Rose (1992). When the women in the group were asked what the goal of their journey was they answered in traditional religious language: their goals were freedom, light and peace. How would they know they had arrived there? They would reach a 'time and a place where none of this matters anymore' A yearning for ....?

Part of the groupwork was the need to struggle continually with patriarchal accounts of God. Is it true that God wants us willingly to accept suffering as part of our marriage? Are our patterns of marriage God given? Are they cultural? How does God see women? Do we owe obedience to our husbands? To religious teachers? And how do we know, what it is that enables us to say with varying degrees of confidence- that God did not make us for abuse and oppression but for love and delight? For dignity as women? In God's image. All the women in the group - facilitators and participants - were drawing on an immediate response to hurt and brokenness. But we were also drawing (as has been documented by other commentators (Fraser, 2003)) on traditions of interpretation which had reached us somehow beyond and through the patriarchal interpretations and which gave us a language for this unanticipated work.

## **Talking about God and the experience of migration**

Much current social theory and feminist theology investigates the figure of the nomad, and this offers a significant challenge to metaphors of divinity and the sacred which are rooted in notions of kingship and sovereignty, of the nation, unity and purity.(see for

example, Chambers & Curti, 1996; Dube, 2000). However, when we celebrate hybridity and border-crossing, we sometimes forget the costs of living as Gloria Anzaldua (1987) put it at 'that edge of barbed wire which is my home'.

Each of the women in the group had come as a wife, following their husband's journey. They had come from Sudan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ireland. Two of the younger women in the group were not migrants in the sense of having crossed national borders, but were another kind of 'refugee'. They had arrived at a Manchester refuge as a result of leaving a violent marriage in the UK and were attempting to establish new lives for themselves without their whereabouts becoming known to their husbands' families.

So, migration had taken economic form - the pulls of marriage and employment- and sometimes political forms - the flight from conflict - and had become, in practical terms, asylum-seeking - based on 'a well-founded fear of persecution', with the persecution occurring within an intimate relationship. For refugees who are fleeing wars or political violence the intersection of the experience of political persecution and inter-personal persecution is complex. In every case, to be a migrant is to be someone who has experienced trauma and loss as well as to be someone who is on a journey, who is making changes, who has left one home and has yet to find a new one.

It is important to note that while the flight from political violence offers a clear ground for seeking asylum, the flight from a violent marriage raises questions about the 'primary purpose' of a marriage. Women who enter the UK as wives are required to remain married for two years or be subject to deportation because their marriages are seen as 'bogus' and only entered into for the purposes of migration. During this period, if they leave their marriage, they will have 'no recourse to public funds', the logo on the passport of asylum seekers. In a travesty of justice, the law designed to offer asylum to those with a well-founded fear of persecution effectively traps women in persecutory relationships. In this case, racism at the borders intensifies private patriarchal relations within marriage and also intensifies the power of religious leaders, who may offer legitimacy to a marriage where the public authorities in the form of immigration officials and tribunals in the new country are failing to do so.

The experience of migration makes the process of becoming free from a violent relationship complex emotionally too. Built into the process of migration is a sense of loss: and this is often expressed in terms of loss of the mother or a mother figure. Further losses are hard to bear. There is also the sense of hostility from the wider society which most migrant communities experience. A woman who leaves her community and 'leaves home' once more may find herself 'between the devil and the deep blue sea.' The commitment of the women who attended this inter-cultural group to one another was very moving, as it was a commitment outside all of our received expectations about 'community.'

What impact did migration have on the group process? Quite often it took the form of reflection on how women's understanding of God was different from that of their mothers. So migration was not only about place but also about time and memory and how those memories and inheritances could be reconfigured. 'My mother would have said, 'You've made your bed, so you must lie on it.' There is a sense of obligation to the past but also a sense of personal change: 'I couldn't have done this in Bangladesh.' 'I can't ever go back to the Sudan.' Going to mass remained a comfort and yet there was a sense, which change opens up, of 'never being taught properly about our religion'. Memory and tradition are to be held on to and also changed. The experience of women leaving violent relationships is a reminder that home is also a place of contention and struggle. This is also true of cultural and religious homes.

In this context, the talk was of 'our God' and 'your God' with frequent expostulations, from all the traditions, that after all this God was One God, and the same. It is likely that, had the group been less time and task limited, the limitations and differences and hostilities imposed by the enclaves of each of our traditions would have begun to show. In fact in this group, at one point, it was Hinduism that was regarded as 'other.' There is an argument for faith specific groups in which the specific contradictions imposed by particular religious traditions can be explored.. However- this breaking- almost accidentally it seemed – into a shared space beyond those divisions will remain as yearning, redolent of the utopian possibility of a non-coercive, community founded in brokenness. Of the possibility of peace within her borders.

## **Talking about God and feminist groupwork: Women's space and sacred space**

What kind of space, what kind of politics was being occupied by the group work? If it was sacred space, as it sometimes seemed, surely this was counterposed to the sacred spaces of churches and synagogues and mosques (Kristeva & Clement, 2001)?

This group was transient, temporary. It opened up on to new possibilities both individual and collective. In a very small way, on a very small scale, for a moment, a new thing was happening. However, this sense of space as diverse, transient, counter-institutional is only part of the story.

A moment's analysis shows that this apparently free floating group was rooted very strongly in practices of collective memory, and was located in a particular place, through a particular set of institutional practices. The group took place in the Zion Centre in Hulme, Manchester: a wonderful new building housing a number of projects including the home for this group, the 'Voices and Choices' women's mental health drop in. The *Zion Centre!* ... so many places in the poorest communities have names taken from the vision of the heavenly city. Paradise Gardens; Salmon Pastures; Mount Pleasant are other examples. In the park outside the centre are inlaid engravings representing moments in the history of Hulme, a journey on Zion's highway made after widespread consultation and discussion by local artist and sometime community activist Craig Russell. None of the women however came from Hulme. So it was a 'no-space'- though one or two had lived in Hulme at some point. It was not an easy place to get to, so transport was arranged, but the open-ness of the space and the possibility of settling our work in a place that opened up to many possibilities was important.

The other 'places' that enabled the group to happen were the European Social Fund and MMU Women's Studies Centre – two large institutional locations that made the work possible, and formed the conditions and also the constraints for the existence of the work. These places were often far from joyful, connected in the main by the internet and the difficulty of team meetings. The institutional contexts were experienced by the two facilitators as placing enormous pressures on the work, while the Friday

afternoon sessions at the Zion centre were experienced by the facilitators and also by the women involved in the group- as a space of freedom.

On what memories did this practice draw? What memories gave room to the desire to create a counter-institutional space and a positive version of working with diversity? In the main the answer lies in the history of feminist practices developed over the last forty years concerned with small groups, consciousness-raising and making the links between the personal and political. The group did create a space for dialogue, for coming to voice. It did not however found a new community, nor was that its aim.

One of the women in the group, N. - a woman whose children had been abducted by her husband when she left and who was fearful of Sharia law – articulated very clearly the importance of returning the insights generated by the groupwork to the faith-keepers – the need to show the law-makers and political leaders how wrong their understanding of Islam had been, in relation to the position of women.

N's insights confirmed a direction towards theory, theology even. Although the work of undoing practices and traditions of misogyny and fear of female sexuality in Christian theology is still only beginning, there are clearly many alliances to be made between this work and other critical work across faith traditions and with secularised women. In seeking to offer this account of the presence of religious language in groupwork with a diverse group of women, I might be in danger of positioning minoritised women as 'superstitious' as well as 'ill'. After all several women in the group had diagnoses: depression and even a personality disorder. Clearly God talk is more likely to emerge in a group of Irish, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Sudanese and English women than in a group of Home Office experts. This is primarily because of the role of religion as binder and sustainer of migrant communities, and its significance for those who are marginalised. It is the persistence of institutions of religion that enables the non-institutional emergence of God talk. Minority women who have left violent relationships are not necessarily either 'darker', closer to the 'dark continent', nor closer to God than other women or men. But there are a number of features of their experience which more readily enable the resources of

prayer to be theirs. In this paper, it has been suggested that these resources are those experiences of vulnerability and brokenness, of migration and of the space which is enabled by coming to voice in feminist practice.

This groupwork requires an ownership of the specific resources of feminist practice in order to engage in dialogue: an attention to brokenness, a work of memory, a particular place opening up to a space- which will enable religious practices that have been involved in shaming and humiliation to be named and transformed. It feels hazardous and heavy handed to bring this analysis to bear on a fleeting few weeks of practice. But how otherwise to open up our institutional spaces, particularly our religious traditions, to a brokenness from which peace may yet emerge?

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