

Intersectional Making of the ‘Sri Lankan Case’:

The Racialization of Domestic Violence in the Swiss Police Force

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This article uses an intersectional lens to ethnographically analyze police treatment of domestic violence in Switzerland. The analysis suggests three interlinked explanatory factors to understand the differential treatment of domestic violence for white Swiss/European nationals on the one hand, and racialized non-European migrants on the other. These factors are (1) prevailing generalized representations of the racialization of violence against women in Switzerland, (2) the police professional logic used to categorize sections of the public, and (3) the specific police institutional memory of two emblematic cases of domestic violence involving families of Sri Lankan nationality. The article discusses the implications of this differential treatment not only for racialized non-Europeans but also for Swiss and white European women subjected to domestic violence.

KEYWORDS: intersectionality, intimate partner violence, racialization, domestic violence, violence against women, police racism

INTRODUCTION

The efforts of feminist movements have led to the transnational recognition of domestic violence, as a specific form of violence against women and a public problem that merits responses within criminal justice systems (Romito 2008; Walklate 2021). While domestic violence can affect individuals of all sexual orientations, the research shows that the vast majority of the victims of this type of violence are female, and the majority of perpetrators are male (Hester 2013). Although domestic violence is a predominantly gendered issue, given its pervasiveness across diverse social groups, it is crucial to understand that not all women experience it in the same way (Gill and Walker 2021). Indeed, women’s specific intersectional locations (Crenshaw 1989) not only affect their experiences of abuse, but they also shape their options and access to services (Sokoloff and Pratt 2005; Anitha 2011). Previous studies have revealed how gender intersects with other social relations of power, notably those based on race, ethnicity, nationality,

immigration status and class to produce additional pressures on racialized migrant women who experience domestic violence (Thiara and Gill 2010; Khazaei 2019a; Day and Gill 2020).

This article focuses on the specific national context of Switzerland, where domestic violence within so-called migrant communities has given rise to a powerful racializing discourse within public and policy debates, which is used to justify discriminatory migration policies. The hyper-visibility of migrant communities in Swiss public debates is not always associated with well-intentioned claims about the greater vulnerability of these communities resulting from structural intersectional inequalities. Rather, it is attributed to an essentialist conception of their 'culture' (Khazaei 2022). Consequently, a racialized concept of 'migrants' culture' is presented in Swiss public debates that ultimately racializes violence against women by rendering domestic violence a migrant problem that has been imported into Switzerland (Khazaei 2019b, 2023).

The linking of violence against women to 'foreign' or 'migrant' populations has been co-opted beyond the official discourse, fuelling far-right campaigns in Switzerland. For example, the Democratic Union of the Center (DUC) ran a campaign premised on the claim that 'violence against women has a well-known origin: non-integrated foreign individuals' (DUC 2019: 8). For the DUC, the solution lies in restricting immigration and drastically reducing migrant communities' access to various forms of social support.

The Swiss context is particularly useful for an analysis of the racialization of violence against women. Given its neutrality during the Second World War, and in the absence of any official colonial rule, Switzerland continues to claim a degree of exceptionalism within the European context (Lavanchy 2015; Michel 2015; Purtschert *et al.* 2016). As I have shown elsewhere, in Switzerland, race talk and race-related categories are replaced by discussions of cultural difference (Khazaei 2019b). This article explores the importance of this specific form of 'raceless racism' (Michel 2015: 410), when it comes to the policing of domestic violence.

Using ethnographic methods, this article analyses the processes of racialization of a group of people through police treatment of domestic violence. It analyses the making of the 'Sri Lankan case', a prevailing narrative in the police institution studied. According to this narrative, serious cases of gendered violence are more common within this ethno-racialized group. The analysis reveals how police officers construct a specific type of difference between relatively similar domestic violence cases and how this construction, in turn, justifies their differential treatment. The article further explores the consequences of this differential treatment for all victims of domestic violence. It examines how intersections of gender and race, but also of class, work against all victims of domestic violence whether they are racialized as migrants.

Three explanatory factors are identified that influence police practices. The first is a generalized representation of the racialization of violence against women in Switzerland. The second is a police professional logic for categorizing people, and the third is the institutional memory of the police force studied, inscribed by two emblematic cases of domestic violence involving families of Sri Lankan nationality. Through a discussion of two representative examples, I demonstrate how the three above-mentioned factors intertwine to produce a more severe intervention in cases perceived as 'Sri Lankan cases' of domestic violence. Conversely, when cases do not fit this perception and involve a Swiss or European population, the violence is classified as mild and non-prosecutable and thus failing to protect these victims of domestic violence as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality makes visible the experiences of those who are dominated and victimized by the effects of multiple structures of power and oppression, including gender, race, class, sexuality and disability. Intersectionality, which has its roots in the

American Black feminist movement, challenges the universality of the category of ‘women’ as *the* political subject of the feminist movement. Intersectionality makes visible power relations that separate different categories of women from each other (Hill Collins 1989). Black feminists argue that a feminism reflecting the position of white middle class women cannot represent the voices, experiences and problems of all women (Hill Collins 1989).

In this article, I endorse the view of Cho *et al.* (2013), who argue that intersectionality is more than a merely methodological tool to explore infinite combinations of overlapping identities. According to this perspective, intersectionality does more political work than simply revealing additional vulnerabilities of women of colour and other minorities, which have been established in previous studies. Considering case studies of police responses to domestic violence in Switzerland, this article illustrates how attending to the intersectional workings of structural systems of oppression yields invaluable knowledge for improving the lives of all victims of domestic violence.

I also draw on the concept of racialization, defined as ‘a representational process of defining an Other’ (Miles 1989[2003]: 102). This conceptualization of racialization foregrounds the process of categorizing humans. As Garcia (2003: 285) explains, whereas race can be understood as something one has ‘racialization is something that is done to a group, by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context’. Furthermore, this conceptualization attends to historical variations and changes that assume significance in relation to the process of race-related categorization (Hochman 2019). As we will see, in the Swiss context, nationality replaces the language of ‘race’ to create a racialized category of ‘migrants’.

The racialization of violence against women

Previous studies have problematized the denunciation of violence against women within racialized groups, be they migrants or other minority groups (Grewal 2016; Farris 2017; Korteweg 2017). They criticize those who decry violence against women by pointing fingers at some minority groups. This scholarship shows how gender-based violence and the associated ‘gender equality’ discourse have contributed to the process of racializing migrant and/or ethnic minorities deemed ‘undesirable’ in various Western countries (Grewal 2016; Farris 2017; Korteweg 2017). It seeks to explain the impacts and effects of such rhetoric on the exclusion of migrant communities from the societies to which they already belong (Korteweg 2017).

A similar narrative on gender equality played an important role in the colonial era as a means of justifying the ‘civilizing process’ of ‘backward societies’, thereby securing colonial rule (Spivak 1988; Collier *et al.* 1995; Ticktin 2011). Some colonial constructs, notably non-Western women portrayed as victims, persist and, as we shall see, influence police responses to domestic violence. Mohanty (1984) analyzed the figure of the ‘Third World woman’ constructed as ‘a victim requiring rescue’ (Piedalue 2017: 566). Abu-Lughod (2013) deconstructed the figure of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ portrayed in recent Islamophobic narratives. Bhattacharyya (2008) explained how the figure of dangerous brown men in discussions of the post 9/11 ‘War on Terror’ emerged from the same gendered and sexualized constructs of colonialism. In Bhattacharyya’s (2008) analysis, Western imperial violence is associated with Western conceptions of (women’s) rights and democracy to justify a project of ‘bombing for freedom’.

Building on this colonial rhetoric in which gender equality is claimed as an integral part of ‘European culture’ in opposition to the inherently patriarchal character of extra-European cultures (Spivak 1988), the conflation of ‘religion and patriarchies with “culture” ... turns acts of violence into religion-driven third-world pathologies or customary/sacred traditions’ (Piedalue 2017: 566). Piedalue (2017) describes this phenomenon as culturalism: ‘a particular logic and set of discourses that homogenize and pathologize the social worlds of non-Western places and

peoples and attribute gendered violence and oppression to “timeless” traditions and anti-modern sentimentality’ (Piedalue 2017: 565). This cultural framing of violence creates a dichotomy between ‘insiders’ (non-violent whites) and ‘outsiders’ (violent others) (Montoya and Agustín 2013). This framing, as I demonstrate, ultimately fails all victims of domestic violence.

Race and policing

The powerful and longstanding dialectical relationship between race and crime has long been the subject of criminological inquiry (Bosworth *et al.* 2008; Cunneen 2011; Carbado and Roithmayr 2014; Parmar *et al.* 2020). Higher rates of arrest and conviction for ethno-racialized minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are now well-established within different national contexts, even though there are contextually based disparities among the targeted groups (see Parmar 2016; Harrison and Gill 2017 for the British context; Fassin 2013 for the French context; and Wa Baile *et al.* 2019 for the Swiss context). Research shows how, migrant and/or racialized groups, as victims of crime, remain under-served and under-protected (Day and Gill 2020; Gill and Virdee 2021; Anitha and Gill 2022; Gill 2022), while being over-policed as perpetrators (O’Neill and Loftus 2013).

It has been argued, however, that criminology focuses more on numerical incidences of race as well as disproportionality in criminal justice outcomes (Bosworth *et al.* 2008; Parmar *et al.* 2020). This ‘positivist lens of quantification’ has neglected the theorization of race and racism in its more complex manifestations with regard to crime control and social order (Phillips *et al.* 2020: 428; Bosworth *et al.* 2008; Parmar 2016). In most of the scholarly work on criminology, and specifically that on police work, race and racism are implicit in the analysis, being ‘vaguely specified and largely undertheorized’ (Phillips *et al.* 2020: 436; Burt *et al.* 2017). This situation has resulted in general acceptance of claims of structural racism in the absence of investigations of the specificity of the mechanisms through which racism is actualized in the everyday practices of the criminal justice system (Garland 2018). In police cases, for example, this research has failed to elucidate why and how police officers make their decisions (Engel *et al.* 2002; Lumsden and Black 2018).

This article contributes to addressing this gap by providing a detailed ethnographic analysis of the intersectional and differential treatment of domestic violence by the police in Switzerland. More specifically, it examines the risk assessment practices of police officers in their domestic violence interventions. Although a substantial literature exists on police risk assessments of domestic abuse, this research has tended to focus on the validity of tools rather than on procedures (Medina Ariza *et al.* 2016). Even now, little is known about how police officers understand and perceive tools and factors for predicting future abuse (Robinson *et al.* 2018). This article addresses this issue by exploring how race, but also gender and class, play out in police perceptions and practices relating to risk assessments.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on an ethnographic exploration of an emergency police unit in a French-speaking canton in Switzerland. The research design follows the principles of feminist epistemology and critical ethnography. Feminist epistemology considers all knowledge to be situated (Haraway 1988). Being an Iranian national in Switzerland, I was perceived as a migrant woman while conducting field research. I found myself in a unique position to use opportunities that arose because of this positioning as possible sources of critical insight into how dominant categories are constructed. This specific standpoint was not only a self-proclaimed one; it was also one that was constantly ascribed to me by others during my fieldwork. Haraway explains that positionings are ‘not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and

interpretation' (1988: 584). My standpoint influenced not only the research objectives but also the methods and field sites that I chose.

Instead of selecting research objects focusing, for example, on differences between domestic violence cases linked to migration status, as in classical intersectional research, I focused on the acts of categorization and differentiation. Instead of taking differences in domestic violence cases involving Swiss nationals and so-called migrants for granted, I asked whether the difference under consideration was based on actual and empirical evidence or on other identifiable factors.

I opted for critical ethnography as methodology. The research objectives of such ethnographies, which extend beyond description, are aimed at understanding 'social life in order to change the way that those in power marginalise those with less power' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 236). Given their intention of producing knowledge useful to disadvantaged groups, these research projects prioritize 'studying up' (Harding and Norberg 2005: 2011). This entails 'studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern' (Harding and Norberg 2005: 2011). Ethnography is also 'the signature methodology for illuminating policing cultures and practices in a variety of settings' (Bacon *et al.* 2020: 1).

Fieldwork and ethical issues

The fieldwork was conducted between March and July 2016. During these five months, I spent three days a week, including weekends, at the police station. I was present mainly during the afternoons and nights, which according to the police officers were the times when occurrences of domestic violence cases were more frequent. During my study, I observed 19 police interventions for domestic abuse, 18 hearings of victims and perpetrators at the police station, and 10 staff meetings. Each time a call to the police station reported a possible domestic violence incident, the dispatched police patrol came to fetch me at the station. I shadowed the police officers, following the orders of the chief of patrol. On these occasions, I wore a bullet-proof vest and remained discreet during the observations.

I maintained fieldnotes and conducted 21 recorded *expert interviews* (Bogner *et al.* 2009) with police officers whom I met during the observations. All of them were white Swiss nationals (or European bi-nationals in a few cases) aged between 25 and 50 years. The police station where I was based comprised six sections, each with 25 officers who covered the entire territory of a medium-sized city in Switzerland. All of them were generalists, meaning that they would intervene in all cases without distinction. Cases requiring further judicial pursuit would be transferred to the specialized squads of judicial police handling vice, burglary and so forth.

At the time of my fieldwork, only biomedical research was required to go through cantonal ethics committees according to the Federal Act on Research involving Human Beings (Perrin *et al.* 2018). Consequently, my ethical choices were evaluated and approved by the General Prosecutor of the studied Swiss canton and followed the procedure in place at the University of Neuchâtel. Following the ethical principles of ethnographic research, my role as observer, research objectives and identity were known to all of the police officers, who provided their informed consent to participate in the research. However, for security reasons and to avoid interrupting emergency interventions, I was not always able to present myself or my project to the people in whose homes we intervened. Following the model proposed by Iphofen (2009), I prepared a checklist detailing the pros and cons of not disclosing my identity to the people involved in domestic violence cases during police interventions. The assessment of that checklist indicated that not introducing myself, and my research to victims and perpetrators to seek their consent during emergency police interventions presented less risk of harm than the reverse act. In practice, this meant that I followed a principle of seeking consent whenever I could be

confident that this would not create a harmful situation (for more details, see [Khazaei 2020](#)). My bullet-proof vest, however, had the word 'intern' inscribed on it, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly respected to preserve participants from possible harm.

Analytical issues

I chose to conduct expert interviews as a complementary research method because of their advantages for sketching out expert knowledge ([Bogner et al. 2009](#)). Specifically, they enable the capture of *hegemonic* practices within institutions, extending beyond individual opinions and inevitable tensions and conflicts among team members ([Bogner et al. 2009](#)). The empirical data presented in this article represent the overall tendencies and patterns identified in the analysis.

My analysis focused mainly on the patterns of institutional practices, attending to individuals only in relation to their roles within the institution. My approach was influenced by [Foucault's \(1971: 12\)](#) suggestion that '[p]eople know what they do; often they know why they do what they do; but what they ignore is the effect produced by what they do'. Accordingly, I prioritized the police officers' actions and practices and their rationalities rather than their intentions and individualities to understand the institutional and supra-individual dimensions of the institutional practices and, above all, their consequences ([Douglas 1986](#)). Thus, the examples presented in the following section are not anecdotal or isolated occurrences; they are illustrative of the general trends and modalities that emerged in the analysis. I applied grounded theory ([Charmaz 2006](#)) and thematic analysis ([Flick 2009](#)) using Sonal and Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

CONTRASTING INTERVENTIONS IN A EUROPEAN VERSUS A RACIALIZED MIGRANT FAMILY

The two interventions that I present in this section illustrate the logics that foster differentiated treatment of domestic violence cases by the police. As I show, these cases could be considered to be similar according to police directives on domestic violence. I accompanied the intervening patrols in both cases and kept detailed fieldnotes recording the events and discussions. The first case concerned a Swiss–Swedish couple in which the male partner was a physician and the female partner an engineer. The second case concerned a Bangladeshi couple in which the woman was a housewife and the man was a waiter.

The case of a Swiss–Swedish couple

The first case occurred on a relatively calm Monday evening when two calls from the same address were received in the police control room. The first call came from a man who said that he wanted to pick up his belongings from his old apartment but that his ex-partner was not allowing entry. The second call came from a woman informing the police that her ex-partner was in the yard, wrecking her garden. A single patrol was dispatched in the 'normal' mode, without a siren and adhering to the speed limits. Our destination was a well-maintained old building located in a well-to-do neighbourhood.

While stepping out of the car, we heard a very loud sound resembling a gunshot. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. The chief of patrol, gestured to me to stay behind as she put her hand on her holster, ready to use her gun if needed. She yelled at a man who was breaking garden tables and chairs with a shovel. His actions had caused the startlingly loud noise that we mistook for a gunshot. The man was in his early forties, and though his face was red with anger, he smiled upon seeing the police officers. He began to move toward us, saying 'Ah, you are here; it was me who called you!' The chief of patrol shouted at him to stay where he was and ordered him not

to move. He complied. The two officers approached him and asked him to sit down on the only unbroken bench in the yard.

The chief of patrol left her colleague to speak with the man and brought me with her to the apartment where a blonde woman, also in her early 40s, opened the door for us. She led us towards the kitchen while answering the police officer's inquiries about what had happened. She explained that the man, who was her ex-partner, had stalked her, confining her on one occasion in the kitchen. He would send her text messages that she perceived as threatening. The police officer asked to see some of them and determined that they were not direct threats. On another occasion, he had punched her in the back while she was sleeping. She recounted how after a very bad fight in front of her children (from a previous marriage) and some friends, she had finally decided to leave him.

On the day of our intervention, he had come over, using the excuse that he needed to pick up his stuff, 'but I knew that he wanted to punish me; he doesn't want the stuff, he wants to destroy everything, and when I saw him like that in the garden, I was afraid to open the door. That's why I called you.' Having obtained this information, the chief of patrol and I returned to the garden. The man was now crying, accusing his ex-partner of wanting to take everything away from him. After consulting her colleague and the control room, the chief of patrol decided to launch the domestic violence procedure, suggested that: 'as both are accusing each other mutually, we will hear the woman as both a suspect and victim and we will convince the man to go to the psychiatric emergency department of the hospital before having his hearing'. Applying the police classification of the severity of domestic violence cases, she decided that the case would be treated as a type 'A' offence, which refers to 'mild cases' entailing assaults.¹ The police officers allowed the man to leave his bicycle near the apartment so that he could return and fetch it later and called for a new patrol to accompany him to the hospital.

The case of a Bangladeshi couple

The second intervention occurred on a Sunday afternoon. We heard on the radio in the control room that a woman had called the emergency number and asked for a domestic violence intervention. I accompanied a patrol with two policemen dispatched in the 'normal' mode. As the woman had informed the police that her husband had already left the apartment, the police did not perceive any emergency. When we arrived at the premises in a working-class neighbourhood, the front door of the small apartment was opened by a young woman with a two-year-old boy. She was crying as she let us in, and the chief of patrol began asking the usual questions to determine what had happened. We learned that her husband, who worked as a waiter at a nearby restaurant, had punched her before leaving the house. After some further investigation, the police officer decided to launch a type A domestic violence procedure.

Later in the discussion, the woman shared her concerns about what her husband would do if he became aware that she had called the police. This piece of information alarmed the police officer and the course of the intervention then began to change. He asked her whether she was afraid of her husband's reaction, to which she responded affirmatively. She also mentioned threats that the husband had made over the phone to her mother, threatening to kill his wife. The chief of patrol then changed his initial classification of the intervention. He decided to take the woman to the police headquarters to conduct her hearing according to the procedure used for type C domestic violence offences. He also called the judicial police and convinced them to consider the incident as a type C offence, which covers the most severe cases of domestic

1 Three levels of severity are described in the police directives for cases of domestic violence: 'A' corresponds to mild cases and assault without criminal prosecution. 'B' refers to repeated assault and also to simple bodily injuries. 'C' refers to serious bodily injuries according to the penal code, endangering the lives of others, threats that are both severe and taken seriously by the victim, victim duress, forcible confinement, kidnapping, sexual assault and rape.

violence, the processing of which would be directly transferred to judicial police inspectors. A prosecutor would also be contacted directly upon filing the case. The police officer told them that there had been some death threats and that the woman 'seemed' to take them seriously.

Finally, we transferred the woman and her son to the police headquarters to conclude her hearing and then proceeded directly to the restaurant where the husband worked. We waited there for the judicial police inspectors to arrive and arrest him. While waiting, the chief of patrol explained his decision to me as follows: 'You know, Bangladeshis [and] Sri Lankans are famous for this; they are all smiling and cheerful and then they stab you suddenly just a few seconds later'. He explained that he preferred not to take any risk, choosing to have him arrested right away by the inspectors because 'one should take their threats seriously'.

A comparison of police interventions

Some similarities between the facts that resulted in police interventions emerge from juxtaposing and comparing the two interventions. In both cases, violent acts, namely furniture breaking in the first case and punches in the second case were considered serious enough to launch the domestic violence procedure but not severe enough, in the police officers' initial opinion, to consider them as type C offences. What changed the course of the second intervention was the issue of threats and the victim's fear. This fear was, however, a common factor in both cases. In the first case, the notion of a threat entailed stalking messages sent by the ex-partner to the woman's mobile phone as well as his intimidating behaviour of wrecking the garden furniture. In the second case, death threats were made by the husband over the phone to the victim's mother. Both threats were reported by the respective women, who were concerned and fearful about the reactions of their (ex)partners.

In the first case, although the police officers themselves witnessed the aggressive behaviour of the man, whom they caught in the act of breaking furniture in the garden, they did not consider the woman's declarations and fear to be sufficient evidence to take the man's threats seriously. This was in spite of the stress that was clearly demonstrated in the police officers' own attitude upon their arrival at the scene. The ex-partner's act of breaking things in front of the woman, who locked herself in the apartment and did not dare to open the door was not interpreted as being threatening and intended to scare the victim. Not only was the case not pursued further but because the man had also called the police and accused the woman, the police heard each of the parties symmetrically as suspect and victim. Police officers accompanied the man to the hospital to calm down, and he was allowed to leave his bicycle there, implying permission to return to the woman's house. Their case was interpreted as a quarrel among two individuals that did not threaten the public order; nor did it qualify as a prosecutable crime. It was acknowledged as a domestic violence case but as one without serious follow up. The officers explained to the woman that she could call them again should he return and act aggressively. Only in this case would they take additional measures against him if needed.

The second intervention was initiated following a report of a woman receiving two punches, but this information was provided in a relatively calm situation as the man involved had left the apartment. In addition, this woman lacked any visible injuries to show as evidence of her declarations to the police. In light of what I had witnessed until then, and based on police directives and internal procedures, I would posit that these kinds of cases are usually treated as type A offences without penal prosecution. This was also the initial evaluation of the police officer in charge. However, the threats reported by the woman were deemed serious enough by the police officers to warrant reclassifying the case as a type C 1, requiring immediate ex officio penal prosecution. Consequently, the judicial police were informed immediately, and the woman was brought to the police headquarters to be heard by inspectors. Moreover, the police officers did not wait for the inspectors to fetch the man from his workplace. We arrived there first and waited

for the inspectors, keeping an eye on the restaurant and on the man working there to ensure that he did not leave the premises until the judicial police inspectors arrived.

The aim here is not to criticize why the police officers took this woman's statements seriously, but rather it is to understand why her statements were taken seriously when the police are generally reluctant to prosecute without having sufficient evidence of physical violence (see [Khazaei 2021](#)). Notably, the second case was one of the rare cases that was transferred to the judicial police during my field research. Other such cases included a series of attempted homicides in which the suspect tried to push the victim off the balcony, suffocate her in the toilet and strangle her. Another case involved a man who had used a knife to threaten his wife. He had scratched the wall with it and had finally plunged it into a cushion next to her face. The use of a weapon and the evidence found at the crime scene were conclusive enough for these cases to be transferred to the judicial police. However, the case in question did not include such clear evidence. Even if death threats could justify a type C procedure, police officers usually need sufficient evidence to warrant its use. In view of these elements, a radically different treatment of these two interventions cannot be justified solely on the basis of 'objective' elements distinguishing the two cases. How then can this differential treatment be explained?

THREE EXPLICATIVE FACTORS

Generalized representations of the racialization of violence against women

The impacts of the previously discussed representations that portray the 'cultures' of certain migrants as being more permissive of violence against women is the first relevant factor explaining this differential treatment. These representations were also evident in the discourse of the interviewed police officers. While discussing the difficulties entailed in handling cases of domestic violence, a young police officer made the following statement:

- Honestly, I think there is not even one intervention where we do not have an issue with cultural difference. Because among the Swiss or the French etc., [it] is really rare in general. It is more often the case with people from different cultures, and it causes us many problems because it is always a mess.
- What kinds of problems do you mean?
- Well, first there is this cultural shock. And then, I don't know, I can give you an example of somebody who comes from Pakistan, or I do not know where. Once again, it is the husband who makes all the decisions.

Along the same lines, another police officer made the following observation:

I don't know if it is in the media or by watching documentaries etc., but we know this anyway that in some Muslim countries or in Sri Lanka or India and so on, they mistreat women.

These representations could be translated into actions and decision-making in the field, as confirmed by another interviewee:

There is also the [issue of the] origin of the people. I imagine you have already been told that we know for the Sri Lankans, things like that; it is not easy. ... We know from experience; we know that those cases are very complicated. Always complicated. ... If I have to intervene in [cases involving] the same degree of severity, let's say a punch, it is not the same thing for a Swiss, a French, or a German family as it is for a Sri Lankan family. It is not the same at all.

These examples illustrate the prevalence of the notion that violence against women is first and foremost a migrant problem imported into Europe. In the Swiss case, the rhetoric of *Überfremdung* (over-foreignization) has resurfaced repeatedly during various periods of recent Swiss history (Skenderovic 2003). The term was first coined in 1900 to draw attention to the alleged social costs of increasing numbers of foreigners entering Switzerland and to the threat that these migrants purportedly pose to national cohesion (Skenderovic 2003). The topic of violence against women has been central in problematizing the alleged cultural incompatibility of migrants in Switzerland (Garufio and Maire 2019). The notion of *Überfremdung* and the alleged cultural danger of an over-representation of foreigners in Swiss society has resulted in the targeting of various categories of immigrants over time: Jews from Eastern Europe; Communists, Italians and Spaniards who came as seasonal workers; and since the 1980s, migrant workers and asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia and from Turkey (Dahinden et al. 2014). More recently, the question of religion, notably Islam, has been linked to that of gender, rendering Muslims coming from East European countries or North Africa especially visible within public debates on violence against women (Garufio and Maire 2019; Bader and Mottier 2020; Khazaei 2022). In light of this literature, we can hypothesize that these generalized representations influence the ways in which police officers evaluate the gravity of domestic violence cases. However, the question of why the police officers whom I interviewed repeatedly mentioned Sri Lankans as a national group is not explained by this literature. This question is all the more striking, as Sri Lankan migration has not been especially visible within Swiss public debates (McDowell 2011).

Deployment of a police professional logic to categorize the public

Studies on police reasoning have shown that police officers differentiate the public into various categories; a habitus that constitutes a practical cognitive competence that underpins their activities (Boussard et al. 2006). These categories are not objective; rather, they are constructed and operationalized by the police force, resulting in different 'figures of clients' in the police discourse and representations (Boussard et al. 2006).

One of my interviewees explained this association to me as follows:

It is a bonus for us, the stereotype. People think that police have stereotypes. They call it a 'nasty-face offence', meaning that we arrest some people because of their appearance. But this helps us; it is something that helps us on the street. When we see someone, and we search him because he said something, or he looks like someone, he has the look of ... well, a dealer, for example, and poof! We would find drugs on him. Or a thief or a pickpocket, he has that look and right on target, we find something on him. That is what makes our job. In the case of domestic violence interventions, the Sri Lankans are a perfect example. Because we know that unfortunately they can be very deceitful because they often consume huge amounts of alcohol, and they have those habits and customs and we know that would be hard to manage.

This reasoning provides an additional explanatory factor in this analysis of the ways in which Sri Lankans (or those perceived as such, as the example of the Bangladeshi couple shows) are treated by the police. A link can be drawn between stereotypes (racial, ethnic, gendered and class-based), the construction of suspicion for police officers, and practices of control that stem from this suspicion (de Maillard et al. 2016). Ethnographic studies of police practices such as that of Fassin (2013) conducted in France, demonstrate that the categorization of the public by police officers results in differential practices towards those they encounter. Police officers provide different 'services' based on the figures of clients that they mobilize in the field (Fassin 2013).

The figure of a 'client' from a rich neighbourhood would more often reflect the segment of the population that the police are charged to protect, while the people they are 'out to get', to use Fassin's phrase, comprise an entirely different category of individuals (Fassin 2013). Apart from differentiating neighbourhoods and territories, which can be considered class-based, other criteria, such as dressing style, physical appearance and attitude, also come into play in the production of the category of the 'client' and in the identification of those to be chased by the police. There are various references to street wear, hip hop, or urban styles in different contexts, which are spontaneously linked by police officers to drug deals, as is the presence of individuals in a place linked to such activities (de Maillard *et al.* 2016). Here, dressing style as a marker of class intersects with a racialized variable partially responsible for arousing police officers' suspicion and is used to justify their differentiated practices towards some sections of the public. Scholars have shown that the Black urban style in the US context, and the youth of social residential neighbourhoods in France (Fassin 2013) and Germany (de Maillard *et al.* 2016) have been constructed as an intersectional category suspected of delinquency. This mode of police reasoning is particularly important here for developing an understanding of the construction of the 'Sri Lankan case'. It can be hypothesized that a similar logic prompted the construction of a narrative on Sri Lankans, portraying them and/or those perceived as such as being particularly prone to violence.

During my fieldwork, I was often involved in conversations about Sri Lankans when the police officers talked about domestic violence interventions:

You know, if there is one group that cannot handle alcohol, it is the Sri Lankans! ... It has been proven that biologically there is something in their genes that makes them unable to tolerate alcohol. Many of our homicide cases relating to domestic violence happen among Sri Lankans. ... I remember this case that happened when I had just entered the police force; a guy had drunk so much alcohol to finally give himself the courage to kill his wife.

This comment, made at 4 am, was typical of police narratives on domestic violence recorded during my ethnographic observations. Inscribed in the general context of the racialization of violence against women in Switzerland presented earlier, the police officers' emphasis on the dangerousness, gravity and brutality of these interventions was often accompanied by an observation on how some cultures are more permissive of violence against women. Representations around cultural distance of ethno-racialized 'others' led police officers to conclude that it was impossible to assess risks. Consequently, they tended to have a more suspicious and cautious attitude towards suspects perceived as being part of this racialized, class-based but also gendered 'Sri Lankan' figure. This figure was gendered not only because of the police construction of Sri Lankan masculinity as dangerous, incomprehensible and unpredictable but also because of the parallel construction of Sri Lankan femininity as a passive container of a patriarchal culture which embodies victimhood. Moreover, this intersectional 'Sri Lankan' figure could be applied to cases beyond the actual national category of Sri Lankans. This is evidenced in the above-mentioned patrol leader's explanation of why threats from Sri Lankans should be taken seriously when dealing with a case concerning a Bangladeshi couple.

Institutional memory of two domestic violence cases and their impact

The Sri Lankan narrative stems from two events that are inscribed in the collective memory of the police force studied here. Coincidentally, these events closely preceded new legislation mandating the *ex officio* pursuit of domestic violence cases. They have been incorporated within new training modules established for police candidates in French-speaking Switzerland, after the penal code was amended in 2004.

The first event concerned a police intervention that occurred in 2003. According to the sergeant major who trained the police recruits, this case was included in the training material for young police recruits in light of the post-mortem photographs of the victim's body taken during the forensic examination. 'The harshness of the pictures should raise the police recruits' awareness of the severity of domestic violence cases, thus confounding their stereotypes of these interventions as 'benign' and 'normal' incidents that occur when couples quarrel'. These disturbing pictures showed huge hematomas covering the victim's body. Her shaved head revealed traces of new and old blows that over time had gradually distorted the shape of the skull.

The second event occurred one year later in 2004, a few days after the new penal code came into force. It was reported in the Swiss regional newspapers. This incident involved two police officers who intervened in a domestic violence case in the apartment of another Sri Lankan couple. The situation turned chaotic, and the man was shot and killed after he threatened the police officers with a knife, leading to an investigation. This case was also incorporated in the training modules developed for police recruits, prompting the establishment of a strict new protocol and a securitized and formalized procedure for domestic violence interventions. One of the police officers explained the impacts of these changes as follows:

It has changed our way of intervening. Before, when we intervened in a couple's dispute, we used to send only one patrol, two police officers. ... Now we try to intervene in force. This means that a second patrol comes anyway to support just in case. ... Now if there is an eventuality of ongoing violence, or if we suspect that a weapon is involved, we intervene with two, or sometimes even three patrols.

These changes were attributed not only to the new legislation but also to the unpredictability of these interventions, exemplified in the second significant case, following which the wearing of bullet-proof vests became mandatory for domestic violence interventions. Several interviews conducted with longstanding police officers affirmed that following that case, police officers' security became an important procedural component of domestic violence interventions. The risk element and the unpredictability associated with entering private homes on short notice without knowing how many people would be present, and where potential weapons, such as kitchen knives, could be present, were all mentioned by the interviewees and clearly showed the impact of the above incident.

The impacts of both interventions, their inscription in the collective memory of longstanding officers, and their incorporation into the training materials for newly recruited agents shaped the discourse and representations of police officers on domestic abuse in important ways. The serious, life-threatening experience of the police officers involved changed the status of domestic violence interventions, which were elevated to potentially 'big cases' to use their own terminology, for which police action was deemed legitimate and warranted. These observations made by the police officers correspond to the findings reported in the literature that police tasks associated with danger, violence, and virility are deemed more desirable by police recruits and officers compared with more social and relational tasks such as victim assistance (Hoyle and Sanders 2000; Darley and Gauthier 2014). Accordingly, in the above incident, a domestic violence intervention considered as a social and relational task to assist victims was reframed as one that also entailed risk and danger for police officers.

This 'experience' (Cefai and Terzi 2012) fosters an empirically based understanding of the narrative surrounding Sri Lankans. As Chan (2003) has shown, police culture is multilayered, being informed not only by formal protocols and training but also by the 'feel for the game' conveyed informally through the transmission of stories and experiences, especially by more experienced officers to new police officers. Thus, integrating the personal feelings and experiences

of individuals facing a challenging situation with an examination of the processes whereby an event or a narrative becomes institutionalized is relevant for the analysis (Lumsden and Black 2018). Read in this light, the personal experiences of a few police officers relating to some domestic violence interventions and their formalized diffusion within training modules and police directives may be significant for understanding police officers' reactions and attitudes towards particular interventions categorized as 'Sri Lankan cases'. The importance of this personal experience becomes clearer when other incidents reported simultaneously by the media but never mentioned by my interviewees are considered.

Notably, the above highly publicized and sensationalized case was not the only incident of this kind to occur during this period. For example, the French and Swiss media both reported extensively on the murder of Marie Trintignant, a French actress, by her partner Bertrand Cantat, a singer in a famous French rock band, *Noir Désir*, which had occurred just a few months prior to the case in question. The case entailed spectacular brutality, with the singer dealing 19 blows, of which four were punches, to the victim's head. He neither called an ambulance, nor did he take her to the hospital until the next morning. The case of Corinne Rey-Bellet, a well-known Swiss alpine skier, who was killed by her husband, Gerold Stadler, a private banker with *Crédit Suisse* and a captain in the Swiss Armed Forces, was equally significant. On this occasion, the fact that a Swiss celebrity was involved attracted public attention throughout the country. According to one of the founding members of the Cantonal Commission for Combatting Domestic Violence whom I interviewed, the occurrence of this incident in a 'perfect Swiss family' prompted institutional and political engagement aimed at combatting domestic violence conceived as a public problem.

The above examples show that the facts relating to domestic violence cases to which both the police and the media referred were not unique, nor was the sensationalism relating to some of those incidents. However, it can be argued that the personal experience of the police officers with a specific intervention involving Sri Lankans had a deeper impact on the institutional framing of domestic violence interventions for this local police force. This is evidenced by the fact that more than a decade after these events occurred, when asked about domestic violence interventions, nearly all the police officers mentioned the incidents involving Sri Lankans in one way or another.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this article importantly contribute to intersectional studies of domestic violence. They show that understanding the intersectional workings of different power relations matter not only for racialized and minoritized social groups' experiences but also, critically, for the survival of all victims of domestic violence. This article has explicated how generalized representations of the racialization of violence against women along with the specific experience and collective memory institutionalized within this police force constitute a police professional logic. This logic categorizes the public into intersectional figures of clients to be served or delinquents and criminals to be prosecuted and punished. The findings show how a category of 'Sri Lankan' cases is constituted in a way that results in more severe interventions in cases perceived as such. Conversely, when cases do not fit this perception and are perceived to involve a Swiss or European population, the violence is classified as mild and non-prosecutable, thereby also failing white victims of domestic violence.

The consequences of this categorization are apparent first in the audibility and credibility for the police officers of the Bangladeshi woman's fear and concern. This is because according to their representation of this type of case, her spouse, like other Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan men, was deemed capable of killing and, therefore, to be taken seriously. Conversely, in the case of the Swiss-Swedish couple, the man did not correspond to the usual 'figure' of perpetrators of

domestic violence cases (racialized working-class men) who are to be pursued and punished by the police (Fassin 2013). The Swiss man was allowed to go despite objective facts that could validate the Swedish woman's fears and concerns. Her victimhood in turn was denied, as she did not match the figure of a passive migrant woman whom the police recognize. Consequently, the Swiss–Swedish case was treated as a simple couple's dispute, distinct from cases of punishable violence and crime.

This intersectional analysis of how power structures operate in these examples reveals the extent to which sexism and racism rely on each other and shows how their persistence demands their mutual reinforcement, ultimately failing all victims of domestic violence. These findings suggest that it is possible and even necessary to link minority rights and women's rights, contrary to their construction as necessarily conflictual (Volpp 2001). Instead of opposing the experiences of a majority of white women with minoritized and racialized women as rivals, intersectionality here enables the building of much-needed coalitions, which was at the heart of the pioneering attempts of Black feminists to conceptualize intersectionality.

Through an analysis of the Swiss context, this article refutes the notion that race and racism are more relevant in the US context (Goldberg 2015; Unnever and Owusu-Bempah 2019). It shows that even in the total absence of race-related terminology, as in the Swiss criminal justice system and public policy, this context produces similar racialized outcomes that ultimately correlate violence against women with ethno-racialized minorities. It shows how these outcomes in the Swiss context 'relate to' but also 'differ from' the broader framing of European 'raceless racism' (Michel 2015: 410).

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation [Doc.ch 152178].

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