



# Gender-based violence against women in Kabul

Jenevieve Mannell, A. Ahmad, L. Ahmad

**Dr Jenevieve Mannell  
Institute for Global Health  
University College London (UCL)**

**Email: [j.mannell@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.mannell@ucl.ac.uk)  
Twitter: [@jvmannell](https://twitter.com/jvmannell)**

# Afghanistan

- **87.2%** of Afghan women have experience gender-based violence (Global Rights, Partners for Justice 2008)
- The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission identified **3,331** instances of GBV in 6 months (Hasrat and Pfefferle, 2012)
- 2009 bill criminalising violence against women, however **<10% of cases** formally recognised by police **end in prosecution** (UNHCR 2013).





# Aim

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- To explore the role of **narrative storytelling** in alleviating the psychological trauma of GBV-related experiences
- Storytelling is a social and political practice which ‘defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied’ (Hall, S., 1997)
- Changing how we tell a story offers a powerful tool for reinterpreting identities, shifting claims of difference and challenging commonly shared values (Howarth, C., 2011)

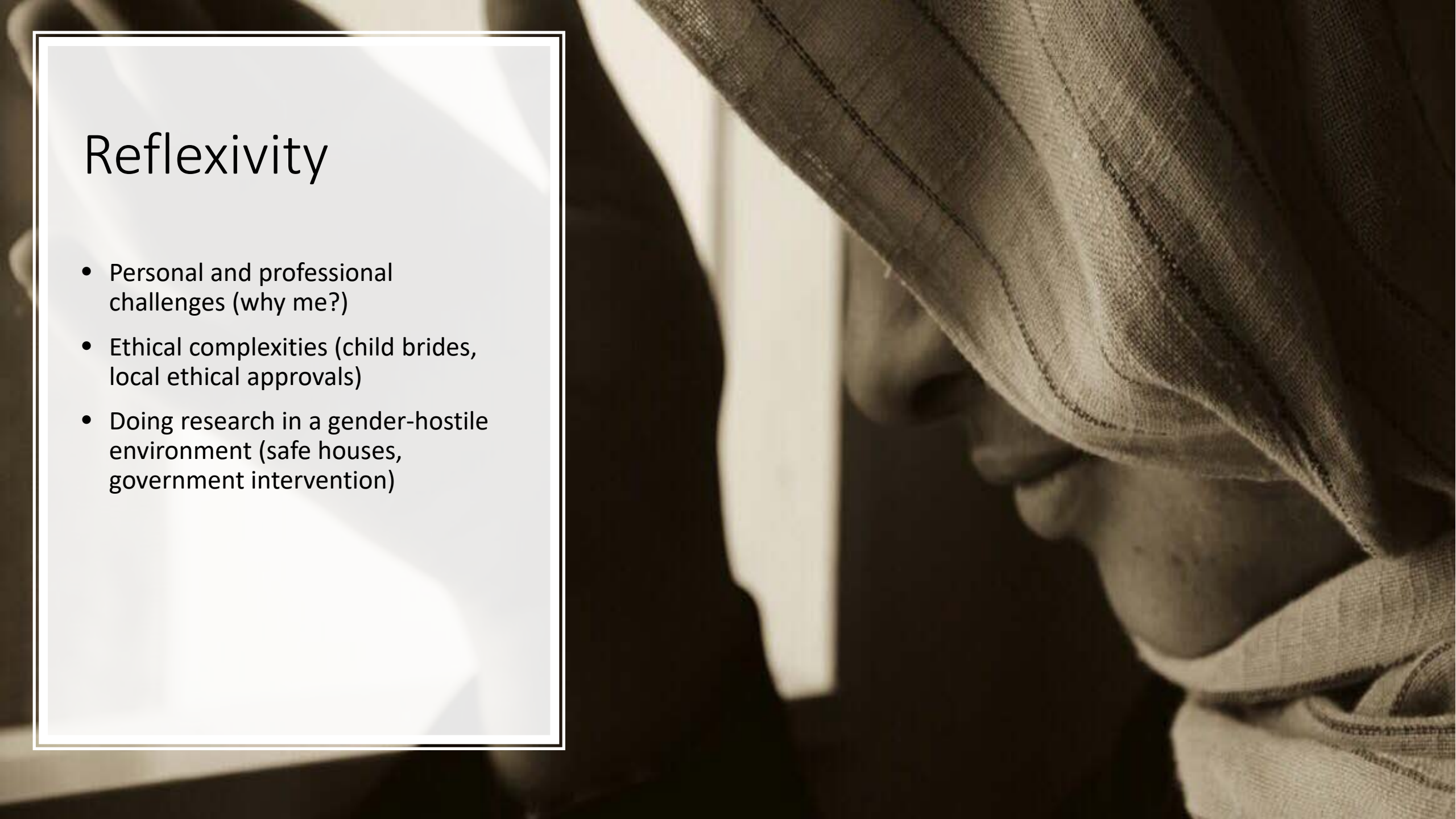
# Our study

- How do women understand the trauma of experiencing GBV? What are women's experiences of storytelling (a) in relation to GBV, and (b) in relation to broader lived experiences?
- 20 in-depth interviews with women living in safe houses; 8 interviews with safe house staff, 1 storytelling activity
- Staged, multiple inductive and deductive coding, Thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001)



# Reflexivity

- Personal and professional challenges (why me?)
- Ethical complexities (child brides, local ethical approvals)
- Doing research in a gender-hostile environment (safe houses, government intervention)





# Results: Storytelling as therapy

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- Stories can relieve suffering, help us be understood and fulfill a basic need to be heard.

*“People tell story to reduce their pain. I am here in the safe house, and here I have met many women and girls who have suffered. Sometimes we tell our story to each other and cry together. Then we feel as if something is coming out of our bodies. We talk about our pain just to share it with each other and it helps us. So, I think people tell stories to share their sadness and happiness.”*

*“Today when I talk with you, it helps me. It makes me think that in this world at least there are some people who want to know about me and my life story.”*

## Results: Other positive effects

- Stories teach us about life, they bring happiness, they inspire us to be strong and they tell us who we are.

*“We Afghans tell stories to each other. We tell stories to our children, and by telling story we socialize them and teach them what is bad and what is good.”*



# Results: Stories can be dangerous

- Stories can make us vulnerable, increase our suffering, and make others to blame us for what happened. They can be stigmatising, may lead to prison, and may even kill us.

*“For me and for other women it is difficult to tell our story. First it is difficult to find the right person to tell. Some people don’t keep secrets. Some people blame you for all bad things that happen in your life.”*

*“Yes, it is difficult for Afghan women to tell their story, I never say real story to someone. I love a man, he love me too but I never talk about it to someone. I know if someone know, they will tell my family and my brother will kill me.”*





# Discussion

- The therapeutic value of storytelling is not in recalling the trauma, but in situating it within one's broader life narrative and identity
- The telling of fictional stories may have many of the same positive effects as the telling of personal narratives
- The listener is as important as the storyteller: this interaction is the basis of therapy and all stories need to be received with compassion and understanding





# Conclusions

“In Afghanistan everything makes it difficult for women to even tell stories, especially when it is their own story. We never think about ourselves. I think we are not considered to be human, and when you are not really a human, who is going to hear your story?”