

# Domestic Violence Survivors' Forums in the UK: Experiments in Involving Abused Women in Domestic Violence Services and Policy-making

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper showcases the pioneering work of the first few key domestic violence survivors' forums in the UK with brief descriptive accounts of three innovators in the field: Croydon Domestic Violence Survivors' Forum, Voice for Change and the Phoenix Group. These groups form part of attempts to involve survivors of domestic violence in policy and service development.*

*The women's activist movement against violence against women has led the way in putting domestic violence on the policy agenda and has always had policies of empowerment and of raising silenced voices. For example, Women's Aid and other women's services have operated policies of attempting to encourage the participation of women using their services, although this work has decreased somewhat in recent years. Now that responses to domestic violence are being mainstreamed in the UK, it is important to ask whether statutory agencies and inter-agency domestic violence forums are learning from the activist projects and attempting to achieve meaningful participation for service users and other abused women. This paper discusses whether the views of domestic violence survivors are both heard and heeded by professionals. It addresses the sensitivities and difficulties involved and the importance of informing services with survivor voices. While focussing principally on domestic violence survivors' forums, the paper makes a variety of suggestions for good and innovative practice.*

**KEYWORDS:** Domestic violence, survivors' forum, user participation, women's voices

The humanness of trying it is what is so important and is often overlooked by boring procedures and doing it because you feel you have to, not because you are committed to it. You need the humanity of it. Survivor accountability is a real human thing. What we have learned from trying to do it here is that the people who are doing it need great commitment and humanity and depth.

(Domestic violence survivor active in policy work)

The development of activist and policy responses to violence against women is of key importance to any understanding of the world that takes on gender issues and to

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attempts to change that world, as readers of the *Journal of Gender Studies* will be only too aware (Schechter, 1982; Kemp & Squires, 1997). Gender-based violence forms the sharp end of issues of concern in a gender analysis, with between one in three and one in five women world-wide experiencing violence and abuse from men (Brunch, 1997; WHO, 2002).

Now, under the impetus of the loose-knit global movement against violence against women which has flourished to different degrees in different places and countries over the last thirty years (see e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Davies, 1994), domestic violence is increasingly seen as a key social issue. Women who have experienced violence have traditionally been silenced throughout the millennia. But now it appears that they are beginning to be heard in a world-wide endeavour to bring their cause to the fore. Exactly who, though, is it who is being heard?

This paper is about how much – if at all – the voices and views of domestic violence survivors themselves are both heard and heeded by professionals in the UK, working in this historically still rather new field. It attempts particularly to showcase the pioneering work of the first few key domestic violence survivors' forums.

### **The Research from Which This Paper is Derived**

A recent research project, one of twenty within the Economic and Social Research Council Violence Research Programme, examined these issues. The study was led by the Violence Against Women Research Group (formerly the Domestic Violence Research Group) in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, and conducted jointly with the Centre for the Study of Safety and Well-being at the University of Warwick. Both these centres undertake national and international studies on violence against women and offer wide-ranging consultancy, teaching and training on the issue, working alongside refuge organisations and the activist movement, and attempting to place their research within an activist, feminist frame.

In line with these commitments, the study was conducted as collaboratively as possible. The Director of the Women's Aid Federation of England acted as consultant on the project, which was advised by an Advisory Group of domestic violence specialists, most of whom were themselves declared abuse survivors. The project was also assisted by a support group of domestic violence survivors in a local community. The guiding methodological principles were broadly derived from feminist epistemological approaches (see Kelly, 1988; Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Maynard & Purvis, 1994), in terms of raising women's voices as research subjects, challenging power differentials in the research and policy process, and building on understandings derived from standpoint and other theories.

The study examined how much the views of domestic violence survivors are heard and acknowledged by inter-agency domestic violence forums, women's refuge, support and outreach projects, and other services and partnerships. A multi-methodological, multi-stage approach was employed to assess the extent and nature of user participation, commencing with national mapping questionnaires to assess and map consultation and participation strategies used by domestic violence forums and services (approximately three hundred and fifty services and one hundred and fifty forums responded to the questionnaire survey). This was followed by detailed in-depth fieldwork in nine localities offering geographic and demographic spread, including the presence of multi-racial

populations. A data-set from interviews with fifteen key national experts was followed by in-depth interviews with one hundred and twelve women service users, with four focus groups of survivors, and with eighty-three workers in both statutory agencies and refuge services, supplemented by an additional five case studies of good practice examples in selected local authority areas.

### **Conceptualisations of Service User Involvement: Starting from the Activist Movements**

In reflecting on empowerment and the raising of the voices of domestic violence survivors, helpful contextualising frameworks are provided by service user movements which have self-organised over recent years to challenge poor or discriminatory services. Thus, a key tool – both in effectively listening to, and in theorising from the views of domestic violence service users – is the body of literature on service user involvement more generally, including practice guidance on how to go about it (see Lindow, 1995; Department of Health, 1996). In particular, the disability movement and the movement of psychiatric service survivors have provided practical and campaigning initiatives and have theorised responses to social issues from the perspectives of those involved (see Brandon, 1991; Priestley, 1998; Sayce, 1999). User involvement in policy-making, while widely viewed as difficult to achieve, can give rise to positive outcomes in terms of achieving more focussed and responsive services, more democratic policy-making, and the individual and collective empowerment of those using services (see, for example, Beresford & Croft, 1995; Stewart & Taylor, 1996).

Service user movements have often taken on the issue of gender, but have not always interacted collaboratively with women's activism. Raising silenced voices, however, has been something that has engaged women's movement activists across the board. We have found it important to address previous silences and 'overlookings', and within this to take on our diversity and difference as women (Kelly, 1988; Kemp & Squires, 1997). In terms of responses to domestic abuse specifically, empowerment of women has always been the watchword of activists who, since the 1970s, have been campaigning, setting up services and developing new policy and practice.

Women's Aid, for example, working both locally and nationally on domestic violence, has a stated commitment to raising the voices of survivors of abuse and their children as part of the political project of insisting that the abuse of women is taken seriously (see Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Mullender & Hague, 2001). Within this commitment, women-run domestic violence services have consistently involved many women who have themselves experienced abuse, working collaboratively with women who have not, in order to build a concerted response to male violence. Users and ex-users of a refuge service have been able to contribute to its running and management and sometimes to take paid jobs within it (although this happens less often now, with professionalisation, than in the past). Thus, the women's activist projects have pioneered the way forward. Now though, responses to domestic violence are being mainstreamed (see e.g. Taylor-Browne, 2001) so that it becomes relevant to ask whether the resulting services and forums are learning lessons from the activist projects and taking account of the opinions and voices of women who have used their services.

### Domestic Violence Policy and Service Development and Survivors' Input

While ideas about the participation of domestic violence service users owe theorising debts to both the women's activist movement and to the other social movements noted above, abused women using services have not formed their own separate movement. [For a detailed discussion of this point, see Hague *et al.* (2003).] Despite the contribution of women's activism itself and the fact that many activists and professionals in the field are themselves survivors of violence, abused women service users have rarely self-organised to participate in service and policy development. They have never been thought of as a service user group in their own right or viewed as part of the service user movement in general. One result has been a diminishing of possibilities for being invited to the table, possibilities which are already diminished by the traditional silences and stigmatisation surrounding victims of gender abuse (Aris *et al.*, 2002).

While violence survivors (either disclosed or undisclosed) who are also professionals might be involved in policy and practice development (see e.g. Hague *et al.*, 1996; Mullender & Hague, 2000, 2001), our study found that agencies and policy-makers rarely feel themselves to be accountable to, or engaged meaningfully in consultation with, abused women who have used their services. This is despite both considerable recent improvements in service provision and a litany of testimonies over the years from abuse survivors commenting on inadequate and patchy service provision (Mullender & Hague, 2000, 2001; Humphreys & Thiara, 2002; Hague & Malos, 2005), with these difficulties often being compounded for black and minority ethnic women (Mama, 1996; Rai & Thiara, 1997). One woman we interviewed said:

We have no influence in their decisions. Not *really*, just pretend! The agencies pretend!

What price, then, service user power? Our research produced evidence that almost all inter-agency forums and many service-providers did believe that the involvement in policy and service development of women who had experienced domestic violence was very important, and something that they intended to do. However, very few had any idea of how to go about it effectively. Most had scarcely ever thought about the issue in a realistic, practical manner, and it rarely happens in any significant way.

### Complexities and Sensitivities

Nevertheless in our research, we uncovered a variety of survivor participation projects. Consultation with users of services is now widely promoted by government as a duty in much new policy and legislation (for example, the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act), and the mainstreaming and embedding of service user participation in this way can be helpful, providing it is not carried out in an overly-formulaic or purely cosmetic way (Barnes, 1999). While much domestic violence consultation falls into the latter categories, our study did find some examples of good practice. The Cheshire Domestic Abuse Forum, for instance, has sought the views of women using its outreach service and the data produced has then been fed back into new service development, specialist domestic violence newsletters to catalyse further work, and evidence to inform Home Office reports and local strategic direction, so that the voices of women using services have been centralised within

the policy process. In another example, the Women's National Commission carried out a consultation to inform the government paper, *Safety and Justice*, which preceded the passing of the new 2004 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act (WNC, 2003).

Consultation on its own, is of course only the beginning – and the most basic form – of service user involvement and sits at one end of a spectrum, the other end of which is real user power in policy and decision-making. Starting from basic (and sometimes rather alienating) consultation, our study found the encouraging beginnings in a few cases of sensitive strategies for the development of fuller, more meaningful participation for service users and other abuse survivors. The multi-agency Standing Together project in London, for example, has conducted three supportive, culturally sensitive participation exercises with domestic violence survivors to arrive at comprehensive recommendations to policy-makers, which have then been systematically acted upon.

However, in all its various forms, the involvement of abuse survivors is clearly a difficult thing to do well unless specific sensitivities and difficulties are recognised and addressed. For the women participating, the interview data sets from our study found that these obstacles could include the impacts of poverty, of social class and of cultural imperatives and differences; the silencing effects and the stigma of experiencing personal violence; the impact of abuse on self-esteem; and personal difficulties in dealing with painful memories and remembered traumas. A crude seeking of the views of survivors sometimes resulted in the exploitation of the woman being consulted and in a type of 're-victimisation' – in this case, by the services concerned, rather than by the original abuser. The woman may be 'used' by the inter-agency forum, neither paid nor compensated, and exposed to trauma and painful memories, just so that rather artificial targets for consultation can be met. However, if these issues can be dealt with sensitively and supportively, and the women involved fully compensated and supported [as also recommended in more general guidelines, e.g. Department of Health (1996)], our informants suggested that the experience can lead both to individual empowerment for abused women and to collective empowerment through the strength of the group in ways that they had never previously been able to contemplate.

In general, the data from our study found that the participation of abused women is an essential component of domestic violence policy and practice in order to keep government, local authority, police and other policy developments on track, to achieve focussed and efficient services, geared towards women and children's real needs, and to contribute to the empowerment of those involved. It is not an 'optional extra'. One survivor active in domestic violence policy work contributed the following moving words:

If they listen to us it is just so good. It makes the services better, just much better. No one has ever listened to us before. And then suddenly these posh organisations are. It brings tears to my eyes just thinking about it.

### **What Works and What Does Not**

Our research found that there is no one way of consulting and involving domestic violence survivors. What evolves in a locality will clearly depend on local conditions – and sometimes on local personalities. Various methods were being tried during the research, some of which worked for a while and then came to an end, an outcome which should not be used to cast aspersions on their original effectiveness. An example was a survivors'

forum which flourished until key members left and no-one else could be found to replace them. In another case, a survivors' group completed a specific allocated piece of work and then dwindled in size.

The most common method which has been tried by inter-agency forums and other projects involves service users attending policy or forum meetings. However, our study found this approach rarely works (unless remarkable personalities are involved or the women are perhaps representing their own group), especially if everyone else at the meeting is representing an agency. One woman we interviewed had this to say:

It is easy for them to overlook you – even if they pretend they are not doing so! They overlook you when it is an important issue, make the 'real decisions' quietly behind your back etc., call a special meeting you are not invited to – or ask you to leave at the key moment! So you have to build it one bit at a time. You can't do it in a hurry – it takes a while plus effort and resources but it can be done.

In any participation process, the issue needs to be taken on that, as theorised for other user movements (Barnes, 1999), survivors' voices are often muted by the official milieu. Service users are likely to be heavily outnumbered and some of our interviewees reported feeling patronised and overwhelmed by management and agency procedure and confidence. Others reported constant amazement at the 'talking shop' nature of many official meetings and the apparent waste of time involved.

They are better than they were, much better. But there is so much talk, conferences, forums, publications, fanfare, but on the ground it's all the same. They say in their fancy suits that they are doing all these things at their meetings – the 'talk culture' – always the 'talk culture' – but for women it's still mainly the same.

Tedious policy-making procedures, alienating, bureaucratic, 'meeting' language, patronising working practices – these difficulties indicate that abuse survivors may need support and training if they are to attempt this work. Such issues may be compounded for minority ethnic women. In the following words from a black woman survivor and project worker, domestic violence forums, strategies and policy-making are characterised by 'the three "Bs": bureaucratic ... big ... no black people'.

A survivor previously active in survivors' consultation exercises summed up the pros and cons as follows:

Well, you keep trying. But half the time, you can't understand what they are going on about. They seem to talk endlessly in circles. And half of what they say is not relevant or someone else has already said it and then they turn and smile at you and say 'what does the survivors' forum think?' What are you meant to say? But when it does work and the survivors say things they listen to, it's great.

### **Innovatory Methods Now Being Tried**

Despite the difficulties that we identified, very good practice was evolving in a few local areas from which others could perhaps learn. As well as the usual questionnaires and



surveys, innovatory methods for survivor participation currently being tried out include women's focus groups; and the active involvement of Women's Aid and other local women's organisations, sometimes in an agreed and structured procedure, to represent abused women's voices and to act as a conduit for information exchange. Special initiatives may also be put into place on a one-off basis such as Internet consultation. A pioneering consultation of this type, for example, was carried out in 2000 by Women's Aid in collaboration with the Hansard Society (Bossey & Coleman, 2000). Liaison with activist groups, political and feminist community theatre, art and poetry can all contribute to raising the voices of abused women. Campaigns and activism have always involved grass roots projects and domestic violence survivors themselves. One of the key new mechanisms currently being tried out is the setting up of survivors' forums or advisory groups, as discussed in the rest of this paper.

### **Domestic Violence Survivors' Forums**

Inter-agency domestic violence forums of professionals exist in most towns and cities in the UK to bring together statutory and voluntary sector agencies to build policy and good practice. Domestic violence survivors' forums are something different. They take various forms and consist of groups of women who have used services (some may be called survivors' groups, focus groups or advisory groups). They have been set up in some areas to work alongside the main inter-agency forum to keep an eye on it and broadly speaking to advise or comment on its work. Such survivors' forums often (but not always) have connections with women's activism.

Survivors' forums are often also support groups, and can offer an innovatory and moving way forward in which policy-makers are directly accountable to groups of abused women service users. In some cases, existing support groups may set aside time once a month or so to look at and comment on the work of the domestic violence forums and services in the area, as one part of their interaction. In other cases, the group may have been specifically convened to make comments on abused women's needs, on what services are required and on progress in combating domestic violence in the locality in question. Currently, there are a few of these groups in different local authorities around the country and they are often actively facilitated by an employee. The Cheshire Domestic Abuse Partnership, for example, has recently started a Cheshire-wide domestic violence survivors' forum.

### **A Pioneer: The Croydon Domestic Violence Survivors' Forum (DVSF)**

One of the very first survivors' forums operated in the London Borough of Croydon for several years in the late 1990s until membership dropped off. This forum was a case study in the research presented here. Although ending prematurely, it was a pioneer of its type and a brave step into the unknown for all involved. Initially, the DVSF developed well and engaged in much useful work as a robust force for change and accountability. The women met enthusiastically and made unique contributions to combating domestic violence in the area, with help both from the facilitator and other agencies. The project attracted interest from outside the borough, and papers and reports were written about it to give others inspiration to perhaps try something similar. After some time, the DVSF was granted a small amount of money to employ workers to action the project. This led to complications

in regards to the need for procedures, committees, budgets etc. while the funding offered was too small to enable effective interventions and the forum's work was compromised. Later still, the (unrelated) withdrawal of funding from the facilitator post demonstrated the vulnerability of such initiatives to changes in funding regimes unless they are firmly embedded in the strategic commitments of the local authority or relevant partnership or agency concerned.

The DVSF had various successes including input into the formation of community-focussed projects, its support for legal representation for abused women and its evidence that there was a need in the area for advocacy for abused women and children (later realised through the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme). The DVSF was an experiment in an untried area, and there were no guidelines or previous examples of similar work on which to draw. Other boroughs have more recently taken on similar work, and have now gone further with it. However, at the time when the DVSF was functioning, it was at the very forefront of developments in this area of work and was in a rather isolated position. Thus the project and the local authority are to be congratulated on giving it a try. Lone initiators of new policy developments always, of course, face a very difficult and potentially lonely task.

### **Two Examples of Good Practice: The Phoenix Group and Voice for Change**

The Westminster Domestic Violence Forum in London works alongside a survivors' group called the Phoenix Group which has been in operation for several years in a consultative role. In our research, we found this group to be well-established, respected, successful and supportive. Factors we identified in its success were that survivor involvement was built into the wider work of the forum from the very beginning, with funding agreed and attached. The commitment of the main forum has always been that, without the incorporation of service users' views the work done is likely to be incomplete and ill-informed. Further findings were that, for the work to be successful in this model, there needs to be constant, committed and honest feedback, to and fro, between the main forum and the group, and that this feedback needs to be conducted by a skilled, committed facilitator who is trusted by both sides.

The Phoenix Group has commented on, and produced reports and recommendations on, service provision in the area. To their credit, the forum and its member agencies have always responded positively and in a serious way to these recommendations and have made changes in their policy as a result. This has included the production of videos and training packs, and policy input on the usefulness of specific legal remedies, on the needs of black and minority ethnic communities, and on public awareness. The comments and reports by the Phoenix Group have been carefully produced to provide detailed evidence and to raise questions for policy-makers on the reality of living with domestic violence. For example, the group strongly recommended that the forum do prevention work and this led directly to a joint decision by agencies in Westminster to address and develop work with male perpetrators. It also recommended that work needed to be done in the education system and the result has been the development of a comprehensive domestic violence prevention training pack for use in schools, now being rolled out across London. A long-term member contributed:

We've been respected at the meetings we've attended of the forum sub-groups ... we are contributing with our experienced voices to the forum's work.



Both the Phoenix Group and the main forum are facilitated particularly sensitively, even uniquely, and this facilitation and support has undoubtedly helped to achieve such positive outcomes. Nevertheless, other domestic violence forums may be able to learn from these experiences. Within an environment of mutual assistance, the group is able to take on issues of cultural difference and the stigmatising effects of experiencing abuse in a meaningful and careful way. The women in the group suggest that: 'we have support for one another and understanding as well as hearing our differences', ... 'we're different women from different cultures and we're here to support each other'. The group has taken forward the lives of the women and their children through mutual help in ways which would have been unimaginable at the beginning.

Voice for Change is an inspirational group of domestic violence survivors which has been in operation in Liverpool for more than ten years and has become a powerful player in the local domestic violence field. Unusually for a domestic violence survivors' forum, it has no facilitator although it is supported and assisted by the invaluable input of the local domestic violence prevention co-ordinator. The group has, on occasion, been 'used' by the local authority for inappropriate referrals. During our study, it became more and more clear that this unfortunate exploiting of unfunded community groups by agencies who have a responsibility to provide services happens time and time again. Clearly, this is an outcome to be guarded against by such agencies, however desperate they may be to deal with all their own referrals, perhaps with scant or decreasing resources in their own budgets.

Voice for Change provides support for other abused women, consultation for agencies, campaigning, comments on policy, and a training outlet for trainee counsellors locally. Local Crime and Disorder Audits and Strategies have included consultation with Voice for Change and it has also been involved in the evaluation of services and campaigns, for example a local Zero Tolerance public awareness campaign. Importantly, it has produced a Charter for Change to which various local agencies have signed up. The agencies have formally committed to carrying out the policy and practice reforms proposed in the Charter for Change in an agreed strategy of directly responding to proposals put forward by survivors. The group is a testimony to what domestic violence survivors can achieve together over the long-term.

### **Key Issues for Survivors' Forums**

The conclusions to be derived from the experience of these various brave experiments are perhaps that, if a project to involve domestic violence survivors who are service users is facilitated carefully, avoiding patronising responses and building towards equality with some sort of emancipatory vision to guide the endeavour, there are real possibilities for exciting change. In such a situation, the women involved will undoubtedly gain a lot, building their confidence and self-respect, and policy development and change will also become possible. The process is also likely to be a moving and emotionally powerful one for the professionals.

Key matters to be considered include:

- safety and confidentiality;
- representedness of the group;
- diversity and difference within the group including attention to cultural issues and the involvement of black and minority ethnic women;

- compensation, expenses and avoiding exploiting participants;
- support and training; and
- taking on issues of trauma and stigmatisation.

The safety of the women concerned and careful attention to confidentiality and anonymity are primary issues to be taken on by any survivors' forum and careful procedures need to be in place, including for choice of venues, transport, publicity, anonymisation etc. Who is to serve on domestic violence survivors' forums and how to constitute groups to make them at least somewhat representative are also clearly issues to be taken on, notwithstanding the fact that external expectations of total representativeness in user groups are generally regarded as unrealistic. Despite this, representedness is usually an issue for groups of service users who can expect, almost always, to be criticised by agencies as unrepresentative. Beresford and Campbell (1994) suggest that this perceived problem is the responsibility of the agencies concerned to solve, rather than the user group, but overly formulaic solutions should be avoided.

It can also be stigmatising and labelling to be active in such a group. Barnes (1999) emphasises that user groups require constant effort to maintain an adequate level of membership, and this problem is accentuated when the work being done becomes alienating (as work with a local authority or using a bureaucratic process can often be) and when there is no recompense for the effort, energy or commitment being donated. Payment for participants engaging in such an ongoing and committed piece of work is always the best option, although this can be payment in kind or in confidence-boosting possibilities (including training courses). It is also essential that resources are provided for support, training, supervision and consultancy on the one hand, and for the provision of general expenses, childcare, transport, translation/interpreting and accessibility policies on the other, to assist members of survivors' forums to do the job.

In our research, it was clear that domestic violence survivors' forums often have to struggle with the off-putting and uninviting nature of the task, and members may ask themselves why they bother. It can be distressing, as noted previously, to have to battle with heavily written policy documents and official jargon, replete these days with references to performance indicators and seemingly remote partnership groupings, which may appear to have little relevance to responding to immediate situations of violence. This problem can be exacerbated where there has been an elaboration by inter-agency and statutory organisations of complex strategies and protocols, often accompanied by little in the way of implementation or of real change on the ground for women experiencing violence and their children.

A particularly disillusioning problem can be how to get policy groups, forums and agencies to take user participation seriously and to act upon it in practice. Many researchers on user movements of different types have also identified this problem. Servian (1996), for example, found that the whole process could be disempowering due to management control and power structures that limited levels of participation. Grant (1997) found that service users saw little point in being involved if managers and experts were just going to make all the final decisions as though the consultation process had not even happened. In our own research, women's groups sometimes felt betrayed and side-lined, when their careful contributions were ignored, even when the reason might have been over-work and exhaustion on the part of policy-makers facing too many demands and scarce resources.

Thus, there needs to be a recognised way for the views of the survivors' forum to feed into the work of the main forum or agency and an agreed and implemented protocol for

then acting upon them. This is demanding and sensitive work for all concerned and needs to lead to real policy development to make services more effective. It needs, therefore, to be carried out, not just as a formality, but according to an agreed, sensitively carried out procedure which leads to action and policy change, regularly reviewed. For this to happen, champions are usually required to carry the work forward and to act as 'honest brokers' within the agencies themselves. Gaining agency and senior management commitment and support, including, vitally, the provision of resources, is an essential part of the process.

It's not good unless consultation with women translates into actual policy and change ... So often views are sought and then – what do the agencies do with the views you've sought out? Ignore them. With real participation/accountability – things actually change as a result. The power of survivors needs to be real, real power. And it's tough to do for everyone. We don't have the answer yet.

(Woman survivor)

Since there is no one 'right' way forward, groups and organisations engaged in this enterprise need to experiment and to be willing to try new approaches which may or may not work. It cannot be done quickly or half-heartedly. This is especially the case because the underlying cause which has brought participants together, namely domestic violence, is such a painful and destructive one.

Another important element in combating the alienating and painful impact that the policy process can have on service users is for the work of survivors' forums to contain an element of pleasure. Celebration by groups of domestic violence survivors and the enjoyment of activities together can contradict the very ethos of abuse and can be empowering in themselves for the abused women taking part.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the evidence from our study is that domestic violence survivors' forums or advisory groups are a positive way forward but can only be successful where they include an element of personal support and enjoyment, where adequate resourcing is available, where this work is structurally built into budgets and policy-making, and (in most cases) where skilled facilitation is provided by an experienced facilitator who is well-versed in domestic violence issues. No one really knows yet whether domestic violence survivors' forums can flourish throughout the domestic violence field in the long term, whether they may only do so in a few cases, or whether inspiring or catalytic facilitation, support and commitment needs to be available from the relevant agencies. All involved need to learn as they go along in a sensitive and human way, rather than a bureaucratic one.

At the moment, consultation with users of domestic violence services and other abuse survivors is often ignored in service and policy development and most agencies lack a genuine commitment to it. To address this situation, the following factors are among the many that need to be taken on:

- senior management support and commitment in agencies;
- central positions for women's activist and advocacy services in inter-agency domestic violence initiatives;

- education and training of professionals and agencies about the need to listen to survivor views;
- training, skills development and ongoing support for survivors to enable them to work confidently in professional milieus;
- attitude change within agencies and the cultivation of an ethos of joint working between professionals and abuse survivors;
- better resourcing for survivors' groups and a formal embedded commitment by agencies, written into budgets;
- the necessity of translating this work into policy change and development and having procedures through which to do so; and
- the sharing by professionals of their power.

One survivor active in participation work had this to say:

It is all about power, all about power. You have to understand that in a very deep way – its not all obvious or straight forward – power takes many, often hidden, forms. Survivors don't have it. People in the agencies have to let go some of their power. And they don't want to – they just want to come to meetings and discuss it! You can struggle on as best you can but unless they let go of some of the power, it's a hopeless task, hopeless.

In general, the involvement of women who have experienced domestic violence in survivors' forums and policy work is clearly a complex and sensitive issue, and needs to be carried out as a process which leads to policy change and action. There is a need for further research on how best to move on from the pioneering work done so far and for its incorporation into training, good practice guides, and professional commitments. The raising of previously silenced women's voices in an effective way which leads to change has always been a lynchpin of women's movements everywhere. Our study found that, in the domestic abuse field, few agencies and professionals are attempting to raise new voices at the moment, and the empowerment of abused women which this could herald remains rather limited – but the beginning possibilities and the work of dedicated pioneers are there, from which the rest of us can learn.

### Acknowledgements

The issues discussed in this paper are discussed in more depth in a book: *Is Anyone Listening? Accountability and Women Survivors of Domestic Violence* by Gill Hague, Audrey Mullender and Rosemary Aris published in 2003 by Routledge; and a guide-book on how to go about it: *'Professionals by Experience': A Guide to Service User Participation and Consultation for Domestic Violence Services* (2002) by Gill Hague and Audrey Mullender published by the Women's Aid Federation of England.

Further information and possible contacts for domestic violence survivors' forums are available from Women's Aid and the Violence Against Women Research Group, SPS, University of Bristol, 8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ, UK; Tel.: 0117-954-6722.

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