

# Breaking Down the Barriers:

## Working with Experts by Experience

**Dr Lucy Allwright Project Manager, AVA**  
**Cordy Ruck, Project Officer, AVA**  
**AVA Expert-by-Experience**



## How we are involving experts

- **National commission** - working with expert group in Manchester to develop recommendations for good practice in women's space involvement
- Expert-by-experience led development of **support app** - Breathing Space
- **Women Side-by-Side** - Mind and Agenda programme. Developed an expert-led training programme for professionals
- **Homeless Link** - Peer support groups - women involved in developing the training
- **Staying Mum** - Peer research into women's experiences of violence against women and
- **AVA's strategic approach** - Charity commitment to embedding experts-by-experience across our projects.

## National Commission and Hand in Hand: Developing our expert led work



### NATIONAL COMMISSION ON DOMESTIC & SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE



*They need to work more with the people who have lived this experience. Coz they are the only people who have lived it, the real life the reality and know what it's like. [...] they need to start engaging with survivors more and using their voices to inform policies and procedures.*

**#HandinHand**

**A WOMAN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE**



# Our model

| Recruitment   | Support   | Training   | Research   | Outputs   |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience based</li> <li>• Currently in crisis?</li> <li>• Networks?</li> <li>• Who is not represented? - what might the pitfalls be?</li> <li>• Interview - discuss where people are at emotionally</li> <li>• DBS checks</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support contract</li> <li>• In case of emergency</li> <li>• What to do if someone is in crisis?</li> <li>• Space for women to share stories</li> <li>• Led by not for</li> <li>• On-going support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safeguarding</li> <li>• Ethics training</li> <li>• Media training</li> <li>• Research skills training</li> <li>• support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A set of research questions devised by women</li> <li>• Interviews and transcription</li> <li>• Safety plans</li> <li>• Check in</li> <li>• Shared research review</li> <li>• Colaborative writing process</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final report</li> <li>• Press coverage</li> <li>• Women able to speak in House of Lords</li> <li>• Peer support</li> <li>• Measuring women's wellbeing?</li> </ul> |

**National call for peer researchers – 70 applications**  
**13 women trained**  
**11 went on to interview other women with lived experience**



## Benefits



### 1. Power dynamics of research broken down

*I was trained and went around my area recording discussions with fabulous, brave women. I found there were no barriers to break down, we understood each other inherently, and personally, I'd never met people who were so empathetic towards me before.*

### 2. Survivors gain support to increase skills and confidence

*Travelling to different venues has massively increased my confidence and has been really enjoyable.*

*projects that involve survivors with lived experience are so vital if we want women to feel they are an accepted and valued member of society.*

### 3. Genuine empowerment increases self-worth and well-being

*This project has really help me to overcome my negative self-belief and i am so much more like my old self again. Actually feels like I've starting living again and not just existing.*

*I am more hopeful and positive about the future and also I feel more in tune with people around me making plans for my future.*

### 4. Peer research can lead to further paid work

Nearly all of the peer researchers are now working in the VAWG sector.

*Getting involved with this project has given me a massive sense of achievement and has really inspired me to work with women who are still fighting personal battles.*

*Together, these women gave me the ability to move past my struggles and become who I am today: a housed, sober, mental health practitioner studying for a Master's.*

***'It was like AVA provided the water and we just flowered'***: Identifying Good Practice and Room for Growth in AVA's Work with Survivors of Domestic/Sexual Violence as Experts-by-experience.

## Aims:

- Identify **what works** (i.e. best practice)
- Identify **what doesn't work** - both at AVA, and in relation to broader pitfalls in work with experts-by-experience
- Identify **where we can improve**
- Identify the **value of expert by experience** work as described and presented by survivors

# Methods

**Primary data collection:** 6 interviews with experts-by-experience.

**Secondary data collection:** broad literature review

**Best practice:** *Survivor's Voices: Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research & Service Development (2018).*

# Findings

## *Facilitating a positive experience*

- Trauma-informed facilitation
- A focus on self-care and boundary making
- Consistent communication
- Accessibility and inclusivity
- Time for fun and friendship
- Flexibility
- Collaboration
- Payment

## *Areas for improvement (AVA)*

- Conversations around race and prejudice
- Facilitating quieter voices
- Complex group dynamics
- Lack of time
- Out of hours support
- Payment

## *Negative work outside AVA*

- Lack of facilitation
- Lack of value
- Lack of clarity
- Lack of personalisation

## *Value*

- Self-development
- Empowerment
- Enjoyment
- Relationship building (and peer support)

# Recommendations:

## 'Planning' phase

- Create a guiding value-set
- Reflect on power dynamics and organisational suitability for projects
- Partner with specialist organisations
- Invest time in clarity
- Practice whole person approaches to recruitment
- Ensure ring fenced funding for payment of experts-by-experience

## 'Doing' phase

- Recognise that conflict is part of the process
- Embed discussions and exercises around: *positive self-talk, abuse 'recovery' and journeys, active listening, diversity and inclusion, trauma responses and triggers, consensus decision making*
- Embed opportunities for peer support
- Encourage boundary making and self-care
- Create space for supporting staff
- Embed opportunities for self-development
- Create crisis plans

## Reflecting'/wrap-up phase

- Whole team reflections
- Provide opportunities for experts-by-experience to upskill and find future long-term employment
- Share learning

## Working with trauma and group work

- Space of peer support? Group dynamics and bonding - consequence of sharing stories - experiential hierarchy
- Being aware that circumstances change: women's perpetrators may return, substance use relapse
- Triggers in training - discussing violence and abuse, intersectionality - South Asian researcher feedback
- Trauma support: train travel, talking to staff in organisation, staff changes
- Media work – risk of re-traumatisation and exploitation
- Impact of telling stories - clear boundary setting is vital

Key: Skilled facilitators, building good relationships,  
Be prepared to embrace risk

## Volunteer vs paid work?

1. legal framework around volunteering - employee vs volunteer.  
Issue of benefits in kind
2. Who can participate - some participants do not want to be paid  
as impacts on benefits
3. May impact on who you recruit to be involved
4. Create policy and procedure so women know their rights
5. Consider personal development and funding for training and skills.

## How has our work changed?

- Commission stage 2 - worked with expert group to make recommendations for good practice in involvement
- Development of support app - Breathing Space - learned about iterative development processes - this is more co-production than involvement
- Women Side-by-Side peer training involvement - paid survivors to sit on steering group. Peer-led training. Paid experts for their time.
- Staying Mum - Clearer organizational policy
- Homeless Link - Peer support groups - clinical supervision. Peer led training and letting go!

## Recommendations on involvement - Manchester Women's Voices Group

1. **Accessibility:** Access to technology. Physical and Emotional needs including trauma triggers
2. **Communication:** Materials adapted for where English isn't first language and communication adjustments
3. **Focus on relationships:** build safety and trust and make this the core of your working practice - when women have faced abuse they may not feel safe in any space
4. **Build in referral pathways:** ensure you know where women can access support
5. **A strength based approach:** Women are the solution not the problem and their needs and desires must be centred in involvement.
6. **Co-production:** This is not the same as consultation - it is a principle based approach that involves experts from the start.
7. **System change:** Women's voices must be centred in the change you wish to make
8. **Understanding women.** While women often face common experiences of violence and abuse this will be experienced differently by each woman and may be impacted by other forms of oppression.

## Some key points:

- Training and skills: give people training; provide opportunities to shadow workers, co-delivery of training, offer pathways to paid work.
- Use personal development plans to show progression, change and success
- Use peer mentoring, support and advocacy to help broker relationships to wider services
- Expert-involvement is ALWAYS peer support.
- Feedback, feedback, feedback – make clear how involvement has led to change
- Link in to other networks: Mind, UCL
- Be trauma-aware and work to being trauma-informed

**Saima Khan, AVA expert:**

'In normal services I am seen as a service user, at AVA I don't feel like that...you make me feel like I am just as valued as the staff...it's not being a client, a service user, its being somebody in society who's making a change...value women survivors...its an approach of being inclusive and valuing a woman's story and giving her the opportunity to feed in...value the people you are trying to serve.

## AVA expert-by-experience