

# **WALKING TOGETHER: COMMUNITY REFLECTIONS ON FREEDOM FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

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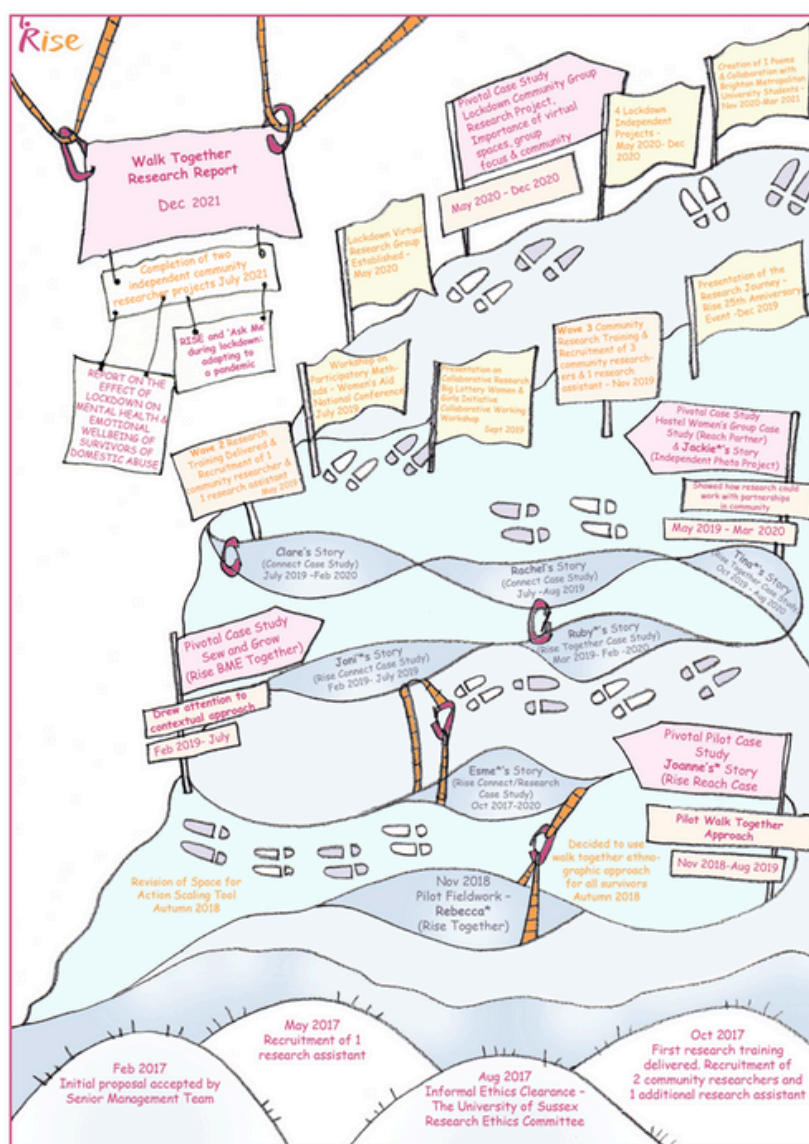
## **Summary**

In this paper we will present the story of our five- year research journey and what we learnt about the meaning and experience of freedom from domestic violence and abuse, for women at different stages in the journey and from very different situations. By walking together with the RISE Big Lottery Community Engagement and Building Project (2016-2021) we have captured the role of our community work in expanding women's sense of 'space for action' (Kelly et al. 2014) –or freedom from abuse in different areas of their lives. Our 'walk together' approach reflects key principles of feminist participatory action, asset – based community development and trauma informed research practice. It can be regarded an active, empowering and collaborative process of making community, through storytelling, listening and sense- making. By centring the voices of women on the margins of our community, with a focus on the so called 'hard to reach' groups by mainstream services, and drawing stories in dialogue, across lines of difference (with survivors at a 'later stage' in the journey) we present significant learning for the Violence Against Women and Girls Sector and the local community of Brighton and Hove.

The success of our methodological approach highlights the dominance of normative construction of linear and coherent 'good survivor' stories, and the difficulty of making marginalised stories of the onwards journey from domestic violence and abuse 'fit'. The creation of alternative forms of expression (visual, spatial and collected over time) leads to stories of different types of 'freedom from abuse' in survivors' own words. Key learnings include; the need for a more intersectional definition of domestic violence and abuse and the way it is experienced in relation to services and geographical space; acknowledging that relationships (as interdependent) are significant for women's sense of self, recognition and belonging; the need to combine a feminist ethic of care with an ethic of autonomy in support for survivors of domestic violence and abuse; and attention to the impact of (lived experience of) geographical space in the city; highlighting sites of exclusion, invisibility and trauma and the creation of spaces of recognition, healing and voice. The paper concludes by inviting the audience to think of ways they can engage in collaborative micro activism as spatial stories of resistance– taking a 'bold walk' in the city of Brighton and Hove, to make freedom from gender violence a reality for all.

## Introduction

In this paper we will present the story of our five- year research journey and what we learnt about the meaning and experience of freedom from domestic violence and abuse, for women at different stages in the journey and from very different situations. By walking together with the Rise Big Lottery Community Engagement and Building Project (2016-2021) we have captured the role of our community work in expanding women's sense of 'space for action' (Kelly et al. 2014) –or freedom from abuse in different areas of their lives. We have presented this journey as a climb up a rocky mountain. The footsteps mark the path of our community researchers and storytellers in the community as they join us at different points, hooking into the project and linking with other women with their climbing harnesses and carabineers.



**Image 1: The Rise Walk Together Journey 2016-21**

## **Our Community Researchers**

On this journey we have been supported by the collaboration of ten community researcher volunteers – seven of whom joined our community researcher training programme – at different stages in their own onward journey from domestic violence and abuse. Our research programme is about valuing individual and collective strengths, learning new research skills and developing our feminist knowledge about gender violence and intersecting oppression and inequality. Researchers have actively shaped the development of our research design and method, conducted research activities with community members and participated in story analysis workshops and dissemination events (including workshops for the annual Women's Aid conference and for the National Lottery Women and Girls Initiative). In addition, some of our researchers have created their own 'independent research projects' with our support, focusing on topics such as the 2020 lockdowns, mental health and the Ask Me Ambassador Programme (Florio, 2021; Ilett, 2021).

## **Our Community Storytellers**

As we have climbed the mountain over the five years we have been joined by the stories of

- 3 women who we met at the point of crisis and followed for up to a year – (identified as disabled, older, and/or experiencing multiple disadvantage).
- 4 women who joined the BLCP wider community as our supporters or connectors – seen at a later stage – two of whom are disabled.
- 2 community groups who shared what it means to feel strong and free in the context of multiple disadvantage or identifying as Black and minoritized.

All have been followed approximately 6 months to a year. These 'research participants' have been invited to share their stories, to help us understand the experiences of marginalised women in our community who were (prior to the BLCP) not reaching or fully engaging with, the dominant risk- led/ short –term crisis intervention model of domestic violence and abuse support. Or for those women who are seen at a 'later stage', beyond crisis support (our connectors, researchers and supporters), to give us a better understanding of the longer- term needs and experiences of women who are rebuilding their lives and looking to give back to Rise and their community.

## An Active Process of Making Community

The image of the mountain was inspired by one of the stories we followed for the research –that of a climbing instructor who wanted to disrupt the macho workplace culture of the climbing wall –with a woman centred connector project – that would offer a more caring and empathetic approach to climbing instruction. One of our community researchers felt that this image was metaphorical not only of our research project but the whole community project; the idea that as a survivor you reach a wall to climb, but to get down you need to lean back and trust your community would be there to catch you. For us – this is done through the process of storytelling, listening, reflection and sense making, it is an active process of making community through stories that creates a shared sense of connection between women from different situations – not only through shared personal experience (of gender violence) but through a motivation to activate positive change for women in our community. This is quite different from the traditional idea of academics or consultants reaching out to consult with a faceless community out there. Researchers and ‘participants’ are part of active dialogue, with the ambition to amplify voices and stories that are rarely heard.







By embedding this work in our Rise Community Project and walking together with our community workers, the research also provided a different and creative space for reflection on our frontline practice. It offered a deeper understanding of women's experiences in the wider social context of their lives. Our research shows the potential of this research approach in enriching the professional community around the survivor.

### **A Rocky Climb**

If all this sounds straightforward, it really wasn't! Back in 2016 RISE had their own agenda – they wanted us to be able to measure or 'track' women's sense of 'space for action' (Kelly et al, 2014) so they would have a model they could embed in their wider systems of data monitoring/evaluation. This meant they wanted to understand from the perspective of survivors themselves, the effectiveness or impact of community based support, resources and intervention in addressing not only their safety but their capacity for freedom from abuse. Rise wanted to measure this freedom in different areas of women's lives over a longer (1 year) period of time, with a focus on those groups commonly regarded as 'hard to reach' who were not accessing Rise services. This focus on measuring and tracking impact is essential in current political climate, it provides evidence for funders of the quality and effectiveness of our work. The Women's Aid Change that Lasts model, which has provided the framework for the wider BLCP community project, has been used to illustrate how investment earlier on in more holistic and longer terms support, saves financial costs to services further down the line as there becomes less need for services.

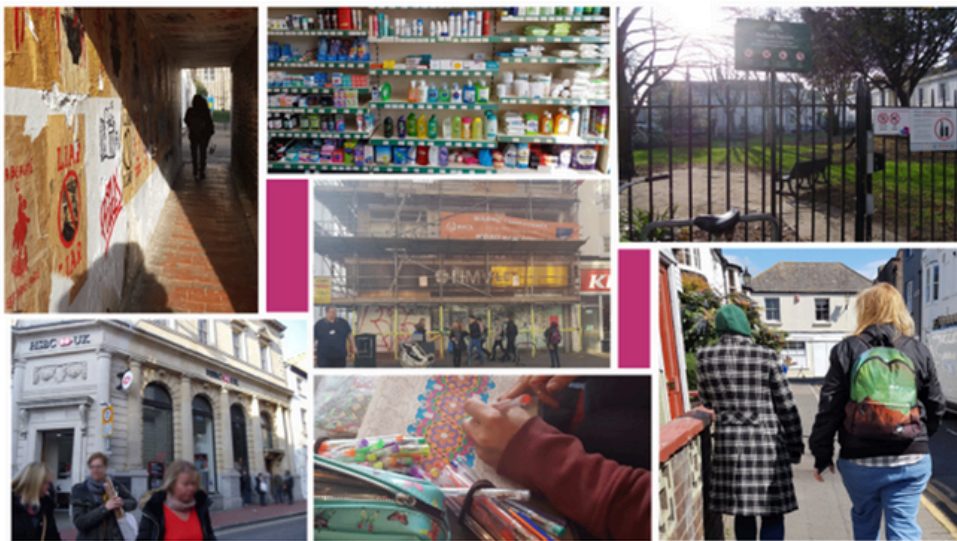


It was the idea of measuring 'Space for Action', however where our research team in 2017 got stuck. To clarify – the concept was created by Liz Kelly and colleagues (2013,2014) – and it was created in relation to the experience of coercive control which can impact on your freedom to think, act, make choices or to live the way you want –free from violence and abuse. Space for action is about a sense of independence or autonomy that is lost through the abuse. By measuring women's sense of freedom in different areas of their lives in this way –they were able to show both the long term impact of coercive control, the role of community resources in expanding space for action and impact of additional barriers (such as economic/access to services/community response etc.). This focus links to the feminist activism within our sector – the fight for women's individual rights for freedom from abuse and of recognising coercive control as a crime of freedom.

For some of our research team back in 2017 however, the very idea of measuring an individual sense of being able to act or think freely or make choices in their lives activated difficult feelings. Most of our research team (six at the time) identified as either disabled, Black Minoritised or experiencing multiple disadvantage. Some, felt anger and frustration with Rise, especially those who had come through our short term crisis or recovery support. They were frustrated with longer term needs related to housing, health disability, accessing therapeutic support. Even though it was not the intention of Kelly and colleagues –the statements in space for action scale (created by academics and not survivors) –to measure individual action/choice in different areas of life made some of our researchers feel like we (as a domestic abuse service/linked project) were locating the responsibility for change/progress –and even 'recovery' within the individual rather than the wider system. Some explained that they believed some women would never 'fully recover' (and to suggest that there is an end point, or maximum score related to freedom from abuse would be insensitive). In addition – our community workers were also finding it difficult to imagine measuring freedom on the journey, or even how to introduce storytelling into their work as so many of their clients were in complex trauma, crisis with no obvious break to measure sense of freedom – like leaving perpetrator –and the frontline support work was long term.

## Learning to Walk Together

We needed a different way of talking about freedom from abuse. A way that avoided using category statements created by external 'experts' to measure a sense of freedom. Our researchers set to work developing flexible and open paper based tools, for 'participants' to map their relationships and talk about their experience of freedom in different areas of their lives (Szabo, 2019). We also needed a form of storytelling that enabled women to tell their story on their own terms, at their own pace. We needed an approach that didn't rely on the traditional narrative format of speaking from the past (violence and abuse) to the present and the future but allowed us to start at a different point (the present, the future), without asking women to narrate the detail of the violence and abuse (past or present). In short we wanted a richer more contextual picture of what freedom from abuse could look like in relation to women's different situations and vantage points.



Here we credit Jodi – one of our first storytellers who taught us how to walk together. Jodi showed us a more participatory, mobile and spatial method of storytelling. She directed us to take photographs of everyday life, she created a photo project, to show the work with our assertive outreach worker to expand her space for action – and also to provide us with context of her life – space of her past – memories of being street homeless, and places of connection with others – past and present. Jodi also showed us what she did to expand her sense of freedom – through the activity of mindful colouring. This freedom to change the lens of storytelling through the activity of colouring is one way in which research disrupted the status quo. It presented a different way for support workers to engage and communicate with Jodi, and to celebrate and highlight her strengths. Following the research, all of the support workers around Jodi started to engage Jodi in conversation through colouring activity and her work was displayed in a community art exhibition.

These visual, active and mobile methods were mixed with processes of researcher led observation and reflection. The story was gradually built and pieced together in collaboration with the researcher and assertive outreach worker, and heard and amplified (back to the Rise service) through story-listening workshops with our community researchers. This approach of ‘walking together’ at Jodi’s pace and using creative and embodied methods of communication and expression, reflects key principles of both feminist participatory action research and asset based community development research. It positions the community member as the ‘expert’ and empowers them to take control over what is shared, how it is shared and in what context. But it also reflects the trauma - informed working practice at Rise, where the whole organisation work with the following core principles; safety, empowerment, voice and choice, recognition of historical, cultural and gender issues (inclusivity), trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration and mutuality and peer support (Rise, 2018). For women who have experienced the dynamics of power and control that are central to the experience of domestic violence and abuse, these principles, if effectively adhered to, can have a transformative effect on an individual level.

‘It’s not that I didn’t know that it was wrong before. I knew it was. But I was just like, fuck off you know, head down, it’s my problem, my business. But now I know I can talk to Assertive Outreach Worker, I can talk to you. Because you listen and you care. (Jodi, 2019).

‘You are right. I am an observer. I know what is going on in the hostel. I can see what is happening. And I think people should listen to me. I think I should go to the council and tell them what I think’ (Hannah, hostel group member, 2020).

## **So What Did We Learn About Freedom from Abuse from Our Community?**

### **The ‘Good Survivor’**

Our first observation from the stories that we walked together with was that there was an idea or sense of a ‘good survivor’ circulating in the way women talked about their own experiences of professional and community support in the onward journey from domestic abuse. By which we mean a general or wider idea or message in society that services are created with a particular (normative) person in mind –who will act in a way that is expected. The following is not a list of Rise’s criteria for who can access our service, neither does it reflect our survivor focused and inclusive ethos, but rather, it speaks to the way the services and institutions that women face on the onward journey are shaped and restricted to serve survivors.



The good survivor is;

- White
- Age 25-55
- Non-disabled
- Mother (usually of young children)
- Seeks help/ works with services when in high risk crisis
- AND if low risk –cope with less support for self-care and safety planning
- Able to tell a coherent story to police/courts – for a report/conviction
- Does not present as aggressive, confused, frustrated.
- Willing to leave perpetrator.
- Willing to live away from home or community (refuge).
- Not under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Eligible for counselling or therapy (at the right 'stage' –not in crisis) to process experience as coherent story.
- Working towards a linear story from victim- survivor –thrivers.

Here we can also see a mirror of the concerns expressed by our community researchers. What it alerts us to is the danger that our feminist message of freedom, choice, autonomy and action gets confused with an image of survival that matches the wider political agenda of austerity cuts/time limited funding, self-sufficiency, personal responsibility and embedded ideas of coherent storytelling that can be found in our legal and criminal system.

The following quotes have been chosen from individual stories to illustrate some of these themes:

It's as if they have never had an older woman in this situation. It does feel like that sometimes. (Ruby, following appointment with solicitor to discuss access to shared finances)

'I am trying to change. I am trying to lead a better life'. (Jodi while making a statement to the police about domestic violence and abuse.

'I supported her in court but they said she was an unreliable witness. It can be frustrating; they don't understand that whole thing of who does what to whom. I wish they would take into account what we see is happening'. (Assertive Outreach Worker reflecting on Jodi's experience of court).

'She didn't text me for ages. Because I think she thought I would be disappointed in her. Of course I wasn't. She didn't think there was any option but to return to him. She didn't think anyone else could look after her'. (Community Worker reflecting on Tina's decision to return to the perpetrator in the pandemic due to fears of Covid-19).

## **‘Survival Work’**

The second thing we learnt, unsurprisingly, is that the women in our research struggled to make their story fit with this image –either in their interactions with (or choosing not to due to unfavourable perceptions of) services, community or family and friends and that this had emotional and sometimes physical (embodied) consequences.

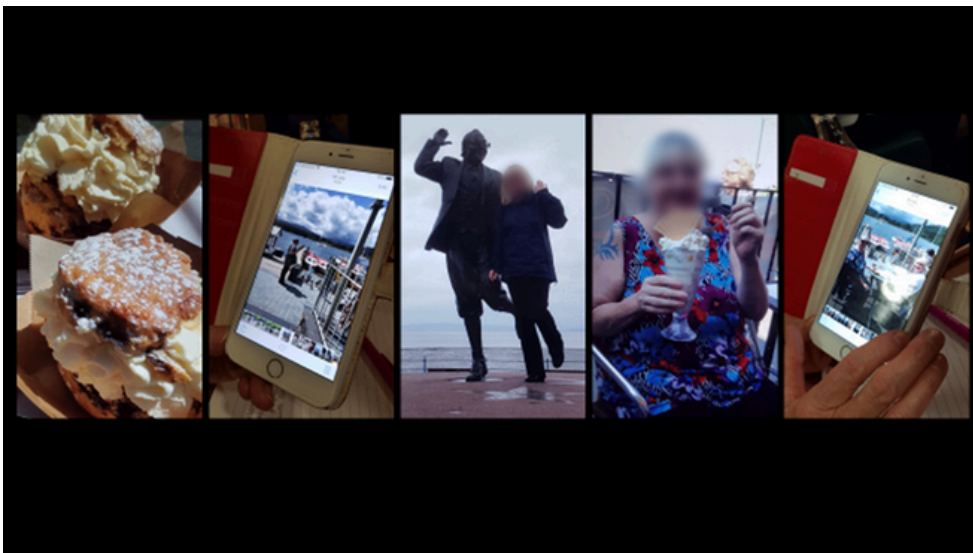
In the field of disability studies this struggle to make your story (of your intimate partner relationship) fit with normative ideas has been referred to as ‘survival work’ (Liddiard, 2012). That is, the recognition that on top of the energy and efforts of ‘safety work’ to deal with the abuse or the ‘violence work’ (Kelly, 2011) to manage the impact of the abuse and the work of rebuilding lives, women are also navigating their exclusion from normative ideas/ discourse. This can be related to wider cultural perceptions, for example, of asexuality, infantilization (of disabled women), frailty (of older perpetrators), of closed/inwards looking (Black and minoritised) communities or of ‘chaotic’ (as opposed to ‘respectable’) lifestyles (of women experiencing multiple disadvantage). These perceptions can be woven through the inaccessibility of services – where needs are not addressed (cultural, accessibility, stereotyping/attitudes) and women feel invisible.

We can only imagine the energy and effort needed when key failings in the system actually put women in further danger or further restrict their freedom. Our research captured examples of perpetrators being released without notification (for women or support workers) from police custody, hostel staff not notifying women that perpetrators were in the building, hostels not having 24- hour support or CCTV to deter perpetrators and make women feel safer. We also saw failings related to the lack of suitable support on offer for a disabled woman preparing to leave hospital in the 2020 pandemic. This meant she felt she had no choice but to return to perpetrator. In another case, we saw the length of delay in housing support for a woman whose deteriorating health left her housebound for over a year, in a top floor flat. Considering the size of our sample that is a lot of failings.

## Capacity for Interdependent Relationships

So how do women tell a story that makes their lives feel liveable in this context? Is there capacity here for experiencing a different kind of freedom? Women talked about; being a 'close family', having a close sibling bond, or about parallel projects with their own children – educating them about feminism, caring for them, celebrating their confidence (in spite of their journey). For Jodi who had been separated from her children, it appeared important to find a way to express the capacity to care for others through her dog.

In many ways these relationships were articulated as interdependent – so it is not just about showing individual strength through a one- way process of caring for others. Rather it is about expressing how they also received support and connection from others, doing soothing and mindful activities together losing track of time, or of pets aiding their own healing or recovery. Places also play a role in this support. For example, Ruby one of our older storytellers chose to create a photo project about the creation of a sense of freedom in her everyday life, which focused on a family holiday. The family returned to the seaside place where they had all grown up, and the photographs taken together, having cream tea with old friends, suggested the creation of new memories–re-writing the story of the relationship with that geographical space



Being understood was vitally important to both our community groups. Both (very different) groups articulated a sense of going against the grain of their wider communities; of being 'trailblazers', disrupting norms just by coming together as a group of women. Having a space to talk about experiences of gender violence, wider intersecting experiences and fears of street harassment – either as racism or in the homeless community was crucial. These spaces provided a place for banter, humour, but crucially, as a space away from men. Whilst the hostel women felt ambivalent about this (as they felt not all men were a threat and some could be allies) it was clear from our observations that when men were in the room there was no chat about the experience of gender and violence and abuse.



Our research team chose to articulate the importance of relationships, in women's stories visually. Their own experiential group research project, on the experience of lockdown in the 2020 pandemic – captured their parallel experience of coming together and feeling together and understood. These images of freedom feel quite different from the story of the lone survivor either of the feminist agenda of autonomy- or individual thought, action and choice – or one shaped by women's experiences of (restricted and normative) services (based on ideas of self-sufficiency and coherence).





Relationships can sometimes feel fragile especially when the family story of – ‘just the way dad is’ has been exposed for all to see, or where the story of the close sibling relationship reveals signs of abuse, or the volatile dog who had been abused and trained by the perpetrator to attack others. Groups can also be tricky. Within the hostel women articulated their fear of ‘loose lips’. There was a very real threat of stories told in the group getting back to other men in the hostel who we realised had some control related to women’s access to drugs.

The wider community team both held these tensions and found creative ways to strengthen gaps. In some cases, the role of our team was about strengthening support around women. Our Assertive Outreach worker carried out intuitive work with the street vet to train Jodi’s dog, enabling her to access public spaces again and to keep him with her within her hostel flat. Our Community Worker work bore witness to and held the fragility of family relationships, balancing risk with assessing good enough support, and the need for multi- agency intervention. The research also captured how space was created for recognition of the two- way process of care (interdependency) to be modelled – which can best be illustrated with the re-occurring theme of (turn taking to) host tea and coffee – but is more nuanced related to the intuition and compassion of our frontline workers often drawing on their own personal experience.



## Ethic of Autonomy

But whilst centring and valuing this ‘feminist ethic of care’ (Gilligan, 1982) within informal and professional relationships is paramount, we can’t let go of the importance of holding onto an ‘ethic of autonomy’ (Davy 2019) and supporting individual strength and healing. This is crucial for those women who are reliant on others for support (for example personal assistants or family members) and in the context of individual autonomy being eroded by coercive control. Across the research women expressed their sense of individual autonomy through photographs of their home and solitary craft activities.



This felt especially poignant for those whose spaces were frequently invaded ('cuckooed') or taken up by men. Workers advocated fiercely for housing and safe spaces for expression and encouraged women to revisit old hobbies and activities.




And finally – we realised through the activity of walking together– enabled what feminist geographers have called a ‘bold walk’ (Koskela, 1997) the small acts of micro activism (the routine of walking and claiming space) which ‘tame’ spaces, or the more ‘silent everyday resistance’ of taking up a space where you are not expected (Listerborn, 2015). We have woven examples through this paper;

- The disruption of the macho culture at the climbing wall
- The routine walking of the back alleyways with Jodi and conversations about gender violence.
- Telling a different family story of the place of childhood.
- Directly claiming spaces in the city from which women have felt excluded.
- Through coming together –as ‘trailblazers’ through activity and shared space.

All of these stories tell a different (spatial and temporal) type of freedom from domestic violence and abuse.

## Summary

In summary what we have learnt is that research is not just about tracking, monitoring and measuring or that traditional form of evaluation or consultation with a faceless community ‘out there’. The Big Lottery funding and our confidence to collaborate whilst valuing our different personal and professional expertise and knowledge, has given us the freedom to be creative and to centre the voices of marginalised women in our community.



Through our work of storytelling, listening and shared processes of reflection and sense-making we have also actively created a shared sense of community or purpose. Through amplifying voices –the opportunity to be heard, valued and understood, we have contributed to the project of expanding women’s sense of ‘space for action’.

We feel this opportunity to step outside of the box offers a real contribution to knowledge about gender violence, intersecting inequality and oppression and ‘freedom’ or space for action. The key learnings are:

- 1) Official definitions of domestic violence and abuse need to put more emphasis on intersecting experiences (oppression and inequality) and how this is lived in relation to the wider system of support and geographical space.
- 2) Acknowledging how relationships of care are crucial to women’s sense of self, freedom and belonging, especially when marginalised from normative ideas of individual agency/action.
- 3) Combining a ‘feminist ethic of care’ with an ‘ethic of autonomy’. Alongside holistic community work we need to continue to provide and advocate for individual opportunities for women to heal – through safe housing; solace and activities and multi-agency work.
- 4) We need to continue looking for different creative ways for storytelling, that avoid traditional or normative expectations of linear progression(victim-survivor-thriver) or coherence, the body, mobility and geographical space offer a different lens.
- 5) We need to pay more attention to geographical space in our city including ways in which we can support survivors by challenging and transforming sites of exclusion, invisibility and trauma to ones of healing, recognition and voice.

Finally, the focus on geographical space offers us exciting and hopeful opportunities for activism on a local level –through collaborative storytelling, and we would like to invite you to take a bold walk with women in our city to make it – a place of freedom from abuse for all.



# WALKING TOGETHER

**"I am too scared to be on my own,  
everything is fine. I feel strong.  
I can tell him to go to the back  
room now if it gets too much"  
Women's voices finally heard  
Calling through the fog of the system  
Of cost/benefit analysis  
To safety and stabilisation  
To the listeners, waiting  
With research grants and projects  
With ideas suggested and shelved  
With values and ethics growing  
Until, finally, a walk is taken  
A journey towards a common purpose  
To explain what it's like to knock on the door of RISE  
and ask for help  
And to walk towards  
Sisterhood and Solidarity  
Space for Action  
To sharing, to recognition  
To feeling grassroots round our ankles  
To standing rooted  
Rising up.**

**Poem by\* Sasha (Community Researcher, 2017- present)**

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For Further Information on the Walk Together Research please contact:  
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Or check out our RISE website: <https://www.riseuk.org.uk>