

RISE WALK TOGETHER 2016-2021 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This research has been funded by the Big Lottery as part of the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) and located within the Rise Big Lottery Community Engagement and Building Project (2016-21).

Over the period 2016-2021 The Big Lottery fund invested £45.5million in 63 projects across the UK as part of the Women and Girls Initiative. The common focus at the heart of all projects was to support disadvantaged and at risk women and girls to regain and retain control of their lives. Evaluation and learning was seen as a central part of this work with the view that increased involvement of women and girls in the design and delivery of services would provide a better quality of evidence for what works in terms of holistic, integrated, person-centred approaches.

Embedding a community research programme within the BLCP provided RISE with an opportunity to 'Walk Together' with marginalised community members, bringing their rarely heard voices and 'expertise' to the centre of the organisation. Drawing on the gifts and strengths of survivors with living experience of domestic abuse, the Walk Together research programme also gave an opportunity for women who wanted to learn new skills, to co-produce and deliver, and connect and 'give back' to others through community research conversations.

Our report tells the story of what this research community of researchers and storytellers learnt when they came together to understand what 'freedom' from domestic violence and abuse: or a 'space for action' (Kelly et al. 2014) means, looks and feels like for marginalised women, when put in the context of specialist feminist participatory action, trauma informed, asset- based community support.

Our Research Questions:

- How do we create an inclusive and strengths- based model of community research that amplifies survivor voice?
- How do women from different situations make sense of the experience of DVA survival (both their own and/or others) in the context of feminist community based (strengths/asset based) support?
- What are the enablers and barriers to expanding 'space for action' (freedom from abuse) in different areas of women's lives?
- What is the impact of community -based intervention on individual wellbeing and lived lives in the context of the onward journey from domestic abuse?



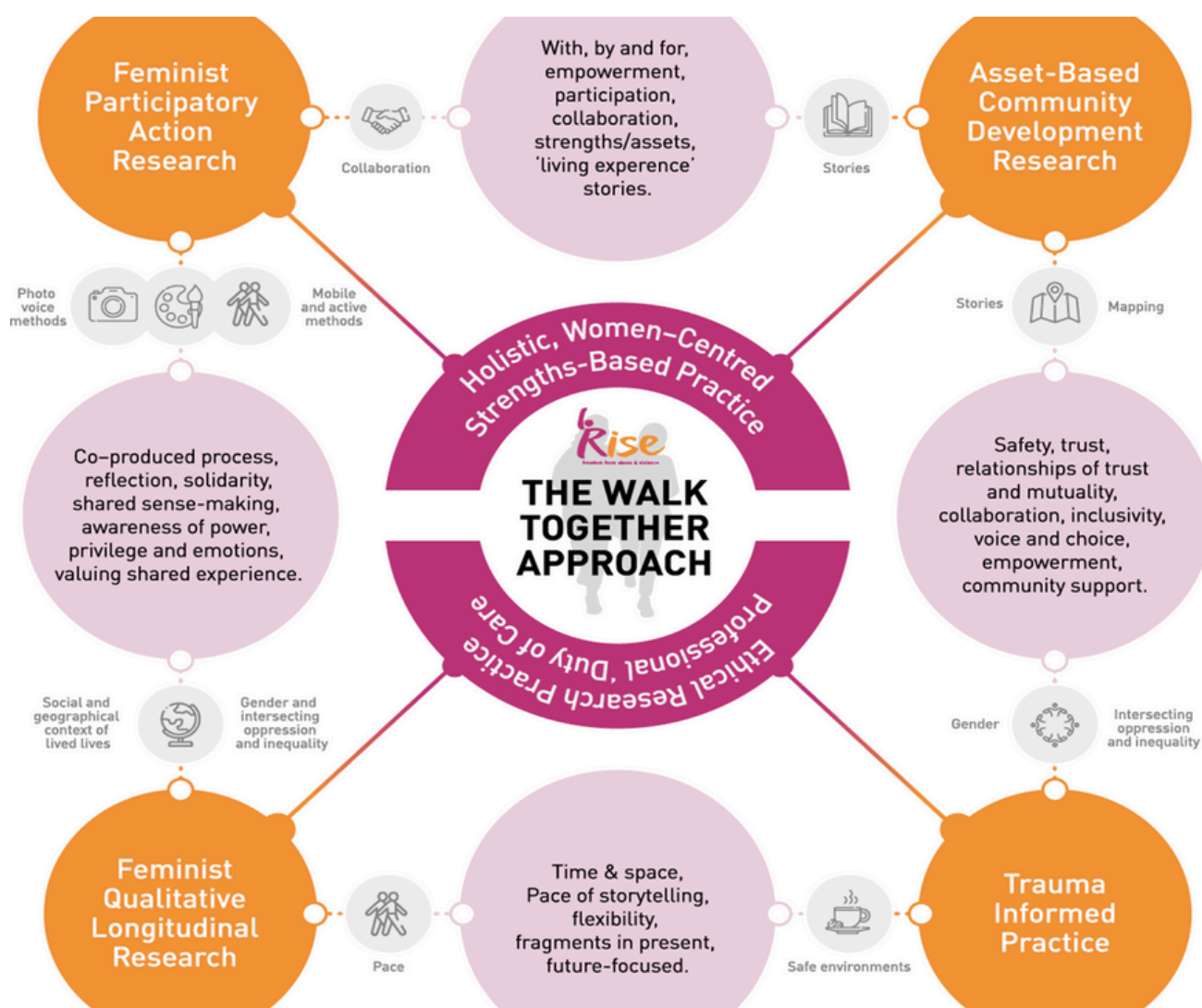
Image 1 created by *Ursula (Community Research Assistant 2017-19) to illustrate the reflections of the Community Research team about the importance of community research and activism both for individual 'recovery' and collective solidarity and healing.

METHODOLOGY

The Walk Together approach enabled RISE to walk alongside, the most marginalised women in our city (including women experiencing multiple and complex needs) as storytellers or ‘co-researchers’ at their own pace and in their own words. Women were invited to share their experiences through active and mobile storytelling, listening, creative mapping, shared processes of sense-making and the creation of research projects.

The literal method of ‘walking together’ either through movement between different places or through activity and conversation enabled these stories to be put in social and geographical context through the collection of rich observational and visual material.

The key components of the Walk Together research approach hold overlapping principles. These components relate to empowerment, co-production, strengths or asset-based storytelling, process (iterative patterns and reflection), and active, mobile and creative research methods.



CORE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The Wider Support System

- Stories from the report indicate short-term, risk assessed, crisis intervention fail to meet the needs of marginalised groups to access and engage with support. Continued funding of longer term women-centred, strengths-based support that takes into account the impact of intersecting oppression and inequality is needed, as evidenced through our stories of the expansion of 'space for action' in women's lives.
- Continued advocacy and professional education around the issue of housing and homelessness for older and disabled women and women experiencing multiple disadvantage who are not being offered safe accommodation in the context of domestic abuse, is essential.
- Need for ongoing professional education and advocacy around related 'good survivor' messaging that is embedded within the wider support system, addressing relationships with the police, healthcare, legal-system and housing. Continue good practice of domestic abuse workers as advocates for women's voices at MARAC meeting.
- Continued partnership/community asset/capacity work but with awareness of fragility of support in context of limited capacity (in organisations), stretched formal support services and difficult (sometimes unsafe) familial and community relationships.
- Recognise the value marginalised women attribute to Rise frontline workers as they navigate these tensions and gaps and provide opportunities for recognition (as opposed to shame) in the context of their lived lives.

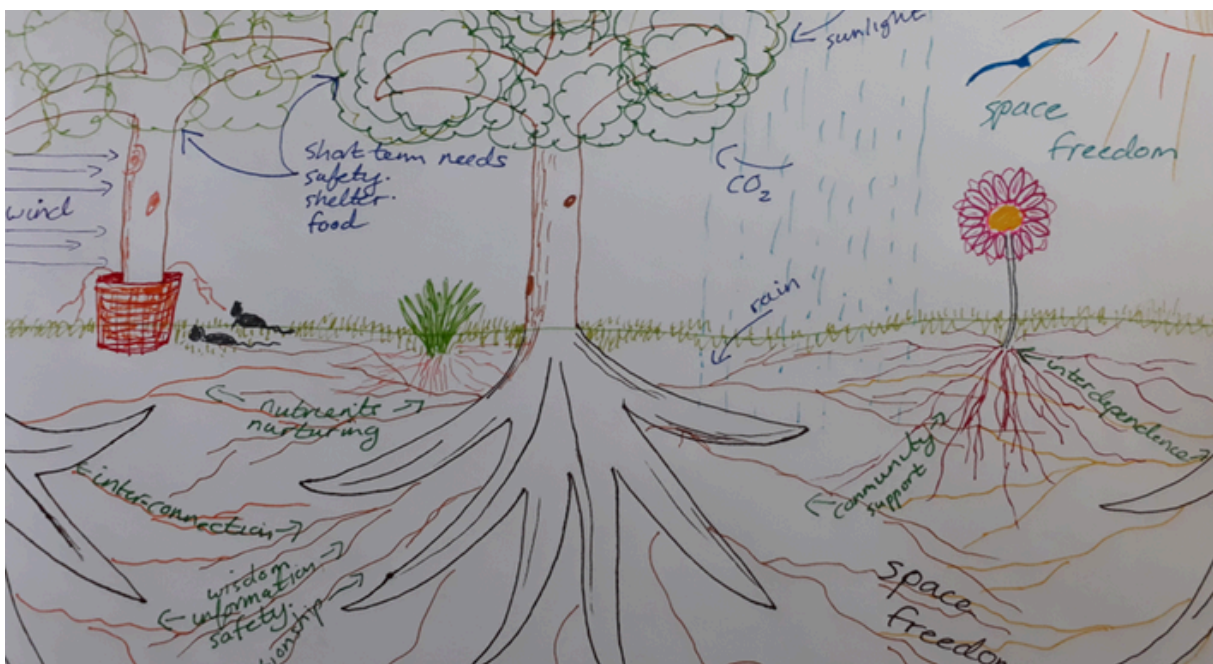


Image created by *Georgia (Community Researcher 2017-21) to illustrate the needs and experiences of the community members who shared their stories with the Walk Together Project

CORE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Community Engagement, Support and Capacity

- To be aware of benefits and limitations of offering support, conversations or activities about domestic abuse in 'women only' spaces or groups- where they occur in mixed -sex community environments To advocate for survivors in these spaces, for example, in recognising and highlighting the wider extent of coercive control in large hostels and to consider co- hosting alternative provision so that stories and views can be shared more freely and acted upon.
- Recognition of the value women place on community groups as a source of ongoing connection, empowerment and healing and continue to replicate this as a more affordable, longer term 'light touch' alternative to individualised therapy and extended waiting lists. Storytelling through different creative expressions is central to this work.
- Acknowledge the significance of public (community) and private (home) spaces/environments in women's stories of building space for action and potential action points -as community activism (making community spaces accessible, safe, trauma informed) or for case work advocacy.

Organisational Structure and Values

- To be mindful of how 'good survivor' messaging can be replicated in the service structure and community project offers, related to the length of engagement (short- term projects) and opportunities for flexibility (the non -linear 'recovery' journey). To ensure the best fit, recognition, and ongoing support through both 'Get Involved' and 'Stay Involved' conversations to avoid shame or sense of failure.
- To be aware of the dangers of toxic positivity in 'strength-based' conversations and the skill that frontline workers demonstrate in holding shame and misrecognition related to failure in the system and the ongoing impact of domestic abuse and related trauma.
- Continued good practice in offering clinical supervision for frontline workers but acknowledge need for community/peer spaces where they can collectively mourn and celebrate the strengths of 'clients' who loose their lives to domestic abuse.

Photo 1: *Jodi shared the photographs she took and soundbites of her talking as part of a display of her story for the Walk Together project at the Communities Rising Conference in September 2021.



CORE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CO-PRODUCTION AND COMMUNITY VOICE

Research and Evaluation

- To embed the Walk Together research approach in wider service evaluation with marginalised groups, and ensure continued dialogue and co-production with survivors looking to build their gifts and strengths and valuing their 'living experience' of domestic abuse and intersecting oppression in order to amplify the voices of others. This means addressing the tension between evaluation agendas (to meet funding expectations) related to measured impact or outcomes and what survivors are telling us is important - as the wider social, political and relational context of space for action and the individual experience of ongoing coercive control and trauma that complicates the idea of linear progress.
- . Flexible and creative tools such as visual mapping, photovoice project and reflective books provide us with opportunities to ensure that experiences are shared in a way that survivors in this research have indicated feels meaningful, empowering and safe.

Space for Action

- To recognise community evaluation and research as an asset to frontline domestic abuse advocacy work, because of the space it creates for reflection, recognition and the amplification of voice. This would be even more powerful if there was strategic (paid) investment in community researchers with 'living experience' of domestic abuse to walk together with case -work providing an audience to 'bear witness' to those stories that are not yet reaching community group spaces and to amplify those that are rarely heard in policy and practice reviews.
- Further work could be done to close the gap between community researcher and storyteller (client or community member) by creating a survivor pathway within Rise communities projects -where storytellers move into researcher or connector roles with a route to activism and change.
- To reflect on the historical, political and organisational context of this work. The story of trying to establish the walk together approach within the Rise service indicates tensions between professional expertise (knowledge and management of trauma) and survivor's own experiences/ expertise in a community context. This indicates the continued importance for both staff and community members of reflective spaces to unpick power dynamics and of trauma informed education and environments.

Amplification of Voice

- To provide opportunities for community members, professionals and Rise staff to engage in community stories of everyday 'micro activism' in women's lives and to link these stories to collective analysis (story-listening) and activism.
- To build the stories from the Walk Together research into our community ambassador education and our Walk Together training programme.

Leadership and Sustainability

- To recognise Walk Together as an innovative and powerful community asset that has been co-produced with women with living experience including those rarely heard in practice and policy discussions. To share this learning as a model or tool with other community organisations working with marginalised women and raise the profile of RISE as a leader in this field.

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)

*For Further Information on the Walk Together Research
please contact: information@riseuk.org.uk*

Or check out our RISE website: <https://www.riseuk.org.uk>