

# RISE WALK TOGETHER 2016-2024

## WHAT IS THE RISE WALK TOGETHER PROJECT?

RISE is a charity in Brighton, Hove and across Sussex that helps survivors of domestic abuse. The Walk Together Project was funded through the Big Lottery's Women and Girls Initiative(2015-21). The main goal was to make sure the voices of women who have experienced domestic abuse were heard, so we could understand what really works in terms of support—not just for safety but for true freedom from abuse.

The RISE Walk Together Research Project was launched in 2016 by Dr. Lucy Hadfield, RISE's lead community researcher. Between 2016-21, the project worked alongside eleven volunteer Community Researchers and supported two community groups along with seven individuals to share their stories about freedom from abuse.



Image 1 created by a Community Research Assistant to illustrate the reflections of the Community Research team about the importance of community research and activism.

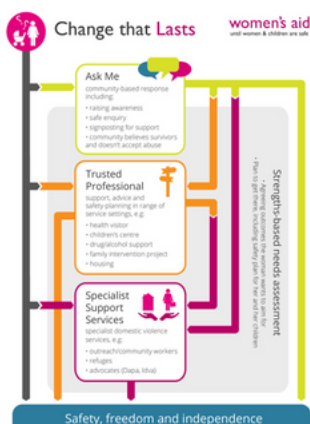


## WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN 2016?

Back in 2016, the demand for domestic abuse support services in the UK was at an all-time high. In Brighton and Hove, RISE, like many other organisations, was working with local authorities to provide short-term, safety-focused support for women and families in crisis. But while that was important, the short-term model didn't always fit with RISE's values.

RISE, being a feminist organisation, came from a grassroots background, focusing on long-term, holistic, women-centred support. We were worried that short-term support didn't address the needs of women facing more complex challenges—like disabled women, older women, homeless women, or women from minority ethnic communities. We knew it could take a long time to heal from the trauma of abuse, especially when dealing with coercive control. For many women in complicated situations, short-term solutions weren't enough to tackle the intersections of oppression and abuse they faced.

The funding from the Big Lottery (now called The National Lottery) allowed us to build on strategies like Women's Aid's Change that Lasts and RISE's own Theory of Change, helping us equip both professionals and the community to offer more holistic, long-term, and strengths based support.



## WHY WAS THE WALK TOGETHER PROJECT GROUNDBREAKING?

The Walk Together project was ground-breaking because it gave RISE a new way to work with women who have experienced domestic abuse. It allowed them to share their stories on their own terms and helped expand their sense of freedom from abuse in different parts of their lives.

RISE had always prioritised amplifying women's voices through events like RISE Living Libraries and community conversations. But this project provided an ongoing space for women to share their personal experiences, grow their skills, and develop their passions through a research training programme.

Even though a research expert led the project, Community Researchers drew on their own lived experiences to guide the research. They explored different ways to gather stories, evaluate the impact of community support to figure out what messages were most important. It wasn't about using one research tool or asking a set of questions—it was about creating an approach that allowed women to tell their stories at their own pace in an environment that felt comfortable and supportive.



## WHAT MADE IT SPECIAL?

This project was especially meaningful because it focused on the voices of women who are often overlooked or seen as too vulnerable to share their stories—especially if they're in crisis or dealing with ongoing abusive situations. The team worked hard to create a safe environment for these women to share in a way that felt empowering and even healing. Many women who shared their stories said they wanted to give back and help others.

Such an inclusive research model, especially in the context of domestic abuse and trauma, requires a safe and ethical framework. The structure of RISE's community project and the trauma informed ethos of the organisation created a space for skilled workers to support the Community Researchers and storytellers, building relationships of trust over time.



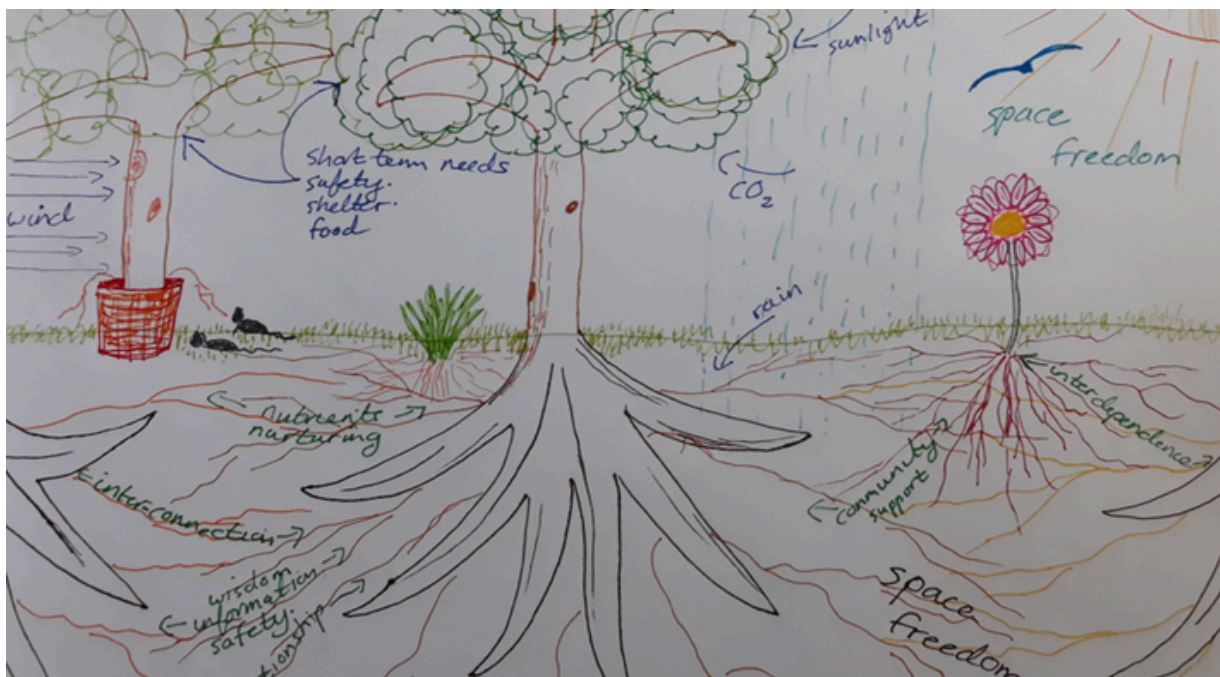
## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

We learned that it's tough to measure freedom from abuse through typical service evaluations. Asking women to assess this can feel overwhelming, especially considering the nature of trauma and healing, which doesn't follow a straight path. Many women—especially those in complex situations—might stay with or return to their abuser. Instead of measuring "freedom from abuse," we focused on storytelling, which created a supportive environment where women could share their diverse experiences and reflect on their strengths. They wanted us to understand the wider context of their experiences.

Our research showed how challenging it is to expect a straightforward narrative of recovery. Factors like disability, age, homelessness, or being part of a minority group made it harder for women to claim "freedom" when their basic needs (like housing or financial security) weren't being met. The term "Good Survivor" emerged, highlighting how some women felt their stories didn't fit into the typical support system narrative and how much work they had to do to advocate for themselves.

Women's experience of the physical environment also felt very important, either as places or spaces that added to women's experience of abuse or as places or sites for healing and strength. Finding physical safe spaces to be free alone or to connect with other women however was not always easy.

**This image, created by one of our community researchers, contrasts short-term crisis support with survivors' actual needs, emphasising the importance of relationships, community, and long-term support.**





## WHAT ELSE DID WE LEARN?

In sharing their stories, by highlighting relationships with family members, friends, and communities, we sensed that women wanted to be recognised and understood in the context of these connections. They conveyed a desire to be seen as relatable—able to care, host, follow unspoken social rules, and engage in friendly "banter." This is particularly significant when women feel isolated and worn down by domestic abuse and the broader support system.

Over time, through assertive outreach and community work on the ground, these stories reveal the value of deeper, more nuanced relationship-building by community workers. Whether it's offering opportunities for light-hearted conversation or simply sharing a cup of tea, this outreach fosters community support around individuals. This empowerment work, which involves creating a trusting environment where women feel comfortable sharing their stories, takes time. It's not a quick fix, but it can lead to long-term positive outcomes.

For our Community Researchers, the experience of taking part in the project generated a sense of connection, solidarity and community, alongside a sense of purpose and 'intellectual' freedom from abuse.

One of our Community Researchers created a poem to articulate the journey of the Walk Together research project, capturing the voices and experiences of the women who contributed. She articulates how the experience of taking part in the project itself can create a sense of recognition, understanding and community connection.

### *Walking Together*

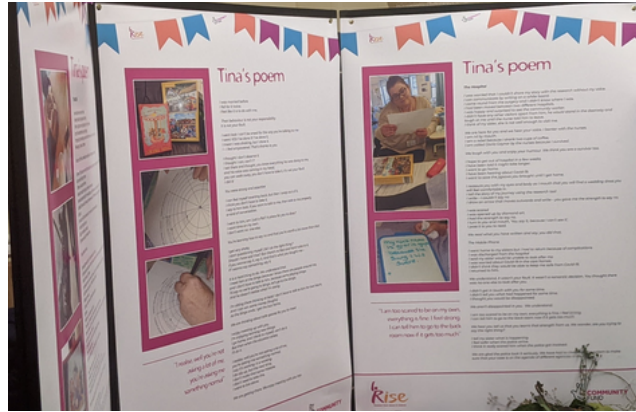
*"I am too scared to be on my own,  
everything is fine. I feel strong.  
I can tell him to go to the back  
room now if it gets too much"  
Women's voices finally heard  
Calling through the fog of the system  
Of cost/benefit analysis  
To safety and stabilisation  
To the listeners, waiting  
With 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.*

## HOW DID WE SHARE OUR FINDINGS?

We presented stories from the research, along with individual research projects created by Community Researchers (focusing on mental health during lockdown and the Ask Me community ambassador programme), at the Communities Rising Conference in 2021.



**Photo 1:** One of our community storytellers worked with the assertive outreach worker to share photographs and soundbites of her story as part of an interactive display.



**Photo 2:** We used poetry as a way to condense individual stories from the community and share experiences in their own words.

## WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

After Walk Together (2016-21), RISE secured more research funding as part of the Communities Rising project (2021-24). At the heart of the Communities Rising project, RISE introduced a new leadership model focused on community action and leading by stepping back.

We brought in five new Community Researchers to build on the lessons from Walk Together, using tools like visual storytelling and incorporating the perspectives of community workers and partners in the community. The research also shaped our Walk Together researcher training (delivered this time online to increase reach) and the Ambassador training program, which reached different community groups and individuals across the city. Additionally, research tools from Walk Together were incorporated into a Stay Involved Workbook, created by two Change Makers to provide ongoing support to community members wanting to become activists.

The "In Small Ways We Make Big Changes" workshop, held as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence campaign (Nov. 2023), combined stories from Walk Together with craftivism to encourage women to take up public space and share their messages.

From April 2024, the Change Maker programme and linked #stopabusE campaign (April -September 2024) provided an opportunity for established community members to develop their own call to action around the experience of freedom from domestic abuse and oppressive physical spaces within the city.



**Photo 3:** A public display in the city library of craftivism and Walk Together stories as 'In Small Ways We Make Big Changes' as part of the 2023 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence.



**Photo 3:** A mood board created as part of the 2024 RISE Change Maker campaign: #stopabusE

## EXTENDING OUR REACH

In 2022 RISE Walk Together collaborated with Fulfilling Lives (BHT) and other local partners to lead the 'The Women's Study', providing training for support workers and volunteers to collect the stories and experiences of wide and diverse group of women in the city about the wider support system. Our co-authored report is available on the RISE website (link).

In 2024 the RISE Community Research team took part in the JustLife Peer Research project, sharing their experiences of the Walk Together community research approach and contributing to the development of the Just Life Peer Research Manual which is available on their website (link). An extended report of our contribution is also available on the RISE website (link).



## FINAL THOUGHTS

The Walk Together Programme came to an end in October 2024 after eight years of carving out space for women and girls in Brighton and Hove to share what matters to them in terms of freedom from domestic abuse.

The Walk Together project showed us how collaboration within a domestic abuse organization can create a safe space for ethical research. Valuing time, creativity, and trust can lead to individual and collective activism at a local level. We believe this kind of deep community research, working directly with survivors, hasn't been achieved by other domestic abuse organizations or academic institutions.

***Being a Peer Researcher makes us feel proud of ourselves and feel proud of the group'... "Peer Research offers reintegration into society and the opportunity to use lived experience and turn it from something really negative to something valuable.  
– RISE Community Researchers for the JustLife project.***

***"It's been an absolute privilege to manage the Walk Together Project. I came to RISE to centre rarely heard voices and raise awareness of diverse women's experiences. What I didn't expect was the power of research to build strong communities, connecting isolated women. Watching RISE researchers and community members amplify their voices and reclaim their identities as activists has been truly awe-inspiring." – Dr. Lucy Hadfield***

## FIND OUT MORE:

**For Further Information on the Walk Together Research  
please contact: [information@riseuk.org.uk](mailto:information@riseuk.org.uk)**

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