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Beverley Gilbert

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Support worker's experiences of self-disclosure within domestic abuse support services and women's voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organizations: a qualitative enquiry

Beverley Gilbert 🄳

Department of Violence Prevention, Trauma & Criminology, School of Psychology, University of Worcester, Worcester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of self-disclosure of women's support workers within domestic abuse support organizations in England. This research considers the voice of women support workers from a feminist epistemological perspective using thematic analysis , and invites the consideration of who decides readiness to work in the sector, and the appropriateness of organizations making this decision for women who wish to work in the milieu of domestic abuse support work. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were held with twelve women support workers who identified their lived experience of surviving domestic abuse. Three key themes were generated through thematic analysis (*ibid.*): women's choice in making a disclosure regarding lived experience, the impact of non-disclosure policies of women's organizations on practitioners and the sense of hope emanating from practitioners with lived experience of domestic abuse. The findings from this study make a useful contribution to an under-researched and overlooked area within research on violence against women, that of the women who undertake such vital work in the sector.

Introduction

Domestic abuse can vary widely, but may include physical, sexual, economic, emotional, or psychological abuse, including threats of abuse that affect another person. This includes any behaviours that cause fear, intimidate, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It can affect people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels, in this respect domestic abuse does not discriminate (United Nations, 2022). The World Health organization (WHO) declaring domestic abuse as a worldwide public health problem (WHO, 2002). However, the impact of domestic abuse is gendered, in that the extent of harm including homicide and repeat patterns of abuse all impact women disproportionately around the globe (Hester, 2009). Domestic abuse support organizations, women's centres and women's community groups provide safe spaces where shared understanding and experiences can support women and recover from abusive experiences within intimate relationships (Tutty et al., 2017). In England, these might be in the form of charity organizations or those from the wider Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

There is a proud history within such organizations of service user involvement, developed over the past decades within women's services (Mullender and Hague, 2001), and the boundary lines existing between service user and support worker can be more flexible when creating a space for the therapeutic relationship approach needed when working with a survivor of abuse. Shifts in terminology have occurred over the decades such as, 'use of self, jointing, mutuality, and decentering practices', so too has the change in self-disclosure practice (Roberts, 2005, p. 47). Support workers with lived experience are estimated to constitute in excess of 50% of domestic abuse organizations' staff capacity (Bemiller & Williams, 2011; Slattery & Goodman, 2009) so it is quite usual for organizations to find that their team members have lived experience of domestic abuse. This is an important issue and whether this experience is disclosed or not is referred to as 'therapist self-disclosure' within psychotherapy. Hill and Knox (2001) define self-disclosure within a therapeutic setting as, 'verbal statements that reveal something personal about the therapist'. (p:413).

There is a history of self-disclosure and peer support practice that underpins many treatment or therapeutic approaches within community work such as: rehabilitation, addiction, and mental health practice. This creates an emphasis on the importance of, 'creating space in the therapeutic relationship for a mutual sharing of experiences and beliefs around pathology to increase rapport, to promote recovery and to instil hope in the patient' (Patmore, 2019:266). Therapeutic approaches within a feminist model promote appropriate self-disclosure within a collaborative approach to engagement with women (Brown, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2000). Yet there appear to be few recommendations or discussions regarding the benefits and difficulties of self-disclosure (Roberts, 2005). This is an important area of practice inviting further research.

There is a suggestion that the ability to offer healing support comes from the survivor's own experience of being harmed (Sedgwick, 1994). Additionally, many support workers use self-disclosure carefully as a mechanism to show empathetic support only where it is in the client's best interest and motivation, particularly in terms of demonstrating a successful model for the client to emulate (Miller & McNaught, 2016). Furthermore, from a service user perspective, self-disclosure strengthens the therapeutic alliance when those in therapist or support work role are considered to be more authentic and human (Knox et al., 1997). The term used to describe this form of peer support within psychotherapy is known as the 'Wounded Healer paradigm', originating in Greek mythology and Shaman traditions (Kirmayer, 2003). This suggests that the potential to support another is generated via the process of self-recovery and that our own experience allows us to appreciate that experienced by others (Jackson, 2001). The incorporation of women with lived experience of abuse when delivering domestic abuse services provides positive role models demonstrating the ability to survive and to thrive after experiencing abuse (Gilbert, 2020). Some argue that the more the survivor has progressed along her own recovery, the greater the support she can offer to others (Zerubavel & O'Dougherty-Wright, 2012). Of course, there are both positive and negative implications connected with survivors working in the domestic abuse support sector (Gilbert, 2020). Working within the sector with lived experience of domestic abuse may enable a sense of self actualization, bringing something positive from a time of past trauma (ibid.), it can reinforce a sense of survival and can create a sense of motivation and hope for the service users involved (Solomon, 2004). The results of this study echo this notion of being a source of hope and inspiration.

Of course, there are both positive and negative implications connected with survivors working in the domestic abuse support sector (Gilbert, 2020). Areas of difficulty as a women's support worker with lived experience might include issues such as poorly managed over-identification, maintenance of boundaries or personal projection issues (O'Leary et al., 2013; Scott, 2022). There may be an individualized agenda regarding the survivors' own recovery process or service user's preferred personal choices in overcoming and recovering from domestic abuse (Abrahams, 2007). These issues themselves are likely to be varied and individual for that survivor-support worker and therefore of interest within research, not least to allow the voice of the women's support worker to be heard in relation to the vital work she is undertaking in the community to assist other women. Peer support within the VCSE sector is

not unusual, however, there is an understanding that time and space should occur prior to the transition from victim, to survivor, to survivor support worker. In other areas of supporting vulnerable clients, or those with complex needs, it is again not unusual for the support worker to have had experience in overcoming adversity or 'wounds', for example, within substance misuse treatment, or within mental health treatment services. There may also be a stigma connected with lived experience of abuse or linked issues such as mental ill health (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

Women's support workers with lived experience are considered to have a high credibility regarding the empathy afforded to their clients given their own prior experiences of abuse (White, 2000; Jackson, 2001). The focus of this article is to understand how women's support workers experience self-disclosure to the women they are supporting. Arroll and Allen (2015) advise that this notion of personal self-disclosure, or provider self-disclosure is a recognized way of building rapport between the support worker and the service user, yet from this research study, most providers of domestic abuse support services prohibit any self-disclosure to service users considering it problematic. This study considers the experience of women who act as women's support workers. That is, someone who has 'walked in the same shoes' as the service user, sharing aspects of lived experience of domestic abuse and a sense of hope of leading a life free from abuse and control. The research from this study considers the notion of self-disclosure and the appropriateness of this when working as a support worker with lived experience of abuse.

Research methods and methodology

The voice of women's support workers was of primary interest within this study and was considered vital when attempting to understand the narrative and perspectives of women research participants (Brannan, 1992, p. 22). It is important when undertaking feminist research to do so alongside women and that is grounded in the experiences of women (Gilbert, 2020). Women with lived experience of surviving domestic abuse, who were subsequently participating in supporting roles within domestic abuse support work took part in this research. Interview data from twelve respondents was collected from five different organizations, from organizations within the charity and VCSE sector. All organizations were located in England: one in the Northwest, two from the Midlands, one from the Southeast and one based in the Southwest region of England. Gatekeepers were asked to send the invitation to all team members enabling those with lived experience of domestic abuse to self-select into the research without having to disclose this to employers or managers within their organization. Interview participants had varying professional roles, from volunteer support worker or volunteer peer mentor, paid peer mentor, paid support worker, to senior management of one charity organization. (These are shown below in Table 1). Participant information sheets were provided, and informed consent was sought from each interview participant, who was given the opportunity to discuss the research and ask questions. The research was approved by the University of Worcester Research Ethics Committee. Interview participants were predominantly white, British in ethnicity, with one Asian and one Black woman interview participant. The mean age of participants was 38 years at the time of data collection and there was a diversity in both age and experience working within the women's sector. Of the twelve interview participants, three were permitted to disclose their lived experience, these women were either a peer support worker, peer mentor or a volunteer. All those who were considered as paid or professional practitioners were not permitted by their various organizations to disclose lived experience to women they were supporting.

Data collection process

In-depth, semi-structured interviews containing open-ended questions were conducted face-to-face with each research participant within this qualitative study to capture the complexity of individualized responses. Interviews were conducted at the place of employment or other

Table 1. Interview participants' occupational details.

Type of organization	Geographical Area	Number of interview participants	Type of practitioner	Experience in role
Organisation 1 Medium Women's Domestic Abuse Charity Organisation	Southeast England	6	1 × manager 4 × support worker 2 × volunteer	Range of 15+ years and 9 months
Organisation 2 Small women's peer support group	Midlands	2	2 × paid peer support worker	1 and 3 years
Organisation 3 Medium Domestic Abuse Charity organisation	Southwest	2	2 × women's support worker	3 years and 1 year
Organisation 4 Medium women's support organization	Northeast	1	1 × hospital based IDVA	Specialist worker 4 years

self-selected site by the interview participants themselves. Interviews took place prior to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed, so face-to-face interviews could be comfortably and safely undertaken. Interviews were diverse in length according to the preference and length of participation of the interview participant. They ranged from 40 min in length to 2 h. Interview participants were asked regarding their views of both the benefits and negative aspects of working as a women's support worker as well as the issues regarding personal disclosure of lived experience to women service users. The interviews were audio recorded and all women's interviews were identifiable using a numerical code to ensure the anonymity of the women being interviewed. Interview participants were given the opportunity to see a transcript of their interview prior to data analysis. They were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and could withdraw their data within 1 month of the interview taking place. Whilst interview recordings were deleted on transcribing, interview transcripts were retained on a University of Worcester personal computer protected by password.

Data analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, coded and have been analysed thematically, recording patterns within the data, and helping to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was conducted by hand, by printing off all transcripts and colour coding the data contained within them, offering a clear visual approach to data themes. Codes were data driven, as the voices of the participants were prioritized. An 'inductive orientation' was taken to enable participants to give their accounts in their own way (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In attempting to understand the experiences and code key themes, this involved the researcher reading, reflecting, notetaking, returning and immersing herself into the voices and phrasing used by interview participants to articulate their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Inductive data engagement by the researcher within the analytic process generated the main themes connected with disclosure of lived experience, this process closely connected the researcher to the voice of women interview participants. The themes within this study captured something deemed important in relation to the whole research area in regard to support workers' experience of self-disclosure within the field of domestic abuse, representing a patterned response within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

Reflexivity of researcher and epistemological perspective

This study takes a feminist epistemological position and values the range of women's experience when working with other women who have lived experience of surviving domestic abuse. Feminist

theorists argue that traditional theories do not understand women's participation in society and in social life (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Harding sought to make women visible within scholarly knowledge and importantly, within the production of knowledge (Lykke, 2010, p. 128). The researcher within this study affirms the identity of a feminist writer. As such, it is acknowledged that the researcher acts as a 'central active ingredient of the research process' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002), and may influence the outcomes when looking at it from a feminist perspective. It is acknowledged that as women we all have differing social experiences and have individual cultural locations, producing different knowledge of our own realities. The researcher within this study is considered as an insider when connected with women's peer mentoring activity having founded a women's peer mentoring and peer support organization herself. This very specific experience and knowledge base was carefully reflected upon to acknowledge this important point and to understand the influence the research might have on research findings.

Mindful of the communication between researcher and subject, and the expectation that they are responsively reflective and can 'represent themselves to us', this is a joint production of knowledge created through the dynamic nature of the interview research format (Alldred and Gillies, 2002:146). It was the researcher's wish to undertake research where each woman was not merely a source of data but was considered as an expert in her own lived experiences and explanation of knowledge and understanding. This trauma-informed, sensitive approach and acknowledgement was considered essential in undertaking research into women's experiences. Each woman participant in the study was encouraged to take as much time as she needed to articulate her responses and viewpoints and was allowed to fully expand on her responses to the interview questions. Use of qualitative, non time limited and free conversation is considered by the researcher as essential in feminist research practice. The depth of conversation and interview responses was considered to be more valuable than the number of interview participants. Feminism in the context of this study means that the research starts from the standpoint and experiences of women, addressing power imbalance. This is then applied to the social phenomena of women's support work, though this notion of perspective can vary considerably (Olsen, 2005 thesis pending).

Research findings

Through thematic analysis of the data, the responses from women research participants were mapped into key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The women within this study all spoke about their own readiness to support other women after experiencing domestic violence and felt that it should be their choice in this to do so, this formed the first theme, 'Women's choice: Readiness to offer support'. Another dominant theme that came from this study was that of 'Non-disclosure instructions from women's organizations', and the discomfort women support workers felt as a consequence of agency protocols and restrictions around disclosure of lived experience. A third key theme was 'The power of survival and a sense of hope', the positive impact of being supported by a women's support worker with lived experience of domestic abuse. These three themes form the basis of this article, drawn directly from the interviews with research participants.

Women's choice: readiness to offer support

All interview participants spoke about the time and space between their own experiences of domestic abuse and starting to work to assist other women. The gap between victimization and support work varied enormously within the twelve participants of this research study, from 2 years to 20 years. It was unanimously recognized by interview participants as a disadvantage to come into support work too near to a woman's own experience of abuse. Interview participants felt that a period of recovery is essential to sufficiently prevent survivor support workers from impairing the safety and efficacy of the support offered. However, it was felt that period of space and recovery process will differ from woman to woman as no two experiences of domestic abuse nor the reactions

to abuse will be the same. For example, one woman allowed twenty years to pass before she felt safely able to support other women.

> You've got to go through the process properly, it's like a bereavement, you know. You've got to go through the journey before yourself and understand how, why, what, when, and what happened. How you felt, how it affected other people. A twenty year gap might not be for everybody, it's just that's the journey it took, and this is where I am today. Interviewee 1

Additionally, although organizational advice can be given to the woman, interview participants argued that it should be something that the woman has some control over herself, rather than the disempowering experience of being 'told' that she is not ready, or to come back in an agency or organization's stipulated time frame. All interview respondents had strong views around this point and those who had a timeframe imposed upon them felt that their own choice and self-knowledge had been impacted by a set organizational determination over time. Interviewee 7 felt belittled and frustrated when she attempted to find employment within a domestic abuse support organization. She felt ready and sufficiently safe, but the arbitrary time scale of the organization overrode what she felt was appropriate for herself.

> I knew I was ready, but they didn't want me to work with them until five years had lapsed. Ridiculous! I felt rejected and unable to progress at my pace. Thankfully a second organisation took me as a volunteer support worker, and I have since thrived. I am not a child, I know what I can do and when I am recovered enough to get on with my life, my goals, my future. Interviewee 7

From the interview responses within this research, all women felt that they had found the right time for themselves in terms of work as women support workers, and that this differed widely from woman to woman.

Non-disclosure instructions from women's organisations

Three quarters of interview participants highlighted that they were expressly forbidden to share with service users that they were survivors of domestic abuse as it was against their organization's policy. Many working with the larger domestic abuse VCSE or charity organizations expressly forbade personal disclosure of a support worker's own experience of domestic abuse but none of the interview participants knew why this was specifically, they had seen no written policy or protocol. One woman interviewee said that she had been dishonest about the time scale between leaving abuse and applying for a job role within a domestic abuse organization. She knew that she was ready but was aware of the time frames the organization insisted upon. All these 9 women felt that this was an issue for them, a waste of a strength, but also importantly it was for them a distinct dishonesty to the women they were working with. They considered that to omit the fact that they themselves were survivors was a dishonesty and that they felt compounded a sense of shame about being a survivor of domestic abuse and that a support organization reinforced this might be considered as a form of abuse in itself. This notion of dishonesty regarding omission of their own lived experience was important for research participants in terms of their feeling of being honesty to the women who they were in contact,

> I think that's a mistake personally as it acts as a barrier, a dishonesty if you like between the woman and her support worker. Why would you hide, lie or deny your own survival? It's not a shame, but some dv organisations make you feel like you ought to hide it, like a dirty secret. It's like the perpetrator in a way, you can't say this, you can't tell anyone. Domestic violence thrives in secrecy and I think many dv support organisations have got it wrong there. Interviewee 8

Here, interviewee 8 links the shame and secrecy that perpetrators of abuse create for victims and survivors during and after the experience of abuse. Now linking this notion of shame and secrecy

around experiencing domestic abuse as is re-created for her by her organization's policy around self-disclosure.

There was a frustration amongst some of the women interviewed when organizational time did not correspond with that of the women's own view of readiness. Where there was a conflict in this, it reinforced feelings of resentment of being controlled by others.

> What can be frustrating with clients is seeing those who have almost given up hope of ever being abuse free, I know I have survived, and I want others to know that they can also be survivors, but limits within my workplace prevents me from disclosing anything about myself. Interviewee 10

Interviewee 10 highlighted that there was a frustration about having a boundary imposed by the organization she worked for, and she developed this further by advising that there is a sense of hope that can be generated by the example set of a woman who had survived domestic abuse and was now a practitioner in a women's or domestic abuse support agency. This leads to the next theme coming from the study.

The power of survival and a sense of hope

The interview participants in this study articulated opinions relating to the sense of optimism and strength that comes from knowing that your support worker has some level of shared lived experience of domestic abuse.

> What can be frustrating with clients is seeing those who have almost given up hope of ever being abuse free. I know I have survived, and I want others to know that they can also be survivors, but limits within my workplace prevents me from disclosing anything about myself. Interviewee 10

Significantly, in this study 3 out of 12 interview participants were not prevented from disclosing that they had survived domestic abuse and were peer support workers or volunteers, so their position and role title within organizations highlighted lived experience of domestic abuse to anyone receiving support. All three felt that this acted as a significantly powerful source of encouragement to their women service users, especially regarding notions of trust,

> I have found that clients feel empowered to know that not only can you escape but you can go on to have a meaningful and rewarding life. I have also found that it can break down barriers with a client especially where they have previously had bad experiences with 'professionals' Interviewee 11

All three unrestricted women's support workers advised that any personal disclosure was considered carefully and only the briefest remarks were made about their own experiences of domestic abuse. They commented on the fact that women service users should not have any disclosure about the details of what happened, just that the support worker had some shared experience of domestic abuse herself.

> The women have their heads full of their own experiences, they don't need mine there too. But it's enough to just let them know you get it, you have your own experiences. Interviewee 3

Interviewee 5 spoke at length of the powerful impact on women service users when they understand that the support worker has survived abuse herself. She also commented on the intuitive knowledge that women have about having support from a woman with shared lived experiences of abuse,

> Women are very intuitive, they can tell when somebody really gets it and I think by going through domestic abuse and, and, being able to really know what they've gone through, see their, like their internal battles they're having with themselves, they can tell, they can tell. Within my experience of working here, where we've had younger women coming through who haven't experienced domestic abuse, it all, isn't always a good fit with all the women, it's like they can tell, you know. Interviewee 5

This notion of authenticity might relate to a sense of empowerment, of knowing something through experiencing it, that this knowledge and understanding can only be understood by personal experience rather than reading from literature or from awareness training.

> I understand the issues the women are facing because I have faced – and overcome such issues myself. This gives me belief that it is possible to overcome adverse experiences eventually (with support) and gives me insight into the nuances of abusive relationships that I think can't be learnt from a book, or from a training session at work. Interviewee 9

As power is arguably something a victim of domestic abuse has had taken from her, it may be that conversely, women's support workers with lived experience of domestic abuse see for themselves the power that peer support has, the strength of such an approach and the authenticity of support offered. The three interview participants who were not prevented from disclosing that they had survived domestic abuse felt that from their own practice experience this was a significantly powerful encouragement to their women service users, especially regarding notions of trust. They did not feel any sense of invalidation as a support worker, no sense of stigma as a survivor themselves and felt that this added to a feeling of competence and authenticity.

Discussion

The key contributions of this study considering support worker's experiences of self-disclosure are highlighted here. Three key themes are drawn from the lengthy, qualitative interviews with women support workers. These include These include: Women's choice: Readiness to offer support, Non-disclosure instructions from women's organizations and finally The power of survival and a sense of hope.

In terms of readiness to offer support to another woman, a survivor of domestic abuse is de facto quite used to feeling a sense of disempowerment, of being restricted and told what she can and cannot do and when this is permitted to occur. She has likely experienced this within the abusive relationship itself when controlled and restricted by an abusive partner. This is an important issue, as a domestic abuse support organization should be aware of the restrictions she will have faced and that her own sense of choice and freedom, her 'space for action' in life has already been significantly compromised (Kelly, 2003). Additional rejection when motivated to pursue a career in support work may well reinforce feelings of failure, rejection, and low self-worth, reinforcing the damage caused by the abuser when within an abusive relationship.

As previously mentioned within this article, it is important to distinguish between the survivor who is at the point of being able to safely offer support to another, rather than the survivor whose personal distress impacts on the support she is able to offer at that specific time. However, the authenticity women spoke about appeared to be important to them in terms of fully understanding the nature of domestic abuse and the experience of women they support, they felt that without that shared understanding, there was something lacking in terms of the capacity of support offered by the non-survivor support workers. The label of 'survivor' was not seen in a negative way, rather an identity of pride within this area of work (Williamson & Serna, 2017). There is an importance also therefore, in ensuring that the needs of survivor practitioners are considered to negate any issues of re-traumatization for example (Gilbert, 2020).

The finding regarding non-disclosure requirements was a surprise to the researcher in this study. It had not been anticipated that VCSE or charity organizations forbade women support staff from revealing that they survived domestic abuse, it was interesting to enquire further about the disclosures made by interview participants and to hear about their own views and frustrations, this had been similar from those in a senior management position and those in frontline support work. Within therapeutic and medical areas outside of domestic abuse support, self-disclosure in any way can be strictly forbidden, described as a boundary violation (Arroll & Allen, 2015; Gabbard & Nadelson, 1995). However, within women's support work there has been a history of shared lived

experience and this was felt to be a strength of the work and the organizations where women survivors worked in practitioner roles.

In the interests of ethical safety and wellbeing, it is vitally important to be able to differentiate between the survivor who is at the point of being able to safely offer support to another, and the survivor whose personal distress impacts on the support she is able to offer at that specific time. There can be a significant issue over the readiness, or recovery of the survivor of domestic violence in terms of how ready that individual is when undertaking the support of another person traumatized by their own experiences. An understanding and period of recovery is essential to sufficiently prevent them from actually impairing the efficacy of the support offered (Gelso & Hayes, 2007). This issue was discussed by women interviewed within this study and they all agreed the importance of this issue but had differing views regarding organizational timescales imposed on them compared with their own personal capacity to determine their readiness. Where individual organizations have an arbitrary time policy that is not linked to individual circumstances and careful evaluation, it might be more helpful to applaud the woman's interest in offering her some safe involvement in support work and to recommend that the woman prepare for this by undertaking other preparatory work prior to working in the field of abuse support. These arbitrary time restrictions were seen as inappropriate by all the women participants interviewed for this study irrespective of their practice roles. All suggested individualized approaches to risk assessment and support needs should be employed when applying for work in the field of domestic abuse support.

Whether permitted to self-disclose by their employer or not, all these interview participants used self-disclosure as a means to reassure their service users. Disclosure, it appeared, acted as a mechanism to develop a sense of trust and rapport between themselves as support worker and their service users (Cheeks et al., 2020). One interview participant advised, 'I'm not allowed to say "I'm a survivor" to a woman, but of course I always do. It's important'. Being controlled and denied the opportunity of acknowledging some shared history is something all the women in this study felt was linked to the feelings of control they had experienced as women within abusive relationships and the secrecy involved felt shameful and unnecessary when it should be a source of hope and optimism.

Women participants in this study talked animatedly about the vital work she was undertaking in the community to assist other women and the power of shared lived experience being a source of inspiration and hope to women being supported. Whilst some organizations may fear a shift in the therapeutic/support focus away from the service user to the support worker, there is evidence that appropriate self-disclosure could increase a service user's sense of trust, of being understood and could subsequently lead to positive change and a reinforcement of hope (Patmore, 2020).

In terms of these responsibilities as support workers or as peer mentors, the quality of the relationship between service user and worker is considered to be the most significant factor in successful outcomes (Ragins. et al, 2000). When looking at these types of support role, research indicates that for those in the role of peer mentor or support worker, the helping experience enables them to gain a deeper understanding of their own past experience through supporting others positively through their own current difficulties (Philip and Hendry, 2000; Gilbert, 2020). Survivor involvement can have a positive impact on the individuals involved by boosting their own personal growth, confidence, and skill development. This can lead to other opportunities such as training or employment. This is important, as training and skill development improves confidence, particularly important when it has been fractured or stripped away during an abusive relationship. There is potential to further the goal of recovery through inclusion, developing life skills and enhancing self-esteem and of feeling valued. Additionally, and importantly, it is a way of bringing people together to achieve mutually desirable outcomes. (Clinks, 2012).

Miller suggests (1976) suggests that women develop in a context where women constantly build attachments and affiliations with other women. Moreover, she suggests that women's identity formation in attachment and in relationships with others should be a source of high value. Jordan expands on this, suggesting that empathic relationship development by women is actually a positive model of the way women develop and interact

with each other (Jordan et al., 1991). In sharing the basic fact of shared experience of domestic abuse, this may add to the value of a practitioner relationship with women being supported. Women interviewed in this study instinctively understood the importance of practice attachments and in creating a community of strength.

Research strengths and limitations

The number of research participants within this study is acceptable in terms of qualitative studies, particularly given the length of the interviews with each woman and in-depth nature of the conversations with each interview participant (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Interview participants came from several diverse geographical areas of England and had a range of roles in differing sized women's organizations. Further research is required to understand more about the diversity of experience in this sector of women's support work and the issue of personal self-disclosure and of peer support with women surviving domestic abuse. The strength of this study is the ethical and feminist approach to seeking the voice and views of interview participants. It is important that research with survivors of abuse does not re-create the silencing that surrounds abuse, and this was emphasized throughout the study. This was considered throughout the study and the voice of women acting in the role of women's support worker with lived experience of abuse is important for the sector. In terms of limitation, this study cannot be said to represent all women's organizations nor domestic abuse support organizations. Neither does it represent all women. For example, the majority of women interview participants were white. Therefore, further practice consideration and research should take place around the issue of disclosure of lived experience and intersectionality.

Conclusion

This research with women support workers who survive domestic abuse has implications for practice and research beyond this study. There must be caution regarding the readiness of support workers assisting women service users who have experienced domestic abuse, however, the interview participants here all noted the powerful impact of being supported by someone with lived experience of domestic abuse. The example of women surviving abuse being something that can generate a sense of empowerment and hope to other women service users within domestic abuse support organizations. There may need to be some organizational reflection and consideration of the notion of disclosure to service users about lived histories, especially given the growing interest in peer mentoring and peer support within women's community sector organizations. So too the value and status of women with lived experience when working in roles within support organizations.

There are some important practice considerations to reflect upon here for VCSE and domestic abuse charity organizations. Women participants in this study argue that the timescale relating to recovery should be determined on an individual basis not based on an arbitrary timescale imposed by organizations on women. Moreover, the feeling of being 'done to' rather than 'discussed with' is important when surviving any abusive history and this is important also when working in the field of domestic abuse support work. Recovery following experience of abuse is different for each woman, and the insistence that survival is kept secret can follow the patterns of secrecy and shame that the perpetrator of abuse imposed on the women when in the abusive relationship.

A practice recommendation from this study is that the timescale relating to recovery should be determined on an individual basis, not based on an arbitrary timescale imposed by organizations.

Key messages

- Readiness and personal disclosure issues are something deserving of further reflection within the domestic abuse and women's support sector.
- The example of survival is something that can generate a sense of optimism and hope to service users within domestic abuse support organizations.
- The impact of secrecy surrounding lived experience of domestic abuse within a professional role can reinforce a sense of shame.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Beverley Gilbert Senior Lecturer Domestic and Sexual Violence. Research interests include - Peer mentoring with women who experience multiple and complex disadvantage, women surviving abuse, creating community inclusion, working with perpetrators of abuse and desistance from crime. Beverley has submitted her PhD thesis at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Research study examining peer mentoring with women who experience multiple and complex disadvantage. Beverley is Founder and Operations and Risk Director for Queens Award winning organisation Cohort 4, a peer support and peer mentoring women's community in North Warwickshire, UK.

ORCID

Beverley Gilbert http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6288-2019

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