

The power that comes from women supporting women

By Kristy O'Dowd and Beverley Gilbert of Cohort 4, North Warwickshire, an organization that helps survivors of domestic violence

Kristy's story

Leaving an abusive relationship is arguably one of the riskiest and hardest thing that any woman can do. Once the immediate physical and emotional harm has been removed, most people would think the worst is over and the survivor can easily move forward with their lives. However, the journey through recovery can be long, challenging and painful. Not only does the survivor have to deal with the emotions accumulated by being in an abusive relationship but they also have to deal with a completely new set of emotions after the relationship has ended. These dreadful feelings can actually be increased when criminal justice agencies and other statutory agencies become involved in a survivor's life.

For me personally there are emotions and memories that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was in a relationship with an abusive man for eleven years. As part of that abuse I was allowed no friends, no job and had only limited contact with certain members of my family. I had tried unsuccessfully to leave several times and became so desperate that in the end I committed a crime.

I spent three years being processed through a criminal justice system that served to ensure that I lost literally everything but my children, and that was a very close call too. In the years spent within that relationship, and my journey through the criminal justice system, I can count only two people in all that time that had a positive impact on my life and made a valued difference. One woman

was a teacher at my children's school and the other was a health visitor, both women who simply just took the time weekly to take me aside and to listen to me (this support abruptly ended when I was made homeless and moved to another area).

Isolation & Lack of Support led me to Cohort 4 Women

It was this almost complete lack of support and isolation that made me decide to help other women who were going through similar situations. I wanted to be that person who makes a significant difference to someone else's life when it seems like there is nothing. After leaving my abuser, I joined a small women centred organisation called Cohort 4 in North Warwickshire, a wonderful organisation that supports women who are or have been affected by domestic/sexual abuse and the criminal justice system.

When I first reached out to Cohort 4 I was on the cusp of returning to the same abusive relationship. As a direct result of being involved with Cohort 4, and surrounded by the strong support network I needed, I found the strength to finally leave my abuser for good. In fact, my involvement with Cohort 4 has helped me to completely turn my life around. With the right encouragement, time, empathic understanding and empowerment from women with shared their lived histories, I have been given some amazing opportunities.

I am currently a student at Birmingham City University after being supported by Cohort 4. After a time, I was appointed as Project Manager for several projects, and I am manager of a micro business that raises funds for the continuation of Cohort 4's women's projects. After two years at Cohort 4, I am now one of the five women directors at the organisation.

Don't get me wrong, I still have meltdown moments from the psychological impact of the past, as proven recently during a Cohort 4

confidence-raising weekend, but now I am no longer alone. I am part of an amazing organisation of women, where, as women, we are included in all aspects of the organisation, from the initial planning, to organising, to then delivering our own projects.

We are 'doing' for ourselves, rather than are being 'done to', and this is a powerful approach. How do I cope now? I am able to pick up the phone and call someone who cares, my own mentor, who at any time will listen to how I feel and talk me through my emotions. This peer mentoring approach at Cohort 4 is amazing as my mentor knows what I've been through herself. I know that we make a difference to the lives of women who leave abusive relationship and who choose to leave behind involvement in crime.

Women supporting women, it is a simple concept that works.

Beverley, a Cohort 4 director

Cohort 4 is distinctly different in the area in which we operate. We are different because our women decide for themselves what they need to increase the chances of their own survival after abuse and after being affected and further damaged by the criminal justice system. Kristy's story is typical of the women who join Cohort 4. Many of them believe they have been re-victimised by statutory agencies, rather than assisted to turn their lives around.

We are a small self-supporting survivor group. Most of the members of our group have mental health issues, most have previous convictions, most have had involvement with social services, and several women have children in the care of the Local Authority. Our women are the experts in their lives and know what they need to find their confidence and self-worth. What they like is that we work to their time scales, not to organisational timeframes that serve merely to 'process' the woman or to limit the amount of contact or opportunity she

has. Criminal justice organisations, in fact many agencies, organisations and projects, have an expectation that change should happen quickly in the lives of the women with whom they work.

Cohort 4 is completely independent from other agencies. We find that there is a genuineness connected with women supporting women, of peer mentoring support and of having a safe women's area in which to meet. Cohort 4 women say that this is important as it assists their survival after abuse and assists rehabilitation through an emotional connection and through allowing the timescale requirements of the woman herself. Our women attend workshops and sessions for as long as they need. What we offer includes accredited training, craft workshops, work experience in one of our micro businesses, training, opportunity, events and outings.

A decade ago, Baroness Corston called for women to be assisted to develop 'resilience, life skills and emotional literacy'. That is not only possible, it is essential. However, to meet the need, it will take organizational change, far more resources, in every area of the UK, and importantly, it will take time to deal with the depth of the emotional wounds in many women's lives. Amazing small women's organisations exist across the UK, but we need more of them, with better funding so they can reach out to women in our communities who have the power to turn their lives around given the opportunity.