

## **'Reclaiming voices: A qualitative study investigating the efficacy of the Freedom Programme in Cambridge as a support group for female survivors of domestic abuse'**

One of the most common yet least investigated modes of intervention with women survivors of domestic abuse is group work, including support groups such as the Freedom Programme (FP). This qualitative study explores the efficacy of the FP as a support group in Cambridge.

The Freedom Programme is a support group with an educational purpose, with a facilitator offering a 12-week rolling programme. Cambridge Women's Aid runs the Freedom Programme on an ongoing basis, and women are allowed to join the group at any time.

Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with women attending the FP (n=9) and the facilitator (n=1). Eight questionnaires were also completed by the women attending the FP. The study received ethical approval from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cambridge. The research participants were assured anonymity.

Eight main themes were identified in the data with reference to the effects of the FP:

### 1. Gaining knowledge through sharing

The FP helped to dispel false perceptions (women survivors of domestic abuse may have previously felt they were alone or at fault). The support group helped to instil new perceptions, as the group members learned more about the causes and effects of domestic abuse. Every woman interviewed felt that following the FP she would be able to identify an abuser in future. The educational and skill-enhancing content of the FP, and aids such as handouts helped the women to feel almost professionals in the issue themselves.

### 2. Understanding

Many women felt misunderstood before entering the FP and had become isolated from family and friends. The FP created mutual understanding between the group members.

### 3. Empowerment

Many women have a sense of internalised devaluation before entering support services for domestic abuse. The researchers found that the FP can lead to the women setting new goals and achieving those. However, the Cambridge FP acknowledges that empowerment is a continuous, repeating process. Out of the eight questionnaire responses, seven women felt that a follow-on support group is needed after completion of the FP.

### 4. Choice

The FP allowed women to feel they did not necessarily have to conform, and that they could concentrate on what they wanted to do and could do.

#### 5. Reclaiming voices

The FP provided the opportunity for the women to speak up in a supportive environment, after having been silenced in many ways.

As one participant said:

*'I'd never ever really spoken before cos if I ever did he told me he'd kill me if I ever tell anyone. So that's another big step. L-learning to talk again.'*

However, several women did say that it took time to build trust in the group in order to speak openly.

#### 6. Future

The FP helped the women build trustful networks for the future and enabled them to make more plans. One of the women said:

*'Going out and getting a career was not even on (my list) and it suddenly is now'*

#### 7. Counselling

All the women who had received counselling had found it useful to some degree. Counselling was perceived as different from the FP, in that it focussed more on feelings than stories. The FP helped the women feel they were not alone. The women's comments indicated that counselling might be most useful at the start of the healing process and that as women gained more confidence in participating in the FP, counselling faded into the background.

#### 8. Improvements

All the women said they would be very likely to recommend the FP to a friend. There were a few suggested improvements:

- Continue the FP over the summer holiday period
- Provide more courses like First Aid, assertiveness and self-defence
- Make clear the possibility of switching groups to an FP group meeting on another day
- Provide childcare and child therapy
- More advertising for the FP so that women know how to find it.