



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence barriers to engagement: engaging survivors from diverse groups (summary)

This research aimed to explore what the barriers are for survivors of abuse from diverse and under-represented populations in engaging with participatory programmes, such as survivor forums.

First published: 21 June 2022

Last updated: 21 June 2022

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Research aims and methodology

This research aimed to explore what the barriers are for survivors of abuse from diverse and under-represented populations in engaging with participatory programmes, such as survivor forums. It also aimed to establish solutions for each of the barriers raised by engaging with diverse survivors as well as professional services.

Following the implementation of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, the Welsh Government created the National Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) Strategy 2016-2021, in which they committed to ensuring survivors' voices will inform their work, and that a sustainable, national survivor engagement framework would be established. In order to create this framework, a series of research projects were conducted, the first to establish how survivors wish to engage with Welsh Government, and the second to evaluate a pilot survivor panel. Phase One of the project aimed to explore the opinions of engagement, barriers and what needs to be implemented in order to engage with survivors of VAWDASV who were male, LGBTQ+, disabled, from minority ethnic groups including Gypsy, Roma Travellers, or either older (65+), or younger (18 to 24) survivors.

Phase Two of the project then conducted a pilot of a survivor forum during 2019. While the pilot was a success, with 12 survivors initially in attendance, the members were a relatively homogenous group of white, heterosexual, British survivors. While the dominant narrative of VAWDASV is of domestic abuse perpetrated against females by males, this is not the only experience, and therefore, a survivor forum should reflect this.

Considering awareness of the above and acknowledging that the original survivor forum pilot was not inclusive of diversity, the phase two report made a recommendation that the VAWDASV policy team should consider further

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engagement with stakeholder organisations to understand the barriers of engagement, specifically for marginalised (diverse and under-represented) survivors. Whilst engagement was conducted in phase one, the lack of representativeness following implementation of recommendations suggests there may be additional barriers. Since phase one, there has also been a global pandemic, which may have affected engagement preferences and skills.

Therefore, before the creation of the new National VAWDASV Strategy, and finalisation of decisions on how a future survivor framework would be conducted, this report aimed to explore and understand the barriers for survivors of VAWDASV and how these can be overcome, before presenting recommendations for future Welsh Government survivor engagement.

Before any data collection took place, a review of literature was conducted on the barriers faced by diverse and under-represented groups. This then informed the methodological approach to the current study with diverse survivors. It was originally planned to conduct focus groups with survivors, grouped by protected characteristic, which would also include professionals from relevant support organisations. Due to challenges in recruitment of participants, semi-structured interviews with four survivors were undertaken alongside seven interviews with representatives from survivor organisations. All qualitative data collection was undertaken online using Microsoft Teams. To widen participation, a survey was administered using the SmartSurvey platform to explore barriers to participation and views on the make-up of a future survivor forum. Demographic information was also collected. In total, 13 participants gave information on barriers experienced and how they can be overcome.

Main findings

The first conclusion to note from the findings is that they mimic the barriers faced by diverse survivors in accessing support services for experiencing VAWDASV.

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Therefore, solutions posed in this project can be extrapolated for support services to reduce barriers faced.

While addressing the concerns raised in the findings, specifically around building trust, addressing fear of community reprisal, varying recruitment strategies, improving accessibility, acknowledging all forms of abuse and offering a variety of modes of engagement, will improve diversity of participation in engagement groups, each of these could also benefit all survivors. Therefore, taking steps to improve these barriers may improve the overall pool of survivors for any engagement project, instead of only including the 'same old voices' as referenced in the findings.

Findings regarding mistrust of researchers and authority, and fear of various reprisals from the literature review were supported by primary data findings. Diverse survivors do not trust that participation will make any change, will not be taken seriously, or worry about experiencing negative effects due to taking part in projects. To remedy this, researchers / facilitators need to take steps to build trust with communities and participants, engaging with gatekeepers and providing information about themselves and the project, so that survivors can make an informed decision.

Standard methods of recruitment and sampling were also raised in both literature and primary data, with wider, more flexible recruitment favoured in order to engage with under-represented populations. Recruitment for survivor engagement should use a range of methods and should also utilise existing survivor groups and gatekeeping organisations to assist in diversification of samples.

Participants in this study also explained how lack of knowledge regarding diversity and alternate forms of VAWDASV to the dominant narrative are barriers to participation, as they can be made to feel 'less worthy' compared with other survivors and that their experiences do not matter.

Accessibility is cited as a barrier for diverse groups. All engagement should be designed with accessibility in mind, ideally in consultation with disabled people, older people and minority ethnic groups, to ensure that any issues around physical, digital and language are identified.

Survivors stated that they did not want to be separate from those of other ethnicities and sexualities, with diverse survivors who were interviewed sharing that they like to be mixed with survivors from other backgrounds so they can learn different viewpoints. However, these survivors did share previous experiences of discrimination and prejudice from fellow participants, which have served as barriers for them in engaging, which would need to be pre-empted in any mixed groups. Regarding whether to hold mixed sex and gender groups, most services, including 'by and for' services for LGBTQ+ and male survivors, stated the need for separation, as the dominant narrative of a female victim with a male perpetrator often obscures other experiences.

Survivors and services both acknowledged and expressed concern regarding including trans+ survivors in female and male groups, in some cases as female survivors worry that they may be perpetrators, but also due to the fear for the trans+ survivors' wellbeing from being bullied or experiencing voyeurism. Therefore, having a strict setting of two groups (one female and one male) will exclude many within the diverse and under-represented LGBTQ+ bracket. To resolve this, additional groups can be offered to LGBTQ+ survivors if they would prefer, but these should not be compulsory or forced on survivors.

Recommendations

Main recommendations

Engagement should be comprised of a variety of methods, including physical groups, virtual groups/interviews, and an online pool of survivors, to which

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anonymous surveys can be provided for wider participation.

Groups (especially physical groups) should be provided to females and males separately. Any potential participants who disclose that they identify as trans+ should be given the option of being in a dedicated trans+ group (or offered to take part in interviews). Those who are LGB+ should be offered a group dedicated for LGB+ survivors, if they would prefer.

Facilitators for engagement sessions should be survivor-professionals who identify as belonging to a diverse group/s. This would encourage diverse and under-represented survivors to take part and also to express views in the forum

Accessibility should be built into all engagements, including but not limited to: ensuring any buildings used are accessible and easy to travel to; that clear instructions or training are provided for virtual forums; that clear and simple language is used in all documents; and options are included for those who do not speak English or Welsh to contribute. All participants should also be asked if they have any accessibility requirements on initial engagement

Further recommendations

As opposed to creating a completely new survivor forum, efforts should be made to engage with existing survivor groups which can feed into a wider, Welsh Government survivor framework.

Sufficient time needs to go into engaging diverse and under-represented survivors before they will agree to take part. This would favour a rolling membership approach to engagement, as it would allow the time to build trust with diverse communities for each intake of survivors.

While a variety of options will benefit engaging diverse groups, physical in-person groups should be used for the main forum sessions, especially where

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topics are sensitive, so that safeguarding can be ensured.

Full and clear details regarding the aims of engagement, including practical, time sensitive outcomes; what is expected of survivors; any potential repercussions; and what will be done with the findings, need to be explained to survivors prior to engagement, so that they can make a clear and informed choice regarding whether to participate.

All documents should be supplied in a variety of formats in English and Welsh, including in clear simple language and in audio. This will help ensure those with lower levels of literacy can engage.

For the online pool of survivors, documents should be supplied in a variety of languages, which have been proofread by those with knowledge of the sector to ensure context is correct. This will assist those who do not speak English in giving input via online surveys.

Physical groups should be held in buildings with good accessibility; including lifts and ramps, disabled toilets, adequate and disabled parking and good public transport links.

Where virtual groups or interviews are used, facilitators need to ensure participants have access to appropriate technology, and also that they have received adequate training on how to use the technology to take part.

Contact details

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Social research number: 42/2022

Digital ISBN 978-1-80364-211-6



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