

'Service users views of mental health and domestic violence: gendered needs and perspectives'

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (hooks, 1996.:55).

The Joint Forum Women's Group (JFWG) was established in 2005 at the request of women who use mental health services to provide a women only space where women can talk about the gendered issues that are important to them and which impact upon their lives and wellbeing. Women only space is vital for this work, as women are not comfortable discussing gendered needs and experiences in mixed sex groups, and the JFWG is a safe space for addressing issues relating to women's inequality. The group operates from a feminist standpoint and worked (and continues to work) in partnership with a range of local and national women's organisations. Alliances with the women's sector helped the group grow in strength¹, and it is these links and our members' activism that have been key to several successes that contributed to bringing about changes to local and national policy².

Gender based violence and mental health

Many of the women who attend our group have experienced domestic violence, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse. Some have experienced gender violence associated with war zones. The numbers of women who use mental health services and who are victims of gender based violence are high (DoH, 2010); Humphries, 2003; WNC, 2010; Women's Aid) but there are concerns that the mental health system may pathologise or label women who have been traumatised by violence (Berg, 2002). By understanding the link between male power structures, violence against women, and women's mental health, we challenge the dominance of the medical model of mental health that constructs violence against women as an individual problem for the woman, or a medical problem associated with the perpetrator.

Identifying violence against women and girls as a product of gender power relations conflicts with explanations of male violence that refer to biological or chemical reactions, aggressive personality types, alcohol or drug use, unemployment and / or mental health problems as either causes of, or triggers for, male violence against women. Non feminist explanations can operate to silence women who may be reluctant to speak about or take action against violent men if they believe the behaviour is caused by social deprivation, hormonal factors or a mental health problem.

The Impact of our work

The women only space provided by the JFWG has proved to be fertile ground for the development of a feminist consciousness for individual women and as a group identity (Lerner, 1993) and, I would argue, has also formed the basis of the creation of a

¹ Most notably, we worked with the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) on Feminist Participatory Action Research

² See for example, Women's Resource Centre (2010) Power and Prejudice: combating gender inequality through women's organisations; and Women's National Commission (2010) *A Bitter Pill to Swallow: Report from WNC Focus Groups to inform the Department of Health Taskforce on the Health Aspects of Violence Against Women and Girls*

feminist standpoint, in that the work of the group is a political struggle to give women a voice to oppose gender oppression in arenas in which service users' ideas and agendas can be largely male dominated or 'gender blind' (Harding, 2004).

The work of the JFWG has caused some tension within the mixed sex organisation, with some male service users expressing vocal hostility to women's views on gender based violence and the need for single sex services. This has been experienced as a form of violence against women by some members of the JFWG. Although there was clear managerial support for the JFWG, an outcome of this problem was to drive the JFWG 'underground' within the organisation, which has implications for the ability of mainstream mixed sex service user groups to be able to organise freely and openly around women's issues from a feminist perspective (Lewis, 2009; WRC, 2010).

In spite of this, the JFWG has had notable success in its lobbying work. By providing a socially inclusive and supportive women only environment in which women service users can gain encouragement, support, knowledge, confidence and skills we empower women to have a voice and be able to engage with and influence areas of public policy where women do not often have a voice, but which greatly affect women's lives. We push for a gender analysis to be applied in community engagement initiatives, and by commissioners and decision makers in statutory organisations. Through our work we aim to ensure women's voices are at the forefront of discussions on key issues that impact on women and girls locally and nationally, such as the need for single sex services, the links between gender based violence and women's mental health, and the impact of commercial sexual exploitation on women's safety and wellbeing. Although we have lost our core funding, the JFWG is determined to find alternative ways for its voice to be heard.

Berg (2002) 'The PTSD Diagnosis: is it good for women?' *Affilia* vol 17, 55-68

DOH (2010) *Improving Services for Women and Child Victims of Violence: The Department of Health Action Plan*

Harding, S (2004) Introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, London: Routledge

hooks, b (1996) 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' in Garry and Pearsall, *Women, Knowledge and Reality* London: Routledge

Humphries, C (2003) *Mental Health and Domestic Violence: a research overview*

Lerner, G (1993) *The Creation of a Feminist Consciousness* Oxford University Press

Lewis, L (2009) 'Mental health and human rights: a common agenda for service user/survivor and women's groups?' *Policy and Politics* vol 37 no 1

WNC (2010) *'A Bitter Pill to Swallow': Report from WNC Focus Groups to inform the Department of Health Taskforce on the Health Aspects of Violence Against Women and Girls*

Women's Aid Survivor's Handbook <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-survivors-handbook.asp?section=000100010008000100360002>

Women's Resource Centre (2010) *Power and Prejudice: combating gender inequality through women's organisations*