



ALLYSHIP

The Coaction Hub is a partnership project between Asian Women's Resource centre (AWRC) and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA) which aims to strengthen the Co-ordinated Community Response (CCR) to improve responses to Black and minoritised survivors of domestic abuse and harmful practices.

In June 2023 the Coaction Hub held a world café event with 25 individuals from a range of agencies which work both locally and nationally. Attendees included by and for agencies, large and smaller mainstream VAWG agencies, individuals working in VAWG employed by local authorities, and generic third sector agencies who have a domestic abuse specialism. Whilst this event supported our research aims, the purpose was also to bring together individuals in a creative, reflective space to collaborate, network and share ideas. The world cafe model was chosen as it supported our feminist ethos, as a tool to subvert power in participatory research and encourage natural cross-pollination of relationships, ideas, and meaning as people move from one conversation to another.

The purpose of these briefings is to share findings from the world café, themes covered included the effectiveness of structures of the Co-ordinated Community Response (CCR) such as MARAC, risk assessment, and partnership working for survivors of harmful practices and domestic abuse. Coaction Hub has been critically examining this in their own practice and invited colleagues from across the sector to reflect and develop practice around cultural competence and allyship. Contributions from the by and for sector as well as the mainstream VAWG sector have been invaluable for research and initiatives within the project, and we would like to create relationships that are mutually beneficial and honest in strengthening each other. We were interested in what allyship, equitable partnership and good practice looked like for agencies, as well as how their practice has been influenced by the survivors they work with.

Allyship:

► Allyship rooted in values of sharing knowledge and practices:

On the theme of allyship, participants emphasised the importance of mutual support, non-judgmental attitudes, and collaboration over competition. They valued sharing knowledge and strategies while fostering understanding, respect, and inclusivity. Participants expressed a need for creating safe and diverse spaces and networks where everyone feels heard, validated and free to express themselves—even in challenging situations. Active anti-racism work was also emphasised, particularly the need to challenge white fragility.

Also, they stressed the importance of building strong networks based on mutual respect and addressing strategic gaps when other voices are missing. There was also a strong focus on centering the needs of survivors.

The participants emphasised the importance of sharing knowledge, collaborating and acknowledging that strategies and practices like co-producing are of paramount importance. By exchanging insights and experiences, we can collectively strengthen our approaches to tackle gender-based violence. Such collaborative attitudes encourages collective working, shared empowerment and ensures the adoption of best practices. It also helps build a supportive network where expertise is pooled for effective interventions. Allyship, deeply rooted in the value of knowledge sharing, plays a pivotal role in striving for inclusivity and equity—effective allyship goes beyond symbolic gestures; it involves a proactive and ongoing exchange of insights, experiences and strategies between different organisations.

From our observations and insights gained within the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector, by and for organisations—those led by and for Black and minoritised communities bring crucial expertise and deep knowledge of the communities they serve. However, at best, there is often a lack of meaningful engagement from white led organisations, and at worst, there is an appropriation of the work of by and for organisations, leading to a sense of mistrust.

Within the VAWG sector, we notice that appropriation occurs when the unique contributions of these organisations are taken over or replicated without proper credit or collaboration, often by larger, white led entities, which undermines the autonomy and impact of by and for organisations. This undermining is not merely an oversight but reflects broader systemic issues where the contributions of by and for organisations are undervalued and co-opted, rather than supported and amplified. The lack of collaboration and genuine partnership by these organisations diminishes the effectiveness of the VAWG sector's response to the specific needs of Black and minoritised women, further entrenching inequalities and mistrust within the sector.



Sometimes white led organisations might invite by and for organisations to participate in projects only superficially, without giving them meaningful roles in decision-making or strategy development. This can lead to by and for organisations being used for their legitimacy or community ties, while their input and expertise are largely ignored. This tokenistic way of "partnership" is harmful. Angela Davis said, "build from the margins, not from the centre"; this approach must be integral to how we shape strategy and decision-making.

 Active Communication and Collaborative Partnerships:

Participants in the world café pointed out and highlighted the importance of active communication within partnerships and between organisations, along with building and sustaining these professional relationships. This enhances the efficiency of our collective efforts and significantly strengthens the overall impact on the communities we serve.

In the VAWG sector, partnerships and collaborations can be highly effective, driving significant social change and enhancing support for women and girls; working in partnerships particularly between white led organisations and by and fors can help build mutual trust. This relational work is vital for building strong partnerships and requires acknowledging and addressing power dynamics. Additionally, this relational work and collaborations are frequently undervalued.^[1] Moreover, while collaborative efforts are essential for driving meaningful change, they can be time-intensive and require recognising the contributions of all involved agencies, including giving proper credit and visibility. When this approach is applied meaningfully and intentionally, it offers many merits and benefits for all organisations, including the opportunity to pool resources, share knowledge, and expand networks to more effectively tackle complex social issues. This approach builds stronger alliances and ensures sustained impact over time.

"We don't heal in isolation, but in community." ~ Kelley Harrell

Working together in inclusive and collaborative ways demands giving space and not being competitive. It involves encouraging inclusivity, mutual respect and shared decision-making. Good practice in feminist collaborations includes amplifying marginalised voices, ensuring equitable participation and valuing diverse perspectives. This approach challenges hierarchical structures, prioritising solidarity and collectivising our voices.

This goes beyond tokenistic and performative gestures and requires working towards genuine and systemic change. White led organisations must acknowledge the expertise and contributions of by and fors in internal and public-facing materials.

[1] Coleman, Gill (2007), " Putting Feminist Theory to Work: Collaboration as a Means towards Organizational Change." Available at: <https://csw.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Coleman-and-Rippin.2000.pdf>

 **Allyship involves creating a non-judgmental space**

Our participants expressed that an integral element of allyship involves creating a non-judgmental space where everyone feels safe and supported, creating a sense of community and trust, sharing knowledge, good practices, strategies and promoting an open exchange of information. These ethics can be helpful ways to enhance collective wisdom and build positive partnerships based on mutual trust. Audre Lorde powerfully expressed saying: ***"Without community there is no liberation."***

From our learnings and insights, a collaborative framework leads to more comprehensive and culturally competent approaches and principles, which can improve and enhance the overall impact of efforts to support women and girls; collaborations contribute to building a more just and resilient society. They help create sustainable systems that address immediate challenges while also working toward long-term social change, benefiting all communities.

 **Need for 'being strong enough to be awkward'**

The participants pointed out that there was a need for 'being strong enough to be awkward'! A willingness to engage in difficult conversations and address uncomfortable issues and power dynamics can pave the way to promote growth and understanding. However, we understand this can be challenging. Drawing from our perspective, this involves having the courage to engage in difficult, uncomfortable conversations and situations, especially for those that challenge the status quo or address issues like anti-racism and structural inequalities. This approach can be fraught with barriers and setbacks and can take time as it requires building relationships based on trust. However, if the aim is for genuine and strong allyship then this process can also provide space to share issues and vulnerabilities as well as can lay the groundwork for genuine partnerships and collaborations.

 **Embed anti-racism work**

The participants also highlighted the critical need to embed anti-racism work into the discourse of allyship and to actively challenge white fragility and defensiveness. It is evident that discussions around racism are not just challenging but are often sidelined within the VAWG sector. This raises the question: Is there truly the will to confront these issues head-on? As Angela Davis said, "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist." This reminds us that in a society built on racism, simply choosing not to be racist isn't enough; to fight systemic racism, a call to conscious, consistent engagement in the fight for justice, we must commit to being actively anti-racist in our actions, daily practices, and beliefs.

Therefore, it is imperative that we keep building an environment of openness, accountability, and a genuine commitment to actions that promote anti-racist spaces and facilitate anti-racist conversations. The contributors to the Coaction Hub's world café felt that white led organisations need to take an active role in anti-racism work, this involves a deep awareness of how existing power structures and positions of power might actively or passively create obstacles and hinder the establishment of partnerships and collaborations. To counter this, one must understand and recognise these challenges in order to effectively address and overcome them.

Within the VAWG sector, white led organisations hold power and privilege and have an advantage in terms of resources and funding.

Domestic abuse support services run by and for Black and minoritised women have faced significant negative effects due to austerity measures and competitive tendering processes. These have led to reduced funding and resources for grassroots organisations. EVAW member organisations, particularly those specialising in services for Black and minoritised women, have reported being excluded from tendering opportunities due to their focus on gender and race-specific needs. When gender-specific services are included, the specialist focus on Black and minoritised women has often been overlooked. In addition to this, there is a stark disparity in funding between Black and minoritised women's services and generic women's services. In 2017, 25 Black and minoritised services shared £10 million in annual income (averaging £400,000 per organisation), compared to ten generic services sharing £25 million (averaging £2.5 million per organisation). [2]

This discriminatory tendering process in the sector often contrasts with the feminist ethos, undermining the principles of equity and inclusivity central to our work. By not aligning with these principles, the tendering process perpetuates existing power imbalances and hinders the formation of genuine, meaningful partnerships essential for addressing the complex needs of diverse communities.

► White Women's Role in Dismantling Privilege for Equitable Collaborations

Our participants emphasised the importance of recognising and addressing the power imbalances that exist within collaborative spaces. This includes understanding how these imbalances perpetuate discrimination and inequality. Therefore, there is a need for the white led sector to lead initiatives, facilitate conversations, and advocate for systemic change.

[2] Imkaan & EVAW (2020). Joint briefing: Black women and domestic abuse – 30 June 2020 Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Joint-Briefing-for-Meg-Hillier-MP-Debate-EVAW-Imkaan.pdf>

The rationale is that those with privilege have a responsibility to actively engage in and support efforts to dismantle racism. By doing so, they can help ensure that the work of tackling racial injustice is not disproportionately shouldered by racially minoritised communities. Intersectional feminist Marai Larsi often reminds us that gender work cannot be done without racial justice work. Our participants called for white women to critically examine their positions of privilege within existing power structures. They must actively work to dismantle these barriers with an aim to create more equitable and inclusive collaboration.

Within their organisations they can also:

- **Advocate for Policy and Structural Reforms in Tendering Processes:** call out and advocate for structural changes and support policy changes that address the systemic issues affecting by and for organisations. This includes challenging and working to change tendering and commissioning processes that disadvantage by and for.
- **Promote accountability and transparency:** This involves being consistent in their anti-racism pledges and endeavours, being transparent about funding allocations, decision-making processes, and the impact of their work on by and for work and Black and minoritised survivors.
- **Explore and proactively initiate capacity-building initiatives:** White led VAWG organisations can engage in meaningful, honest conversations by building trust and consulting with by and for organisations to understand their specific challenges. They can also acknowledge structural issues and, in practice, create space for by and for organisations to access opportunities for external resources and support. Additionally, they could consider whether capacity building can be strengthened through grants, training and other resources that enhance infrastructure and advocacy efforts.

➤ Reflecting on strategic decisions and asking: who is missing from the table?

Our contributors emphasised the necessity of inclusivity in strategic decision-making. Demonstrating a commitment to equity and acknowledging the expertise often absent from these conversations can help address and mitigate the power imbalances between white led organisations and by and for organisations.

It is crucial that issues affecting racially minoritised communities voices are heard and that by and for expertise are integral rather than being treated as mere add-ons. By sharing decision-making power, white led organisations can actively work towards dismantling structures that perpetuate inequality.

The Call to Action for the VAWG Sector on Anti-Racism[3] also emphasises these issues and highlights how white led organisations have the opportunity to break this cycle by acknowledging their role in perpetuating inequality and committing to making meaningful changes. This effort can be driven by a unified vision and solidarity within the entire sector, bringing together all organisations—regardless of size or leadership to work towards a shared goal of dismantling systemic racism. However, for this to be effective, there must be a strong and sustained commitment to the process. This willingness cannot be short-lived or superficial; it requires a long-term dedication to challenging entrenched power dynamics, continuously learning and adapting, and ensuring that anti-racism is not just a temporary focus but a core principle guiding every aspect of the work in the VAWG sector. Without this enduring commitment, the progress made can easily be undone, and the cycle of inequality will persist.

► Focus on Survivor's Needs and Support to be Survivor-centred

The contributors on the theme of allyship also emphasised that true allyship must place the needs of survivors at its core. This means that our initiatives, actions, policies, and strategy within the VAWG sector should be guided by a deep understanding of, and responsiveness to, what survivors truly need. Recognising and addressing the barriers that victims and survivors face was highlighted as a crucial aspect of effective allyship. These barriers are often compounded by multiple forms of oppression, such as those related to race, class, faith, immigration status, disability, and sexuality.

Within the framework of intersectionality, it is essential to acknowledge that survivors do not experience abuse and violence in a vacuum; their experiences are shaped by the various intersecting identities they hold. This awareness highlights the importance of providing services that are not only survivor-centred but also culturally competent and attuned to the diverse realities of those they serve. For example, The Faith and VAWG Coalition's[4] work highlights the unique challenges survivors of VAWG from faith backgrounds face, including the lack of tailored support and barriers to accessing help.

Many report that secular services and society fail to understand their experiences, particularly the significant roles that religion and spirituality play in their lives, as well as in their experiences of abuse and healing[5]. Therefore, services must be inclusive and sensitive to the cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts of survivors, recognising that these factors profoundly influence how victims and survivors experience abuse and how we constantly work on supporting them.

[3] Anti-Racism Working Group (endingracisminvawg.org)

[4] Faith and VAWG Coalition (2022), "Keeping the faith: What survivors from faith communities want us to know." Available at: <https://www.faithandvawg.org/publications/resource-page-document-only/> 7

[5] ibid

The importance of culturally specific, trauma-informed approaches is evident in how by and for spaces can significantly reduce women's isolation. These spaces offer opportunities for women to form supportive, family-like relationships, which help mitigate the absence of traditional family support and social networks. [5]

In our discussions, participants also called attention to the importance of providing accessibility in multiple languages as a vital component in addressing survivors' needs. This approach not only builds inclusivity but also ensures that all survivors can fully engage with the resources and support available to them. Recognising the diverse linguistic needs of survivors allows us to create a more equitable environment where everyone feels heard, understood, and empowered to seek help. By prioritising multilingual accessibility, we can better respond to the unique challenges faced by survivors and enhance the overall effectiveness of our support systems. Accessibility in multiple languages is not just a matter of convenience but a critical factor in ensuring that survivors from diverse linguistic backgrounds can access the help they need.

It is worth noting the richness and strength of by and for organisations, they hold deep knowledge of their communities and the ability to provide direct support in multiple languages. This enhances their effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of the communities they serve. This approach ensures that support is not only linguistically accessible but also culturally and contextually relevant.

Therefore, in our understanding of intersectionality, this goes beyond linguistic support. It is also crucial to address the accessibility needs of survivors with disabilities, those who fear being outed in their communities for being LGBTQ+, and the specific barriers faced by Black and minoritised victims and survivors. Ensuring safe and confidential spaces, using inclusive language, and providing tailored support services are key to creating a more responsive system.

Comprehensive accessibility is essential to ensure that all survivors, regardless of their background or circumstances, can effectively access the help they need.

[5]_Thiara, R., & Roy, S. (2020), " Reclaiming Voice: Minoritised Women and Sexual Violence – Key Findings", Imkaan & University of Warwick, available at : https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/f98049_1a6181417c89482cb8749dbcd562e909.pdf

This approach calls for continuous learning and adaptation by service providers, ensuring that they are not only meeting basic needs but are also creating an environment where all survivors feel seen, heard, and supported. By striving to understand and address these complex barriers, allyship can move beyond performative gestures to become a meaningful, transformative force that truly centres the holistic needs of survivors, leading to more effective and equitable support systems.

Conclusion:

The June 2023 World Café event provided a vital platform for a diverse range of agencies to collaborate, network, and reflect on improving responses to domestic abuse and harmful practices. Participants emphasised that successful collaboration hinges on mutual support, open communication, and commitment to inclusivity. They highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge and strategies without competition, while also building trust, understanding each other's roles, and maintaining active, supportive communication.

For effective anti-racism work, participants advocated for challenging white fragility and for white women to be proactive in addressing these issues. They offered insightful feedback on strategic decision-making, particularly on working actively with intersectionality and centring the voices of survivors.

White-led organisations should focus on the needs of survivors, ensuring that the expertise and intersectional needs of Black and minoritised communities are central to their strategies. They must strive to dismantle power imbalances by creating genuine partnerships, advocating for structural changes, and promoting transparency and accountability. Investing in the capacity-building of by and for organisations will support their crucial work and address the historical disadvantages they face.

Inclusive and collaborative approaches are essential for building a more equitable culture in the VAWG sector. This involves creating spaces where all voices, especially those of survivors, are heard and respected. Therefore, building a culture of openness, accountability, and genuine anti-racism is critical for creating effective and culturally competent responses to domestic abuse, as well as for widening and enriching the Coordinated Community Response.

ANNEX

Glossary

By and For Agencies – organisations which are run by the community they service. In this report we are specifically referring to Ending VAWG By and For Services run by and for Black and minoritised women.

White led Agencies – organisations in the VAWG sector who are not specialist by and for agencies for Black and minoritised women. White led organisations receive significantly more funding than by and for agencies.

CCR – Co-ordinated Community Response: The Coordinated Community Response (CCR) to domestic abuse and VAWG brings communities together to enhance victim/survivors safety and hold abusers accountable. To be effective, it must ensure the safety of all victim-survivors and engage diverse communities and individuals.

The term '*generic*' agency refers to an organisation who are not specialists in domestic abuse or VAWG, but who may have been awarded contracts for IDVA work or to manage women's refuges. Examples include housing associations and organisations who work with a broad range of client groups.