



Co Action Hub

COACTION HUB DAR DR PROGRAMME LEARNING

Introduction:

The Coaction Hub is a partnership between 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. The project critically examines aspects of the CCR, such as MARAC, Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs) (formerly DHRs) and risk assessment to determine their effectiveness, and explores alternative options. The project combines the expertise of AWRC, with over 45 years experience working with Black and minoritized women experiencing domestic abuse and harmful practices, and of STADA working to bring agencies together within the CCR, including co-ordinating and chairing MARACs and DARDRs.

One of the key components of the project is the DARDR programme, which aims to increase the participation of Black and minoritized women and by and for agencies in DARDRs, via chair mentorship and expert panel member workshops. Currently, by and for agencies, and Black and minoritized women in general are underrepresented as DARDR chairs, and on panels, and this project aims to support these agencies to share their expertise more widely within the DARDR arena. This paper examines the reasons for this programme, as well as the challenges and successes.

The Context:

The Coaction Hub DARDR programme is a response to the lack of diversity in the DARDR arena, and concern that this is impacting on the lessons learned from the deaths of Black and minoritised women. Research by STADA in 2020, commissioned by MOPAC found that many DARDR panels gave insufficient consideration to equality and diversity issues:

The lack of an intersectional inclusive panel to ensure that diversity issues are appropriately considered leads to inaccurate assumptions about how such issues should be interpreted. A better understanding of intersectionality is needed by the chair and report writers of DHRs [1].

*The term Black and minoritised is used throughout this paper as a term to refer to all communities who are minoritised within the UK through structural racism and oppression. Although in some contexts the Coaction Hub uses other terminology, primarily Global Majority, the term Black and minoritised encompasses individuals and agencies who have been involved in Coaction Hub projects who would not be considered part of the Global Majority, such as Jewish and Irish Traveller women. However, we understand that using broad terms is problematic and where possible we endeavour to use specific terms to be clear who we are referring to

This is concerning given that DARDRs are aiming to understand, and learn from, the experiences of the victim. As the Home Office guidance states: '*The narrative of each review should articulate the life through the eyes of the victim (and their children)*' [2]. It appears that this is not always being achieved. Research shows that Asian and Black victims are over-represented in domestic homicide deaths, including both intimate partner homicide (IPH) and adult familial homicide (AFH) compared to census data[3].

An understanding of the barriers these victims and perpetrators experienced in accessing support from agencies is imperative to improve responses to future victims. This includes analysis of the intersecting characteristics and needs of the victim, what this meant for their help seeking journey, and how agencies responded to them. However, as our research report highlighted many DARDRs do not adequately explore these factors, suggesting that chairs and panels are not always gaining an understanding of Black and minoritised victim's experiences, calling into question whether lessons are being learnt for future victims.

This paper focuses on the learning from our chair and expert panel member programmes and is a complement to our research paper linked above.

Coaction Hub DARDR Mentoring Programme:

The aim of the mentoring programme was to support women working for ending VAWG by and for agencies to become DARDR chairs. Initially we planned to recruit four chairs, but struggled to recruit two candidates in the first year. This to some extent spoke to capacity issues, as the expectation of mentees to be able to take time from the roles in by and for agencies was difficult for many women we spoke to in the sector. After reviewing the programme and resources available we decided to recruit two DARDR chair mentees over two years and developed the expert panel member aspect of the programme in addition (see section below). As part of the scheme, mentees were provided with:

- Specialist training including AAFDA's DARDR Chair training and some tailored training from a STADA DARDR associate chair
- Shadowing STADA DARDR associate chairs
- Induction from STADAs DARDR manager
- Induction and support sessions with the Coaction Hub
- Access to clinical supervision
- Access to STADA DARDR chair meetings
- Membership of the AAFDA DARDR network
- Financial compensation to their agency for time taken
- The support of an experienced STADA mentor chair, and the full administration support and resources from STADA DARDR team to chair a DARDR.

As part of Coaction Hub's learning review, our learning partners met the DARDR chair mentees independently of the project and provided the following feedback:

Both mentees commented positively on the support provided to them particularly from Fran and Amy throughout the duration of the DHR mentee programme. Mentees valued the opportunity to access a unique and targeted programme of this nature. In addition to the training, mentees valued the one-to-one support and mentoring, information and advice provided and the responsiveness of staff to their queries and support needs. The opportunity to shadow meetings attended by STADA mentors and access guidance from 'established panel members' was also an opportunity for mentees to develop their thinking and deepen their understanding of the DHR chairing role.

Learnings from the scheme:

- 1) There were many challenges to professionals working for by and for agencies to be able to engage with this scheme, most prominently time and capacity. The mentees were already wearing a number of different 'hats' in their roles, and juggling this work was an additional task, albeit one they did with passion and enthusiasm.

- 2) Many of the professionals we engaged with across all aspects of the programme had attended DARDR chair training, but did not feel confident to chair a DARDR. The addition of tailored support, opportunities to shadow and discussions with established chairs enhanced this training.
- 3) The mentees we worked with had a vast amount of expertise which they can not only bring to the DARDR field, but also to the specific DARDR work at STADA. For example, one mentee presented to STADA associate chairs on her expertise of faith and how it relates to domestic abuse.
- 4) Beyond the DARDR field, mentees were able to share their expertise and experiences as an example of the need for greater cultural competency and faith literacy. For example, one of the mentees co-delivered a workshop with the Coaction Hub at the SOAS Project Dldl conference on faith and domestic abuse. More information on this event can be found [here](#).

Expert Panel Member Programme:

The expert panel member programme was developed in response to discussions we were having with the chair mentees, and other professionals from by and for agencies in the sector. Whilst we initially focused on improving the diversity of DARDR chairs, it became clear that this was a lengthy process, and that expert panel members were another way to improve the intersectional, feminist understanding of domestic homicides. The Home Office guidance states that DARDR panels should be consulting with experts to help understand crucial aspects of a homicide: 'For example, a representative from a specialist BME, LGBT or disability organisation'. [4]

These specialists bring a wealth of information to the process, advising on the specific case, as well as highlighting the wider systemic issues faced by the victim. Crucially, they provide this expertise in the context of the VAWG the victim has experienced and from an independent perspective.

Research by Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice's (CWJ) Life and Death (2023) found that many panels did not include an expert panel member, and concerningly, on some DARDRs expert panel members or 'cultural experts' are being engaged who have little to no understanding of domestic abuse[5]. From our reading of DARDRs it is also clear that even when expert panel members are engaged, in many cases their 'voice' is not heard within the DARDR. Often they are brought in for only part of the process as opposed to being considered as full panel members. As STADA research asserted

'the cultural expert should not be an add-on, called in to either challenge an interpretation or add context to one. VAWG cultural expertise should be a critical and integrated part of the whole process [6].'

The DARDR panel member programme has so far encompassed:

- Scoping workshop with by and for agencies
- A series of workshops with by and for agencies encompassing DARDR processes, expert panel member role, responding to overview reports, and engaging family, friends and perpetrators
- Co-produced guidance with and for by and fors on the role of expert panel members.
- Meeting with the Domestic Abuse Commissioners office to discuss the expert panel member role and experiences of the group
- Webinar for DARDR chairs on working more effectively with expert panel members, incorporating the learnings from the workshops
- Facilitating sessions as part of AWRC's accredited Harmful Practices IDVA training.

Learnings from the expert panel member programme:

- 1) Many professionals from by and for agencies are being treated unprofessionally within DARDRs. Examples include their expertise being questioned or dismissed, lack of compensation for their work, not being treated as full panel members and lack of acknowledgement of their time and expertise. This is explored further in our coproduced guidance. These issues are representative of the wider ways in which by and for agencies are undervalued with the VAWG sector and by statutory agencies. These themes are explored throughout Coaction Hub's work.

- 2) Whilst there were many examples of undervaluing or poor treatment of expert panel members, there were also examples of good practice by chairs. This included meeting the expert panel member separately, clear expectations of what was expected, and valuing their knowledge.
- 3) As part of their role as expert panel members, some by and for partners told us that they had to challenge racism, misogyny and victim blaming. In many cases they were the only agency to do so. This echoed some of the findings from our MARAC research where racist stereotypes and victim blaming were identified within MARAC settings. This raises concerns about professional responses to Black and minoritised victims. Anti racism and cultural competency training has been suggested for DARDR chairs and panels.
- 4) The need for a clear definition of the role of expert panel member to provide clarity and consistency across areas.
- 5) The need for fair renumeration for expert panel members, communicated at the earliest opportunity.
- 6) The need for expert panel members to be valued as full panel members with VAWG expertise, as opposed to being brought in at the end of a DARDR or for one aspect of the role, such as providing a one off talk on culturally specific information.
- 7) The importance of trusted learning spaces for by and for specialists to discuss experiences and share ideas. Feedback received informed us that the opportunity for professionals to 'compare notes' supported them to be able to feel more confident in the role. For more feedback on this work, one professional wrote a blog on learning from the programme.
- 8) The importance of this work being reciprocal. Coaction Hub is very clear that this programme is a co-learning space, as opposed to hierarchical training where knowledge is imparted. STADA's DARDR manager fed back to us that she had gained invaluable insights into the expert panel role and had learnt from the experiences and expertise of our specialist by and for partners who embody this role.

9) Discussions opened into wider conversations about who designates whom as being 'an expert' and how this is linked to wider notions of power. This reminds us to question what makes an expert, particularly in circumstances where expertise is being appropriated for gain, such as winning contracts. This is explored in more detail in Coaction Hub's paper on allyship

Conclusion:

DARDRs are one example of a Co-ordinated Community Response (CCR) to domestic abuse. However, for the CCR to be effective it must work for all victims. The Coaction Hub DARDR programme has highlighted the gaps in cultural competency and faith literacy in many DARDRs, and the need for more diversity and expertise within panels. Our research, and our discussions with by and for specialists have illuminated a number of issues which raise concerns as to whether lessons are being learned in many Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews of Black and minoritised victims. There is a need for a more diverse range of chairs to expand knowledge within the DARDR arena, and utilise the expertise of professionals such as those involved with this programme. Currently many of the women we have spoken to feel that there are barriers to them becoming DARDR chairs, and more needs to be done to address these barriers. Opportunities for mentoring, shadowing and engaging with DARDRs and DARDR chairs need to be made available for Black and minoritised VAWG experts.

Beyond this specific work we have been contacted by, and had discussions with, women from across the VAWG sector, and one theme which has emerged is the need to demystify Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews more widely. Whilst there is good reason for confidentiality and sensitivity when dealing with a domestic homicide, many professionals in the sector appear to have very limited information on the purpose, processes, and outcomes of DARDRs. Some had also not been made aware of learning from DARDRs in their area. As part of our work with by and for agencies around being expert panel members we focused on demystifying these areas, but this indicates a need for wider discussions, and dissemination of learning across the sector, particularly with professionals working with victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Recommendations:

- Funding is made available for a national mentoring programme to expand the diversity of DARDR chairs with opportunities for training and shadowing
- A national network of expert panel members from by and for agencies to be set up to provide a supportive learning space for these specialists
- The Home Office to make the use of expert panel members mandatory when the victim was from a racially minoritised community
- Expert panel members from ending VAWG by and for organisations to be included on all relevant panels and to be adequately compensated for their expertise
- Funded anti racism and cultural competency training to be made available for DARDR chairs/ panels

References:

[1] STADA (2019) London Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis and Review of Local Authorities DARDR process. Available at:
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[2] Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (2022) Available at:
<https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Files/VKPP-DHP-Ethnicity-Spotlight-Briefing-June-2022.pdf>

[3] Home office (2016) Multi-agency Statutory Guidance for the Conduct of Domestic Homicide Reviews. Available at:
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80be88e5274a2e87dbb923/DHR-Statutory-Guidance-161206.pdf>

[4] Ibid

[5] Life or Death? Preventing Domestic Homicides and Suicides of Black and Minoritised Women (2023) Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice Available at:
<https://www.imkaan.org.uk/updates/2022/525apx0ic5yyqalsvvj6ixuy0m4qm7-7wmtp>

[6] STADA (2019) London Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis and Review of Local Authorities DARDR process. Available at:
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