

# Evaluation of the Women Side by Side programme

A summary of  
what we found

June 2020



## Introduction

People understand peer-support in many different ways. This is because it is always created and owned by the unique group of individuals who take part. At its centre, peer support is about the relationships that people make as they share their own experiences to help and support each other. Peer support can happen anywhere or anytime, as something carefully planned out or more freely.

People with experience of mental health problems, volunteers and local organisations have played a huge part in developing community-based peer support as a way to support each other. It has since become a common form of support offered in communities. Many people find it helps them overcome and cope with all kinds of challenges, particularly when it comes to mental health.

Services that are just for women have also proved to be really important places for support, as they can focus on issues most often experienced by women such as domestic abuse and sexual violence.

## What is Women Side by Side?

Women Side by Side was a programme carried out by Mind and Agenda (the Alliance for Women and Girls at Risk). The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Welsh Government provided its funding. It builds on work previously done by Mind, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, running community-based peer support in England, called Side by Side.

This programme's goal was to give women facing multiple disadvantages, and therefore at risk of experiencing mental health problems, more chances to access helpful, evidence based, peer support.

When we speak about 'multiple disadvantage' this includes:

- Homelessness
- Addiction and substance misuse
- Violence from family members or partners
- Contact with the criminal justice system

The project supported and funded charities and voluntary (third-sector) organisations for 12 months. It distributed grants worth £1.3 million in England and Wales in two ways:

- Grants for peer support projects for and led by women with experience of multiple disadvantages (13 in Wales, 54 in England).
- Grants for women's organisations to lead others in learning new skills and finding new ways of helping more people, referred to as 'capacity building' learning hubs (4 in England and 1 in Wales).

There were many different types of groups funded, for example:

- A group for women in prison
- A group for young girls growing up in gangs
- Several groups for women from different Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups
- Some groups for women with learning difficulties or physical health problems, as well as mental health problems
- Groups focused on a specific interest, for example caring for animals or going to the theatre

## Who was funded to deliver women's peer support?

There were 67 funded projects and 5 hubs; 66 projects gave face to face women's peer support groups to 3,139 women, and one online-only project gave peer support to 2,663 women.

- 91% of organisations had previous experience of running peer support groups.
- 51% of organisations set up new peer support groups with the funding, 49% used the funding to grow existing groups.
- 49% of projects were carried out by women's organisations, who received 52% of the funding. The rest were mental health specialist organisations or general community-based charities.
- 72% of projects ran groups that allowed women to drop in and out at their own pace.

Overall, Women Side by Side supported a total of 5,800 women.

## What did the research involve?

Mind commissioned researchers from the McPin Foundation and St George's, University of London (SGUL) to find out how well the Women Side by Side programme achieved its goals.

This team used peer research methods; this is a specific type of research which centres the expertise gained from direct lived experience in the process of investigation. The entire frontline evaluation team were women with experience of multiple disadvantage and/or mental health problems, including the group responsible for advising the work and the team members working locally.

The evaluation aimed to understand:

- The impact of peer support
- What is different about women-only peer support that takes past trauma into account
- How the mental health and women's sector can work better together
- How the project was able to help groups and services learn new skills and support more people

The evaluation collected the following evidence:

- 380 responses to co-produced questionnaires
- 75 observations were undertaken with projects using co-produced guidelines
- 40 in-depth interviews with programme staff, project facilitators and group participants
- 20 project stories

Mind also collected data from projects, in a project monitoring process which took place at the same time as this evaluation. This data was not linked to the evaluation data.

## Findings

### Did women benefit from women's peer support?

Quantitative data showed improvements in women's relationships with friends, family and wider community (their social networks).

Women who took part were:

- better connected to friends and neighbours
- less lonely and isolated
- more able to talk about mental health with friends, neighbours and acquaintances

Women who took part in projects run by women's organisations saw a greater improvement in how they felt about themselves, including better self-esteem, and an increase in social networks with new friends added. However, women did not see their wellbeing (as defined by specific measures used in the project evaluation) change. This may be because wellbeing is often only improved once other stressors (like problems at work, money worries, or relationship problems) are removed. These wider stressors were beyond the scope of many of these projects.

In interviews, women reported that they had more social connections, self-esteem, self-confidence and had built skills. This may explain why improvements were shown in women's social networks with both friends, neighbours and acquaintances, and why they felt more confident communicating with other members of their peer group.

**Before that I didn't know how to start a conversation... I feel quite different from before.**

Peer support group member





## Do peer support values differ in women's peer support?

The evaluation of the previous Side by Side programme identified six values underpinning effective peer support:

1. Safety
2. Choice and control
3. Experiences in common
4. Two-way interactions
5. Human connection
6. Freedom to be oneself

Key findings from the current evaluation showed the following:

**Safety** (emotional and physical) was shown to be more important for women's peer support. The role of men was discussed, with most preferring women-only group membership, female facilitation and locations that ensured safety of women.

**Choice and control** were also key features for women's peer support. Some women talked about statutory services where this was not present. Women valued having the choice to attend; give support to others and receive it themselves. The programme allowed women to open-up and seek support at their own pace and in their own way regardless of the issue.

**Experience in common** was even more vital than in the previous Side by Side programme.

- Women felt connected firstly because of their shared identity as women.
- The second thing they had in common was the group focus, such as social group, a training course, or activity.
- The final shared experience was mental health problems and/or experience of multiple disadvantage.

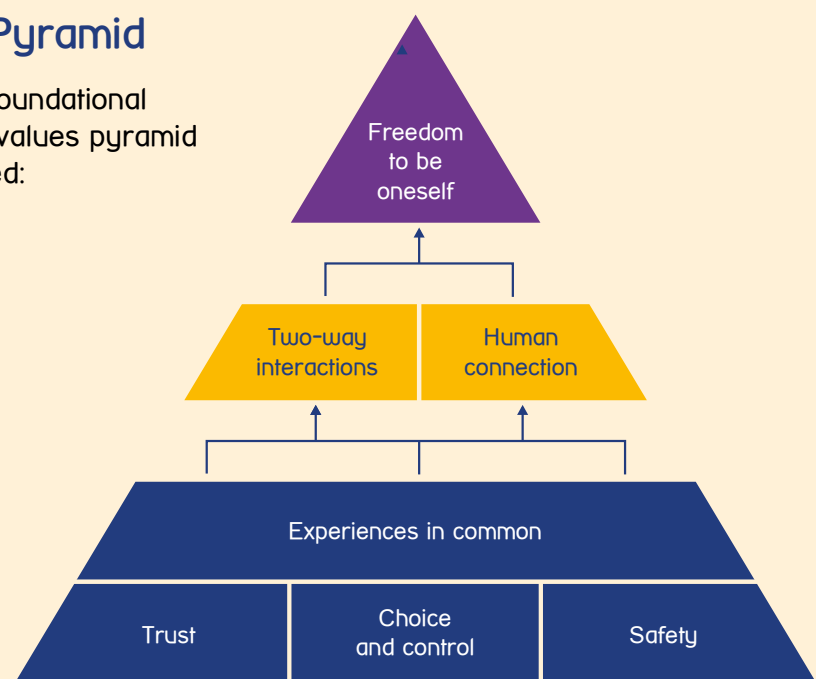
**I think there's been a sense of belonging, I think there's complete recognition that this is a place where you don't get judged, that we are supportive and nurturing and empathetic where nobody is telling you what to do or how to be.**

Peer support group member

**Trust** was identified as a new foundational value. This reflects evidence that women are more likely to experience trauma than men, affecting their mental health, help-seeking, and ability to trust. Many groups included women with experiences of domestic abuse and sexual violence (past or current) and so it was important to take that into account at all times.

## Peer Support Values Pyramid

To reflect this finding of a new foundational value of trust, the peer support values pyramid (from Side by Side) was changed:



**I've got the respect and the trust of the group, which I think is, obviously, first and foremost.**

Peer support group member

## Evaluation limitations

All research projects contain limitations, the specific challenges for this project were:

- Not enough resource and time for the evaluation team and projects to carry out their work.
- Better ways of working around trauma was needed. Questionnaires were sent out but only 12% of women responded, which limited our findings.
- The regional researchers could not visit every project because of time, resource and geographical spread.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The programme was successful in achieving its goal of giving women facing multiple disadvantages and mental health problems more chances for helpful, evidence based, peer support.

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the full McPin evaluation are included below. It would be helpful to look at these in more detail to improve the quality and availability of peer support for women, as well as work between partners in the future.

- Taking part in women's peer support groups was positive for the women we spoke to. Most women felt able to take part because the programme was for women-only. This suggests there is justification for ongoing women-only peer support.
- The values pyramid for women's peer support should be adjusted to include the foundational value of 'trust'. We recommended that the Side by Side values should continue to be tested and critiqued, using a peer research methodology.
- More work is needed to understand how peer leadership within groups can best be supported and developed. We recommended

that peer leadership should be defined by the women giving and receiving peer support, fostered in safe environments that recognises existing strengths women have gained from their lived experience to lead.

- Even when male presence was tolerated or accepted, we observed that women-only spaces were highly valued. Clear guidance on the role of men at hub learning events and creating ground rules that protect women is recommended.
- Partnership working provides opportunities for shared knowledge and in turn better delivery of women's peer support. We recommend the partners encourage more opportunities to work together.
- We recommend that the learning hub model could be developed further, with more events over a programme period. We recommend learning event budgets include project travel funding. This will allow more women to attend and increase diversity of lived experience.
- Funding and grants should be provided in ways that accurately reflect the time, and cost required to work with women experiencing multiple disadvantage; in this case 2 years minimum to build partnerships and create, and deliver, sustainability plans.
- Learning from this project may be helpful to others commissioning and working on peer support. We recommend that programme learning and critique of the findings should be encouraged.
- Methods to evaluate peer support need further development. No programme should run two parallel data collection processes, as was the case in Women Side by Side. We would not recommend using an evaluation questionnaire over multiple time points tracking several outcomes.
- Changes in wellbeing are not a useful measure of impact in community-based peer support. Our recommendation is an evaluation based upon a community participation approach or a developmental evaluation embedded in programme delivery. Outcomes associated with funding should be driven by the beneficiaries of the programme and developed reciprocally between peers, organisations and funders.

We're Mind, the mental health charity. We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.



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The Women Side by Side evaluation team writing collaborative, produced by staff from the McPin Foundation and St George's University of London.

Women Side by Side uses peer support to improve the mental health of women facing disadvantage. The project is supported by Mind and Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk.