

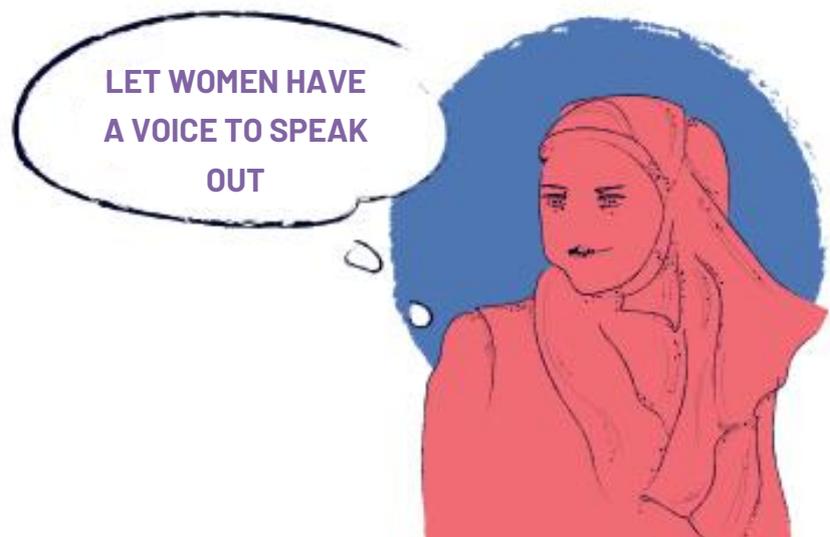


The Importance of Women Only Spaces



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Introduction

Women's Voices was set up in response to the question "Where are all the Women?", to address the fact that women facing multiple disadvantage are **often hidden and not given a voice**. It is hosted by **Inspiring Change Manchester** an 8-year, National Lottery Community Fund Learning Programme working with people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Women's Voices is made up of two interchangeable groups; the '**Women's Voices Chill Out Group**' which helps women to build confidence, self-esteem and form connections through creative engagement and social activities. Whilst the '**Women's Voices Movement Group**' focuses on empowering women to have a voice and a platform to influence systems which may have let them down in the past. As the ICM Programme comes to an end we wanted to **capture the insights from this work, demonstrating the value and acknowledge the contributions that the women who have been involved** over the years have made to shape our learning.

This 'Women's only spaces' document is one of several pieces of work the Women's Voices have co-created alongside contributing to local and national research. This demonstrates the varied approaches and opportunities that the women have been able to input and share their insights.

For this piece of work, we worked with the current women's voices group, to hear what mattered to them when it came to women only spaces. This included members of the two women's voices groups, as well as ICM staff. While these groups are open to anyone who identifies as a woman, they have been attended almost exclusively by women who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. Therefore, the conversations capture the views of these women and is not representative of the opinions or experiences of nonbinary people and trans women.

The women were asked three questions around if women only spaces were needed and if so why. The key themes that came up were that having a women only space, or women only worker, allowed the women accessing this support to feel **safe, understood and that they would not be judged**. There was also recognition that there were not enough of these spaces and the ones that did exist were very difficult to access.



Why do we need women only spaces?

A Place to Feel Safe

"you are trying to get help and other people are bringing your trauma back, it shows how much we need these safe spaces"

"women need a safe space, so they know where they stand"

In the discussion, many of the women immediately referred to women only spaces as 'safe spaces', it was clear that they were able to feel safe in these environments in a way that was not possible if men were present. In the UK in 2020 92% of defendants in domestic abuse-related prosecutions were male, with 77% of the victims being femaleⁱ. As gender-based violence so disproportionately affects women, it may not be surprising that many of the women we work with do not feel safe in mixed gender spaces. Having these women only space allows them to let their guard down and more fully engage with the support available

A Place with No Judgement

"[Women need to be] ...given a voice and a space to express themselves, where they feel they aren't being judged by men"

"to be heard, and have no judgements from anywhere or anything, in a judgemental world"

"a place to speak with no danger or backlash"

During the conversations many of the women expressed that they didn't feel like they could speak freely around men, as it might be perceived as negative or 'man bashing'. There were also fears that if they spoke about a situation where a man had hurt them, then other men in the room might take the side against them and support the male. One woman expressed that she would not have felt comfortable speaking honestly about why she preferred women only spaces in the focus group if a man had been present, as it may have offended him or been misinterpreted. While it was recognised that many men would not react in this way, it shows that simply having a visible male presence in a space can prevent women from feeling they can be honest about their experience.



The women also mentioned the important of Men's only spaces or "*separate days for men and women*", which would allow men to access the same support that was available to the women, but without taking this space away from the women. Through women's voices, the ICM programme recognised the positive impact that having gender specific support could have on members and so began running 'Men's Well-being Days'ⁱⁱ which focused on men's unique support needs. Whilst these days were successful; with men making up more than three quarters of members being supported by ICM, there were already many opportunities and spaces inadvertently tailored to men's needs.

A Place where you are Understood

"If I went somewhere else, they wouldn't have understood the situation"

"it is a place to understand your emotions, if you are heated up in the moment you need the space to cry"

It was raised that the women felt men would not have a strong understanding of women's experiences and emotions in the same way other women could. This applied to both male staff and clients. There was a feeling that if the women tried to talk about issues that are typically seen as 'gender specific' then men would not want to hear about it and again this meant that they could not use the space to talk and express emotion more freely.

The Women's Voices group has made an active choice to try and remove the perceived hierarchy of staff, clients and volunteers. It is regularly reinforced that 'we are all women here' and this ensures it is women led not service led and power dynamics are addressed. This has also created opportunities for the women to establish and form lasting friendships with other women, which in turn creates an informal support network which can be invaluable.

The women feel more comfortable and understood in spaces they are familiar with. So, when external organisations wish to consult with the group to get their views and insights to help inform on policy or service redesign, they are invited into the WVs spaces and expected to participate and share a little of themselves as everyone else does.



A Place to Share Knowledge

"we get information from these places, that we wouldn't necessarily know"

"need other women to guide them and help break the cycle"

These could be spaces for more informal knowledge sharing, that women would not just get information from group facilitators or workers, but from each other. This was seen as particularly important for women and girls who had not grown up with their mum or any other female influence. Many of the women who had a history of domestic abuse felt strongly that they should be able to speak to younger women and explain what was 'normal' in relationships, in order to "*help break the cycle*" of abuse.

It is important that women should feel they gain something immediate when they access these spaces, not just the informal community that is created over time. They also asked for more formal knowledge sharing and learning from support staff on topics such as domestic violence, sexual health and motherhood. The Women's Voices group (through the ICM Programme) has facilitated opportunities for the women to get involved with volunteering, social activities and training to upskill the women. This has included self-esteem/confidence building, community reporting and leadership training. Gaining knowledge or experience from these opportunities has allowed women to thrive and given something back through this community.

How do we create women only spaces?

Design

"services should get women involved so they can make the space. With Women's Voices the women are making the space for each other"

"talking to the women like this to find out what they want"

One of the most important elements raised was the involvement of women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage in the design of women only spaces. Both through formal pieces of research, but also by speaking to the women as and when they are accessing the service and asking them what they needed. This involvement empowers women to have some control over the space they are using and subsequently creates a sense of ownership. This can also improve attendance for these groups and spaces. Research by Mind into lived experience involvement found that members are *"more likely to attend your service for a longer period of time"*ⁱⁱⁱ if they have been involved in its design and delivery.

Environment

"a nice environment- a space people want to come to"

"poetry and creativity, women then feel comfortable"

"comfortable chairs and plants, a living kind of space"

The ability to feel safe, understood and not judged within these spaces was also influenced by the physical environment. This should be comfortable, creative, warm and *"immediately [make you] feel at home"*. One suggestion was giving the women a **choice** if they wanted to wait in a quieter area to help reduce anxiety and greeting them in a friendly way or offering them a drink to make sure they are comfortable. Equally, considering childcare needs, and where possible providing a safe place for children, so that women can focus on getting the support they need. Recognising and understanding how the physical space might impact women entering it can also come from lived experience involvement in its design.

However, the physical space was not a big focus of the discussion, it was clear that the staff and accessibility were much more important elements. There wasn't



a sense that these spaces needed to be in person, many of the women have become more comfortable with attending online groups and events since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, before being invited to contribute to this piece of work a number of the women had said that they would be more likely to attend if it was in person. This shows that not everyone has the same requirements and giving women the choice can ensure these spaces are as accessible as possible.

Access

"make it easy to access, just click and get in touch"

"services that come into contact with women have to promote these spaces"

When creating these spaces, it is essential to ensure women can access them by considering the unique barrier they may face. For example, one woman raised that *"timing is a big thing"* and she is only able to attend Women's Voices as it is during school hours, so she is able to focus on the group without distraction.

Another concern was the difficulty women often had with finding out about women only spaces and knowing how to access them. The primary method it was felt women should learn about these spaces is by being signposted by other services that were already supporting them. The way these services approach these conversations need to be friendly and sensitive, they should explain clearly what these spaces are, how the women can access them, and what they will gain from going along. Also, things like social media, online links and WhatsApp were suggested to try and contact women who other services might be struggling to reach

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic the group coordinator did a lot of work around recruiting women for the 'Women's Voices Development' group through monthly attendance to different women's groups to publicise Women's Voices. However, this was stopped due to Covid-19 and has not been picked back up as the programme winds down. Although this is something that all services can continue to improve on, as many women continually struggle to access support. A member of the ICM team stated that she would have benefitted from joining the women's voices group in the past, but *"before [she] joined ICM I had no clue that there was a space available only for women, a safe space"*.

Staff

"even though it is professional I would feel more comfortable with a woman"

"knowing the woman isn't going to be judgemental and they are on the same wavelength"

The majority of the women we spoke to mentioned the importance of female staff and a women only worker. Their explanation of this reflected the reasons that were given for wanting women only spaces, they would feel they weren't being judged, they were understood, and they were safe. In the past, where one woman had been given a male worker she felt she was *"just brushed off"* and not taken seriously. This perceived sense of judgement meant she was not able to advocate for herself and just froze, and subsequently couldn't get the support she needed from the service available to her.

While it was clear that most women we spoke to felt more comfortable with female staff, this was not completely unanimous. One woman felt that as she had *"been through the service that much I'm not bothered if I have a male worker"*, while another woman said she would only feel *"half comfortable"* with a women, and the more important thing was having a strong, trusting relationship with you worker, rather than their gender. It is easier to build these trusting relationships when women are given a choice over who supports them





Recommendations

Our recommendations are focused around the key themes of creating a space that is safe, understanding and non-judgemental. This is based on what the women we spoke to felt was most important to them, and it is necessary to recognise that this is not universally representative of all women's needs. By consulting with the women, you are looking to support you can most effectively meet their individual needs.

- **Create safe women only spaces where possible-** While we recognise that not all services will have the resources to create women only spaces, it is clear that having this space is something that women really value and so it is important to find alternative ways to create this sense of safety. This can be done through women only days or groups and ensuring that there are enough female staff available so that this is choice in who they want to be supported by.
- **Give women choice around how they access support-** This includes choice in the gender they are supported by, whether they access support in person or not and flexibility around appointment times. Where possible women should have a voice in service design from the outset.
- **Support should be delivered in a way that allows women to feel understood-** the primary way to deliver this would be to ensure a female member of staff is always available to support a woman if she requests this. However, as this may not always be feasible, it is important to provide all staff with adequate training on gender informed approaches, the unique support needs of women, and trauma informed practices^{iv} so that women feel safe and understood when accessing the space.
- **Make these spaces easily accessible to women-** Consider unique barriers to accessing these spaces that women may face, such as safety considerations or childcare commitments. Make sure the spaces are well publicised and relevant support services have a good understanding of why they exist, so they promote them in an appropriate way.

References

- i ONS, Domestic Abuse and the Criminal Justice System, England and Wales: November 2020. [Domestic abuse and the criminal justice system, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/domestic-abuse-and-the-criminal-justice-system)
- ii ICM Blog 10th October 2018 [Men's Well-being Days — Inspiring Change Manchester Blog \(shelter.org.uk\)](https://www.shelter.org.uk/blog/2018/10/10/mens-well-being-days)
- iii Guide 3: Involving people with lived experience of mental health problems in the design and delivery of your work. Mind. [Mind Mental Health Guides: involving people with lived experience of mental health problems in the design and delivery of your work](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/mind-mental-health-guides-involving-people-with-lived-experience-of-mental-health-problems-in-the-design-and-delivery-of-your-work)
- iv For more information or training on this we recommend AVA [Training - AVA - Against Violence & Abuse \(avaproject.org.uk\)](https://www.avaproject.org.uk)

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the women of the Women's Voices Movement for their hard work, contributions and passion which went into making this document. Each of you are true inspirations and will continue to inspire in whatever you decide to do next. We would not be who we are without you.

