LOVE& POWER

# Survivors building Love & Power

Rethinking how survivors of men's violence drive change

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# Executive Summary

Survivors of domestic abuse are often invited to "share their stories," but too rarely are they resourced, supported, or respected to make change when they do. This report explores what happens when lived experience is not just heard, but harnessed and how organisations can work *with* survivors, not *on* them.


Love & Power student leaders stage an Empowered Campus action at Oxford University in 2023, advocating for improved survivor listening and engagement across the UK.

This report draws on conversations and interviews with survivors of domestic abuse, some working within the sector, others engaging from outside it.

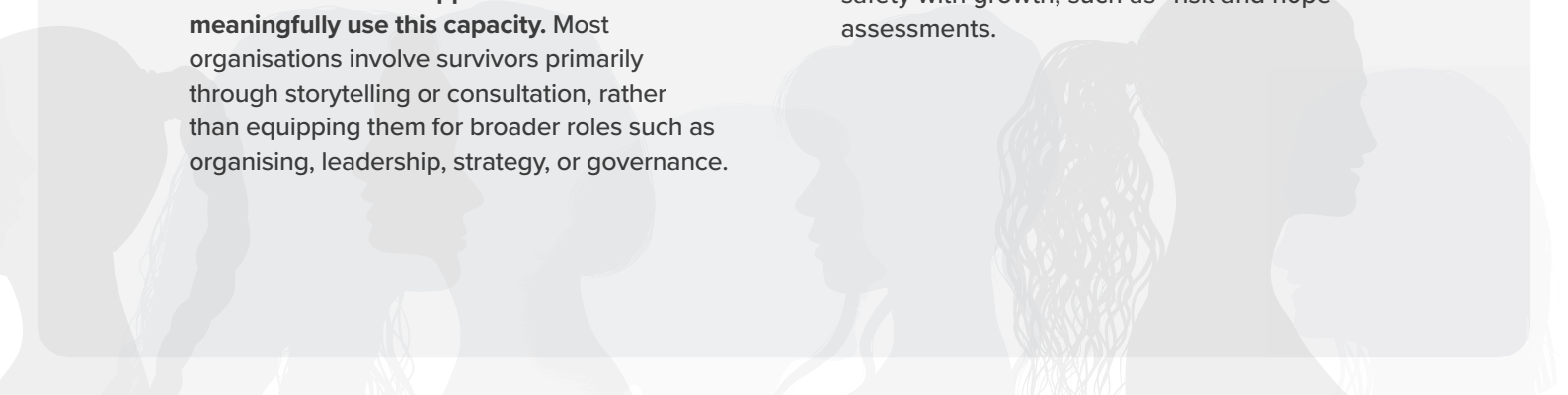
Their stories reveal a shared appetite to build power collectively, collaborate with purpose, and use their experiences and skills to create meaningful change. Above all, they are driven by a desire to make the world safer and fairer for the survivors who come after them. The current system for engaging survivors of domestic abuse is built around service, not systemic change. We need to reimagine survivors not as beneficiaries, but as builders and organisers.

## Key findings

- **Service models alone can't create long-term change.** Current responses prioritise crisis management and risk containment. While essential in moments of danger, these models rarely support survivors to rebuild power, connection, or purpose beyond immediate safety.
- **Safety is too often understood as containment rather than agency.** Survivors described systems that equate safety with silence, withdrawal, and compliance, rather than trusting survivors' expertise in managing risk and making informed choices about their own lives.
- **Survivors have skills, capacity, and a strong appetite to lead change.** Many survivors want to use their lived experience alongside professional skills to prevent harm, influence systems, and support others, not only to recover, but to contribute.
- **There is a dearth of opportunities to meaningfully use this capacity.** Most organisations involve survivors primarily through storytelling or consultation, rather than equipping them for broader roles such as organising, leadership, strategy, or governance.
- **This gap represents a missed opportunity for transformation.** When survivors are not supported to move beyond voice into power, organisations lose vital expertise and survivors are denied pathways that could transform their healing, confidence, and long-term outcomes.

## Recommendations

- Create routes from crisis to contribution. Design clear pathways for survivors who wish to move from receiving support to leading change, including mentoring, training, and campaigning opportunities.
- Shift from "for" to "with." Involve survivors as co-creators at every stage of service design and evaluation, ensuring participation builds power rather than extracts experience.
- Rethink safety as agency. Replace blanket risk avoidance with frameworks that balance safety with growth, such as "risk and hope" assessments.



# Introduction

> *Some extraordinary survivors, recognising that their suffering is part of a much larger social problem, are able to transform the meaning of their trauma by making their stories a gift to others and by joining with others to seek a better world."*

Herman, J.L. (2023). *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*. New York: Basic Books.


Love & Power leaders carried out a lockdown-compliant action in Parliament Square, London, in April 2020 as part of the Some Women Need to Walk campaign.

Credit: Dave Bird, Love & Power

## Throughout history, systemic change has happened when people directly affected by injustice came together, alongside allies who cared, to demand better. The suffragettes, anti-apartheid movement, and queer rights movements all began this way.

**Today, survivors of domestic abuse engage with support systems in very different ways. Even using generous estimates, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of survivors each year do not engage with the police or are unable to access specialist, safe accommodation.**

**2.3m**

An estimated 2.3 million women aged 16 years and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2024.

Office for National Statistics (2025). *Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update May 2025*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/redevelopmentofdomesticabusestatistics/researchupdatemay2025 (Accessed: Jan 2026)

**c1.5m**

1,350,428 domestic abuse-related crimes and incidents were recorded by police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2024.

National Centre for Domestic Violence (NCDV) (2025). *Domestic abuse statistics for England and Wales*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/redevelopmentofdomesticabusestatistics/researchupdatemay2025 (Accessed: January 2026)

**c75K**

In 2024-25, local authorities reported 76,850 individuals supported in domestic abuse safe accommodation across England, an increase of 12,900 or 20% since 2023-24

UK Government (2025). *Domestic abuse safe accommodation statistics, England 2024–25*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/redevelopmentofdomesticabusestatistics/researchupdatemay2025 (Accessed: January 2026))

> *"It was only when I got older that I started to realise that it had been domestic abuse. So I've never accessed any services at all."*

Most ordinary people, when asked, say they oppose domestic abuse, yet the UK still donates more each year to a single donkey sanctuary* than the biggest four domestic abuse causes combined (The Independent, 2024).

Despite the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector being full of passionate, hard working experts with the best intentions, current systems push survivors towards individualism and isolation, this report explores survivor aptitude for a space to work together towards meaningful change.

This isn't about expecting every survivor to become an organiser or campaigner. When someone is living through a crisis, social, emotional, financial, or physical, their focus is likely survival. But when that moment passes, we want another pathway to be waiting: one built with them, where safety and power can grow together.

* Oppenheim, M. (2024, September 2024), The Independent [Online]. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/domestic-abuse-donkey-charity-funding-b2607499.html (Accessed: January 2026).

## The Systemic Challenge

Most organisations are firefighting: underfunded, bound by receiving government funding, and constrained by risk-averse models of working. This limits their capacity to imagine new ways of engaging survivors, challenging ways that build power rather than just manage harm.

Love & Power was founded to do things differently, to challenge scarcity thinking and to reimagine what survivor engagement could look like. This report emerges from conversations and interviews with survivors, some working within the sector, others not, who shared a strong appetite to collaborate, use their skills, and make the world better for those who come after them.

Together with the survivors we interviewed, we asked: what would it take for survivors to be supported not only to heal, but to lead? Beneath that question sits another, more fundamental challenge for our sector: what would our organisations look like if they were built around survivors' capacity, rather than their perceived vulnerability?

This report explores that question not through the lens of service provision, but through the experiences, ambitions, and analysis of survivors themselves.

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We believe that honouring people in their fullness through organising can rebuild what abuse takes away: community, confidence, long-term safety, joy and pride. This is about transforming systems from something *done to* survivors, even with generous intent into something *done by* survivors, for collective good.

By the end of this report, we hope to show that survivors are not only capable, but essential to building the safer, more equitable systems that we all need.

*"What would it take for survivors to be supported not only to heal, but to lead?"*

# The Current Landscape:

## Service vs Organising

> *"When analysing communities, you'll find that the more services there are in that neighbourhood, the less power that community has to control its future."*

McKnight, J. (1995). *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits.* New York: Basic Books.


Students gather as part of Love & Power's student-focused initiative, Empowered Campus, during the 2023 roadshow.

# Currently, survivors wanting to recover from abuse are faced with the same limited options.

Survivors currently navigate a landscape of responses that are, in many cases, essential and life-saving. They may report to the police, to later experience court backlogs first hand which can mean waiting years for resolution. They may access specialist domestic abuse services, including refuges, advocacy, and safety planning, which, despite being delivered by a sector full of thoughtful and highly skilled professionals, are frequently operating at or beyond capacity and are often forced to turn people away due to chronic underfunding. Others may seek therapeutic support through the NHS, where waiting times are long and provision time-limited. Some turn to Employee Assistance Programmes, which frequently deem domestic abuse survivors "too complex" to support. Many rely on family and friends instead.

These responses matter. They save lives, reduce harm, and support individual recovery. This report does not critique their purpose, quality, or the dedication of those who deliver them. Rather, it argues that the options currently available to survivors are overwhelmingly **individual in focus**, designed to support people through crisis, manage risk, and stabilise lives.

What is largely missing is a collective dimension. Our systems are not built to support survivors to connect with one another, build power together, or act on the shared, structural nature of the harm they have experienced. As a result, responsibility for recovery is placed on individuals, reinforcing isolation and internalisation, and obscuring the reality that abuse is not a personal failing but, as Gloria Steinem describes it, a "collective fate" for which society must take shared accountability. When responses stop at individual recovery, survivors' access to networks, skill development, joy, and pride is limited.

We believe there is another, underdeveloped option that not only supports individual healing but also builds social networks, skills, joy, and pride, while creating the conditions for systemic change and better outcomes for survivors collectively. That option is organising: building power to do with, not for.

As we have seen the women's sector evolve from brave women hiding others in spare rooms to a professionalised system with essential tools such as DASH RIC (Domestic Abuse, Stalking, and Harassment Risk Identification Checklist), MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference), and safeguarding legislation, we must also recognise that much of its day-to-day function is now shaped by the demands of risk management. This work is vital but doesn't need to be the total picture.

In addition to this essential work, there must also be space for capacity building, joy, learning, collaboration, and friendship as integral parts of recovery from abuse. We believe that organising provides this space. Alongside managing harm, we can also work to change the conditions that allow it to persist , and who better to lead that change than survivors themselves?

| Service | Organising |
|---|---|
| Helps individuals | Builds community |
| Prioritises safety | Prioritises agency |
| Works with clients | Works with leaders |
| Focus on crisis | Focus on change |
| Survivors need to fit the structure | The structure is built to serve survivors |

# Rethinking Healing:

## From Individual to Collective

> *The role of relationships in sustaining change seems absurdly obvious, and yet relationships are never designed into any of our solutions. Our health services are designed around the lone individual. The doctor sees the patient."*

Cottam, H. (2018). *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships Between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State.* London: Virago.


Love & Power Leaders using their hour of allowed exercise to stage a socially distant public action, Scotland 2020.

## The familiar "victim > survivor > thriver" model has become a shorthand for recovery, but it's too linear and too individualistic. It imagines healing as a personal journey with a clear endpoint, rather than an ongoing, relational process shaped by connection, community, and collective power.

**Survivors in this research challenged that simplicity. Their experiences showed that recovery doesn't move in straight lines and that "thriving" isn't something reached alone. As one woman put it:**

*"....the definition of survivorhood, is that (the abuse) is over and that's because the only people you ever hear from are people who it is over for, because they're not managing their risk anymore. Then everyone else gets completely lost in that because they can't be as vocal because they've got to manage the risk."*

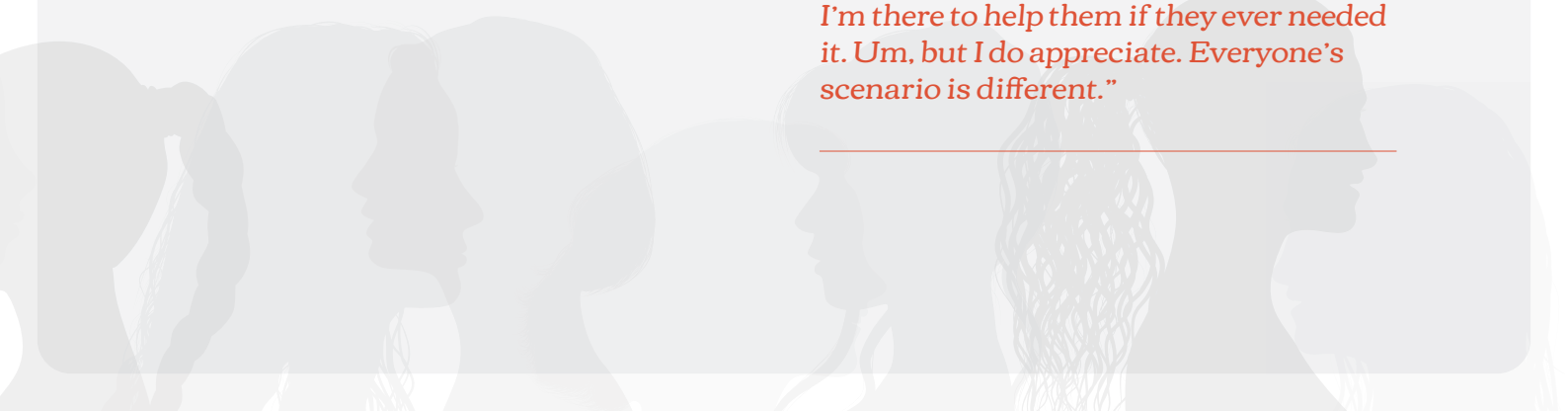
This view suggests that you can 'girl boss' your way into recovery. But what even is recovery? Some survivors shared a nuanced view of what they had gone through, suggesting that whilst the experience was harmful, they are proud of the person that they are on the other side of it. After experiencing post traumatic growth, they felt they had their 'eyes opened' to the realities and prevalence of abuse and wanted to use their lived experience and expertise to act.

**Many survivors reflected on how the experience had shaped them as parents to young children, wanting to bring their children up empowered with knowledge about VAWG as a systemic prevention strategy:**

*"But I'm like, yeah, Mama just experienced something that wasn't very nice but now, Mummy helps other people. Don't I? And he (the survivor's son) even is learning that ethos, because last year, he did a little inflatable run with me. . . and he was like, can we do that again to help people then?"*

*"That's really important to me and I'm okay, I'm okay. I am changed forever. Yeah. And in some ways for the better. Yeah. Um, there's a lot of positives that have come out of this about me as a person. And as a mother, So I'm glad it happened."*

*"Life is not great for everybody and I would rather my kids know and know that there's boundaries and know that I'm there to help them if they ever needed it. Um, but I do appreciate. Everyone's scenario is different."*



**Others talked about their professional achievements that were inspired by their own experiences of abuse, one survivor who had set up a peer to peer survivor network shared:**

*"So I'm always pinching myself going. Is this real? Well I do. I'm a strong believer in. If you do, good, good things happen and I do believe, me, personally. I don't regret that it happened to me because I have got that strength to be able to do what I do, I guess."*

That desire to act to prevent harm, to support others, to create change was central to how many participants understood healing. It wasn't only about safety, stability, or individual wellbeing, but about purpose and contribution. For them, healing and change making were intertwined: both offered ways to rebuild agency and transform pain into power. One survivor shared that after attending group therapy sessions, the therapist identified that over time, she was taking up a more of a leading and supportive role in the group. She was invited to become a formal volunteer and later the Deputy CEO of the service she once used, she told us:

*"just the fact that somebody had some belief in me because he'd spent so long telling me I was mental and I was useless and nobody would want me and I'd never be good for anything."*

She also shared *"the more I do, the more I want to do."*

**Another survivor we spoke to, who had an "awful experience" in the criminal justice system found motivation through this experience:**

*"It's really difficult to be heard and to be listened to and to be taken seriously, especially in the criminal justice system. So for me it was really a case of wanting to be that mouthpiece but other victim survivors who weren't able to come forwards."*

This suggests that the dominant model of recovery reflects the same individualism embedded in wider social frameworks most notably Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs." Maslow's pyramid* implies that people must meet private, personal needs before they can pursue community or justice. Yet, as Indigenous and collective wellbeing scholars have long argued, this framing misses how connection itself is a fundamental human need. Belonging, solidarity, and participation are not luxuries that follow healing; they are the conditions that make it possible. As Tribal Health (2021) notes, *"Maslow's model was based on an individualist worldview that doesn't reflect the collective nature of wellbeing."*

Survivors' accounts point toward a different understanding of what it means to "thrive" one rooted in relational power. Relational power grows through relationships, shared purpose, and mutual recognition. It's not power over others, but power *with* others, the kind that emerges when survivors support one another, collaborate, and lead change.

* Maslow, A.H. (1943). 'A theory of human motivation', Psychological Review, 50(4), pp. 370–396. Tribal Health (2021). Reframing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

**The survivors that we spoke to told us:**

*"I spoke to somebody with lived experience, it just made the shame pour away from me because whilst um my friends and family didn't mean to every time someone asks you, "why didn't you leave?" it perpetuates that shame."*

*"It's like strength in numbers and it's not only kind of because you haven't found validation in the system. It's really important to find validation from each other."*

*"You have that systemic gaslighting. I think when you're not believed you question whether it happened to you and being around people who understand that and validate, that is just so powerful and therapeutic as well. That's amazing."*

Rather than a linear progression from victim to thriver, we might instead imagine a cyclical or layered process individual → collective → systemic, where healing, organising, and justice reinforce one another. This is particularly relevant when looking at domestic abuse. Many of the practical and emotional ramifications of the abuse don't end when the relationship does.

*"My career was decimated by the abuse and becoming a single mother."*

One survivor shared the wide reaching implications of having to move home to stay safe. Missing out on a dream professional opportunity as well as her support system.

*"Because it wasn't just the move and the move away from my family and my support system. But it was also, I was at a place in my career. I just finished uni like the year before . . . to have that taken from me, the opportunity that I could have had, and the impact that I could have, like, with the work and the support. I was furious like, as if you've not taken enough from being, you know, my myself my sense of self and my time and my energy and my sleep and my money like now you've come to my career as well."*

Traditional view:


What the survivors we spoke to identified:


In this view, thriving is not a personal endpoint but a collective practice one that becomes stronger each time survivors connect, act, and build together. If healing can be understood as a collective process, then recovery work must also evolve beyond service provision and toward building collective power.

# How the System can Replicate Abuse

The VAWG sector is full to the brim with intelligent, fierce, hopeful, and compassionate staff, many of whom are survivors themselves, navigating their own paths to create change. The sector has an established and heroic legacy of saving women's lives. We owe so much to the women who built and now sustain it.


Love & Power activists carried out a lockdown-compliant action infront of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, Bristol, in April 2020 as part of the Some Women Need to Walk campaign.

## The author of this report wants to state explicitly that this is *not* a critique of the aims of the sector, nor of those who work tirelessly within it.

**Instead, we use this section to explore how the systems that the sector operates within can, at times, inadvertently reproduce dynamics of power and control that are familiar to survivors of abuse, for both survivors accessing services and staff operating them.**

For this reason, careful analysis of funding models, bureaucracy, and risk management is needed, not to assign blame, but to steer the ship back toward the shared motivation that drives us all: dismantling and eradicating violence against women and girls.

At a structural level, the relationship between government, providers, and survivors can mirror a chain of command rather than a circle of transformation. Government commissions services often through short-term contracts that prioritise measurable outputs and "risk reduction." Providers deliver to those specifications, leaving little room for creativity, challenge, or reflection. Within this context, survivors can find themselves positioned at the bottom of systems that struggle to hear critique from those they are designed to serve.

In this model, "safety" can become synonymous with avoiding risk rather than cultivating long-term agency or liberation. Survivors are encouraged to stay quiet, to comply, to minimise disruption — all in the name of staying safe. This is not only a feature of the VAWG sector.

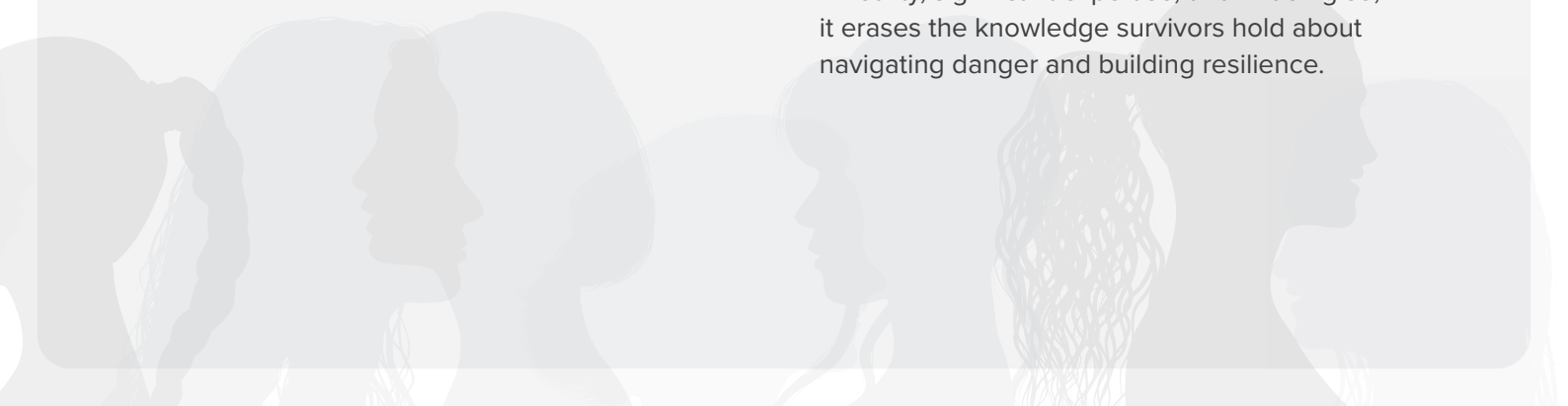
**One survivor described having to remain silent for years while waiting for her case against her abuser to reach court:**

*"the trial will not be for 18 months, that will then be So what would that be 2026? I left the relationship in 2023. The abuse started in 2022. I am not keeping my mouth shut for four years. I'm not shutting my mouth because I know there's so many women that still have to keep their mouths shut."*

*"I thought I don't care. I'm not being silent anymore. I haven't named him. It's not about naming him, but I'm not being silent anymore. That's how you continue to be able to abuse me. That's, that's the biggest facilitation for abuse is the shame which equals the silence."*

These dynamics emerge not because of a lack of care or skill, but because the systems we work within prioritise risk containment over shared power.

This approach can risk infantilising survivors. Too often, they are told to follow process and stay safe rather than trusted to act, analyse, and lead. It can assume fragility where there is, in reality, significant expertise, and in doing so, it erases the knowledge survivors hold about navigating danger and building resilience.



This is not an argument against safety. Understanding that the risk posed by an abuser is dynamic is central to good practice and should be monitored throughout any working relationship. Our argument is that most engagement with survivors happens at the point of crisis or when risk is most visible. It is worth recognising that each survivor defines "risk" differently: for some, it may be fear of death; for others, the threat of losing access to their children, being stalked at work, or facing homelessness. Yet the experience of abuse does not end when immediate risk subsides. Many of the survivors we spoke to identified this moment — when the crisis had passed — as the point where they began to feel ready to contribute to systemic change.

**As one woman shared;**

*"I was really careful about what I was posting and how I was acting and censoring myself not wanting to go out in case you bump into them and things like that. So I guess the moment that changed for me, psychologically was when I was like, if they are still looking at my social media, I don't care anymore because let them because I felt there was that time it passed that it wasn't in physical kind of threat anymore, and I just didn't really care anymore because that emotion had gone. I think that's when you move into that kind of psychological safe space."*

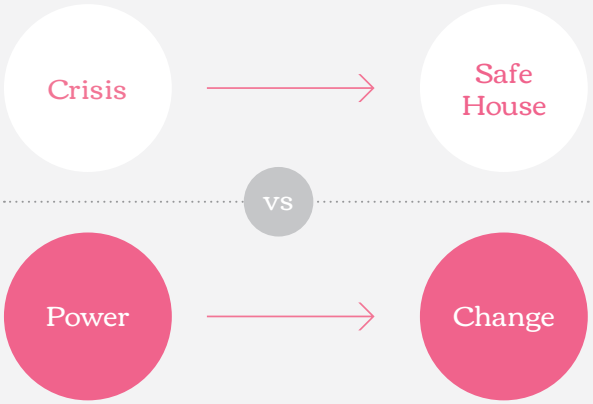
Many survivors recognise this dynamic and, over time, vote with their feet. Low engagement and attrition rates across services are not always simply signs of fatigue or avoidance; they can also be evidence that the current offer does not meet survivors' deeper needs for justice, agency, connection, and purpose. Even when survivors are invited into decision-making spaces, power often remains tightly held.

The rise of "Experts by Experience" panels is a welcome direction of travel, yet too often these initiatives risk becoming tokenistic spaces where survivors are consulted but not helped to build power.

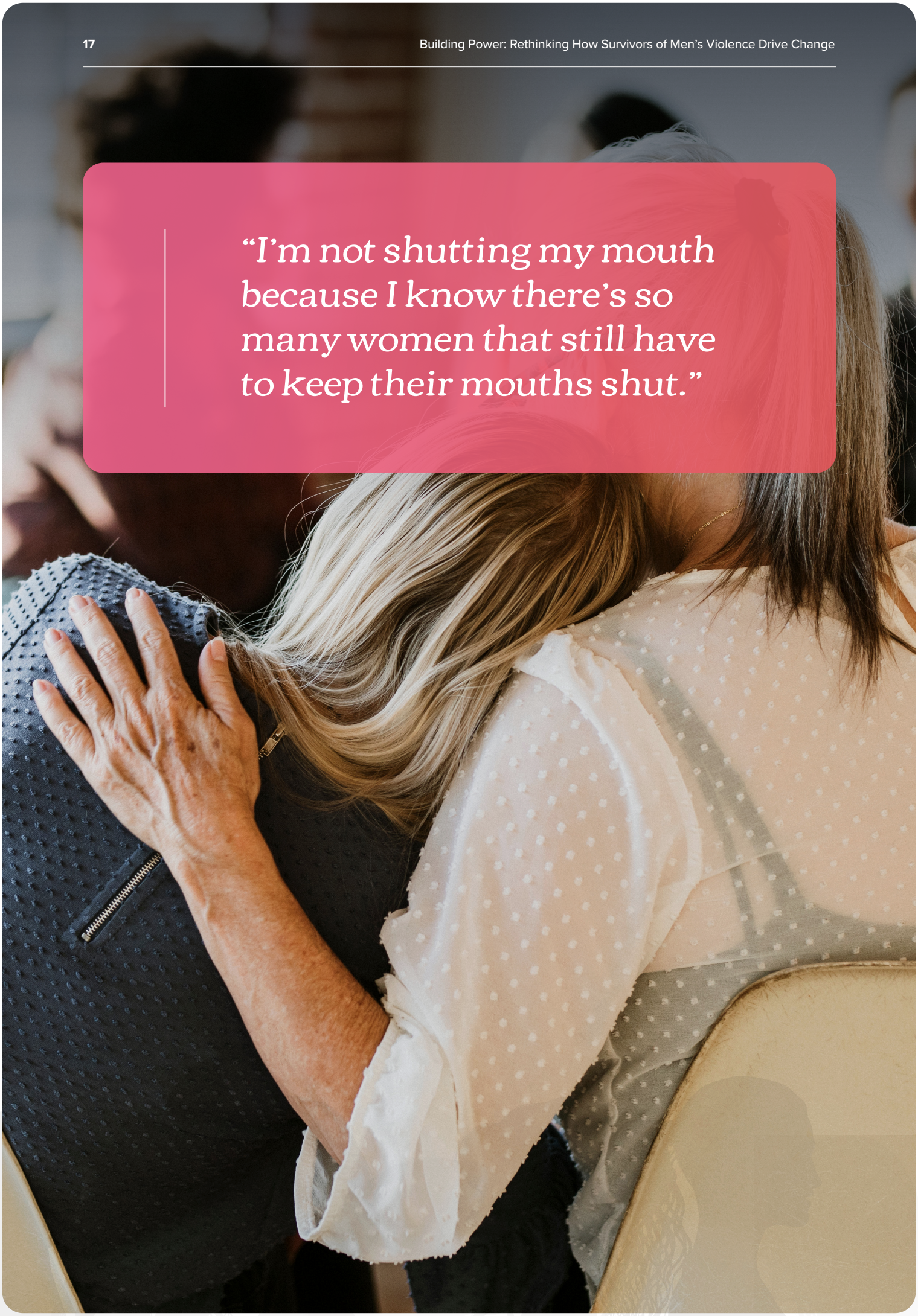
**As one survivor shared:**

*"I just sometimes think that's not really taken into account, and I've got examples, you know, of other survivors, I've worked with that, have complained that, um, they're used their voice, uh, story is used to get larger organisations, or Charities, some money, but then they're not sort of paid or their expenses, aren't paid, or they don't get anything out of it."*

Survivors' insights can be extracted to validate pre-existing decisions rather than to shape them. What results is a system preoccupied with crisis management, not change. It moves people from crisis to safe house but rarely from powerlessness to power.




If we are serious about ending abuse, our systems must stop replicating this logic. Safety cannot depend on compliance, and care cannot mean control. Real safety and real change come when survivors are trusted to speak, act, and lead in their own right.



> *"I'm not shutting my mouth because I know there's so many women that still have to keep their mouths shut."*

# Do Survivors Want to Build Change?

> "Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection with others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity."

Herman, J.L. (2015). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.* New York: Basic Books.

**The answer, resoundingly, is yes.**

Across interviews, conversation, and the day-to-day work of Love & Power, we found clear evidence that many survivors want to do more than recover, they want to create change. For some, that desire is immediate; for many others, it emerges as the urgency of crisis begins to fade. What unites them is the motivation to ensure that what happened to them does not happen to anyone else.

**Survivors told us:**

*"If I can reach his next victim and do the education before he does, then I love that, I absolutely love that."*

*"So it is about Justice for me, but I also know I will not get my Justice from the CPS. Yeah, not even if he gets the maximum that nothing will ever bring Justice to what he did to me and continues to do to a degree. But If I can, if I could stop him doing it to anybody else."*

*"I think sometimes I have that in that there should have been no reason that I received better service and support than other people did purely by the fact that my postcode is different."*

Many survivors seek out roles that repair what abuse tried to destroy: connection, agency, purpose, and impact. Some volunteer with local community groups; others campaign for policy reform, set up peer-support spaces, or use their professional skills to challenge cultures of silence in workplaces. Love & Power's own programmes have shown how quickly survivors turn experience into expertise when given the tools, trust, and community to do so.

This work is not about every survivor becoming an activist, it's about making organising possible for those who want it. Current systems rarely offer that choice. Most services focus on personal safety or therapy, leaving no clear pathway for those who want to contribute to wider change. As a result, survivors who are ready to act often have to build their own routes from scratch.

## Thrivership and Collective Care

The appetite for change is closely tied to what some call *thrivership*, a stage of healing that moves beyond survival toward meaning-making and contribution. Thrivership recognises that growth often comes through connection and purpose, not in isolation. It aligns with feminist and community-care traditions that understand wellbeing as relational: we heal in relationship with others, not apart from them.

Collective care builds the scaffolding for this process. It transforms the instinct to "give back" into a practice of solidarity, where survivors support one another while pursuing structural change. In this sense, activism is not separate from healing; it can *be* healing and a way of reclaiming voice, agency, and belonging.

**Survivors shared their reflections on their contribution to loved experience change making:**

*"Like something good has to come from my experience. And I think I've thrown myself into everything, you know, at 18, I didn't go to uni,I was in a minimum wage jobs. No prospects, very little education. I... have been fighting tooth and nail to have a successful life and to learn like myself."*

*"(when I think about) how I want to raise my children, the life that we live, the person that I am. It's almost like for a long time, he really did win. And now I think like I get hard days but even with the (not guilty) verdict, I get to be me."*

*"I want to say it's something really magical like a love of you know Womanhood it's not rage, it's rage and it's indignant that he doesn't get to decide that that's how things ended for me that he could put me through that and my life would change to such a vast degree in my son's life as well."*

## Case Example: Rebuilding Power Through Purpose

As part of our interviews, we spoke to a survivor who had previously worked in the commercial sector and saw an opportunity to use her professional experience to make a difference to the lives of survivors. Drawing on her background in business, she began developing workplace training on domestic abuse, determined to use her skills to drive change, even though she didn't see herself fitting into frontline roles.

Early in her journey, she attended the Freedom Programme, then run by her local Women's Aid. By that point, she had obtained a non-molestation order and represented herself through a court case that resulted in a lengthy prison sentence for the perpetrator. She described using the time while he was in prison to heal and to focus on pitching her idea for a training business.

**Reflecting on how staff initially responded to her, she said:**

*"Oh, so for them, I guess I'm not a normal, if that's the right word to use, victim or survivor. I was going in there saying, 'I'm going to start a business and I'm going to do this.'"*

*"The people at the women's group were like, 'Oh, do you want a chat? Is everything okay?' And I was like, 'No, I'm good. This is what I want to do.'"*

Around a year later, the same group invited her back to speak to other survivors. She recalled the stark contrast between her experience and how she was perceived:

*"I went in and honestly, it was the most bizarre experience of my life. I walked him and I have my suit jacket on. . . I had my little like briefcasey thing because I've been to a meeting. . .... There were all these tables and I sat down and there were two women opposite me. Um and then the third joint and I sat there and they were all talking and they weren't engaging with me and I went, oh, Hi. How are you? And they went, I'm really good,thank you. And they looked really terrified of me and I was like, Okay, um, obviously, we're all survivors and. . . they went, well, you're not a survivor . . .. Well, I don't look like a Survivor and that was a penny. Drop moment for me, because I went, hold on a minute. And I said, I am a survivor. I nearly lost my life, a couple of years ago. And they were like, oh my goodness!"*

Since then, her training programme has been widely recognised and adopted by businesses. She now mentors another woman we interviewed, also a survivor working in the same industry, who described her main motivation as seeking a form of justice she knows the criminal justice system cannot provide:

*"It is about Justice for me, but I also know I will not get my Justice from the CPS. Yeah, not even if he gets the maximum that nothing will ever bring Justice to what he did to me and continues to do to a degree. But If I can, if I could stop him doing it to anybody else."*

Her mentee spoke about how meaningful the relationship has been, both in giving her a route to use her experience and in the sense of solidarity it created:

*"That first conversation, it felt like, for the first time, somebody put their arms around me. My friends and family tried, but you can't explain to them the unexplainable."*

Together, their stories show what becomes possible when survivors are trusted to use their skills, to lead, and to lift one another. This is what power-building looks like in practice: survivors not only rebuilding their own lives, but building structures of support and change for others.

## An Appetite Without a Pathway

Not every survivor will want to campaign or lead, nor should there be an expectation for those who are harmed by systems to then do the work of fixing them. But what is striking is how few structured routes exist for those who *do*.

The survivors we spoke with described searching for mentors, training, and communities of practice. Those who experienced emotional abuse looked for ways to help others build confidence; those who had been let down by systems then looked for opportunities to highlight failures to avoid repetition. Each acted from the same impulse: to turn pain into purpose.

There is a clear appetite for change, but not yet a pathway to follow. Recognising and resourcing this energy is key to building a movement that not only protects survivors, but is powered by them.

# What's Holding Organisations Back

If survivors are motivated to create change, and many within the sector share that desire, why has so little shifted? The answer lies not in lack of will, but in the conditions organisations are forced to operate within, systems designed for firefighting, not building.

Students gather as part of Love & Power's student-focused initiative, Empowered Campus, during the 2023 roadshow.

## Funding Models and the Scarcity Trap

Most VAWG organisations exist in a permanent state of scarcity. Government funding is often short-term, tightly prescribed, and focused on crisis response. Cycles of risk management rather than power building are maintained as contracts are awarded on the basis of measurable outputs, the number of survivors "supported," the speed of risk assessments, the timely management of cases, rather than long-term change.

At Love & Power, we were confronted with this directly whilst emergency funding was granted during the pandemic. Whilst this funding was desperately needed and life-saving, it was also time-limited and didn't come close to undoing the harm of austerity. We sadly watched as the sector was put in a position of being grateful for the money, unable to voice that it didn't go far enough. The irony of this relationship mirroring that of interpersonal financial abuse was not lost on us at the time. The result is a sector that is intermittently rewarded for managing harm rather than creating transformation.

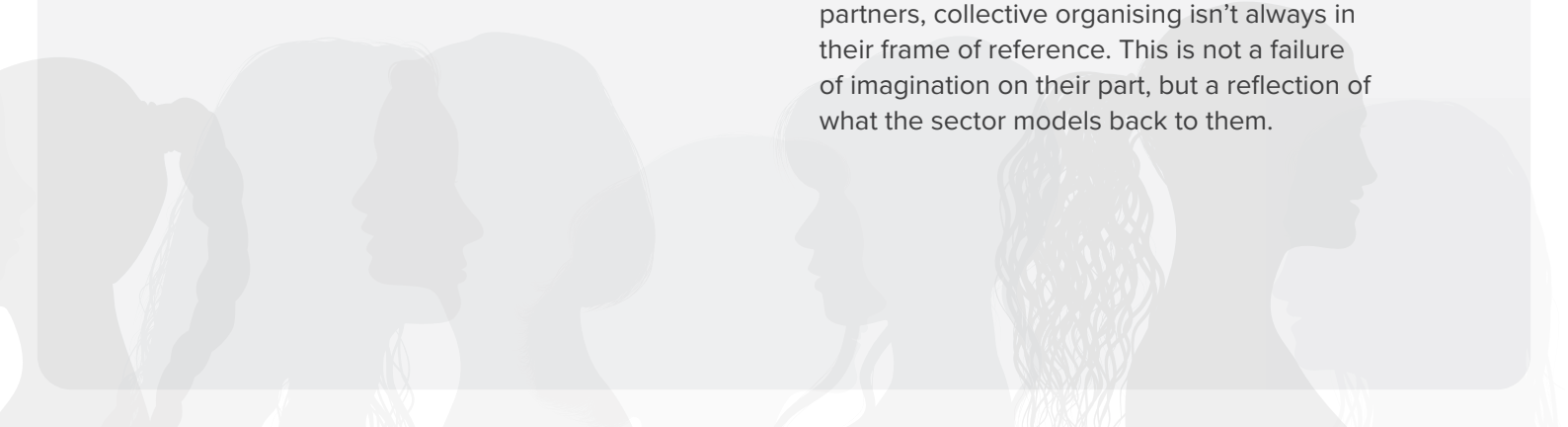
This funding structure leaves little space for innovation, reflection, or organising. When survival depends on the next grant cycle, there is no safe margin for experimentation, even when staff and survivors both recognise that the current model isn't enough.

## Professional Culture and the Fear of Risk

Alongside structural barriers are powerful cultural ones. This culture often disguises itself as care. The constant assessment and mitigation of potential harm is central to safeguarding, but it can also become a mechanism of control. It discourages staff from imagining new forms of engagement or leadership. In this way, risk management starts to maintain the very hierarchies it was designed to protect against. When safety is defined as the absence of risk rather than the presence of agency, organisations end up replicating the same disempowering logic that survivors are trying to escape.

## "Experts by Experience" and the Limits of Imagination

The "Experts by Experience" model was introduced to make services more accountable and inclusive, and whilst there are examples of good practice, it often falls short of its promise. Too often, survivors are slotted into pre-existing agendas: asked to review materials, attend panels, or share their stories within parameters set by the organisation. These opportunities can be valuable, but they rarely build power. Survivors become consultants, rather than co-creators of change. Even some survivors find it hard to imagine genuine co-ownership of organisations. Having only experienced systems that treat them as service users, not partners, collective organising isn't always in their frame of reference. This is not a failure of imagination on their part, but a reflection of what the sector models back to them.



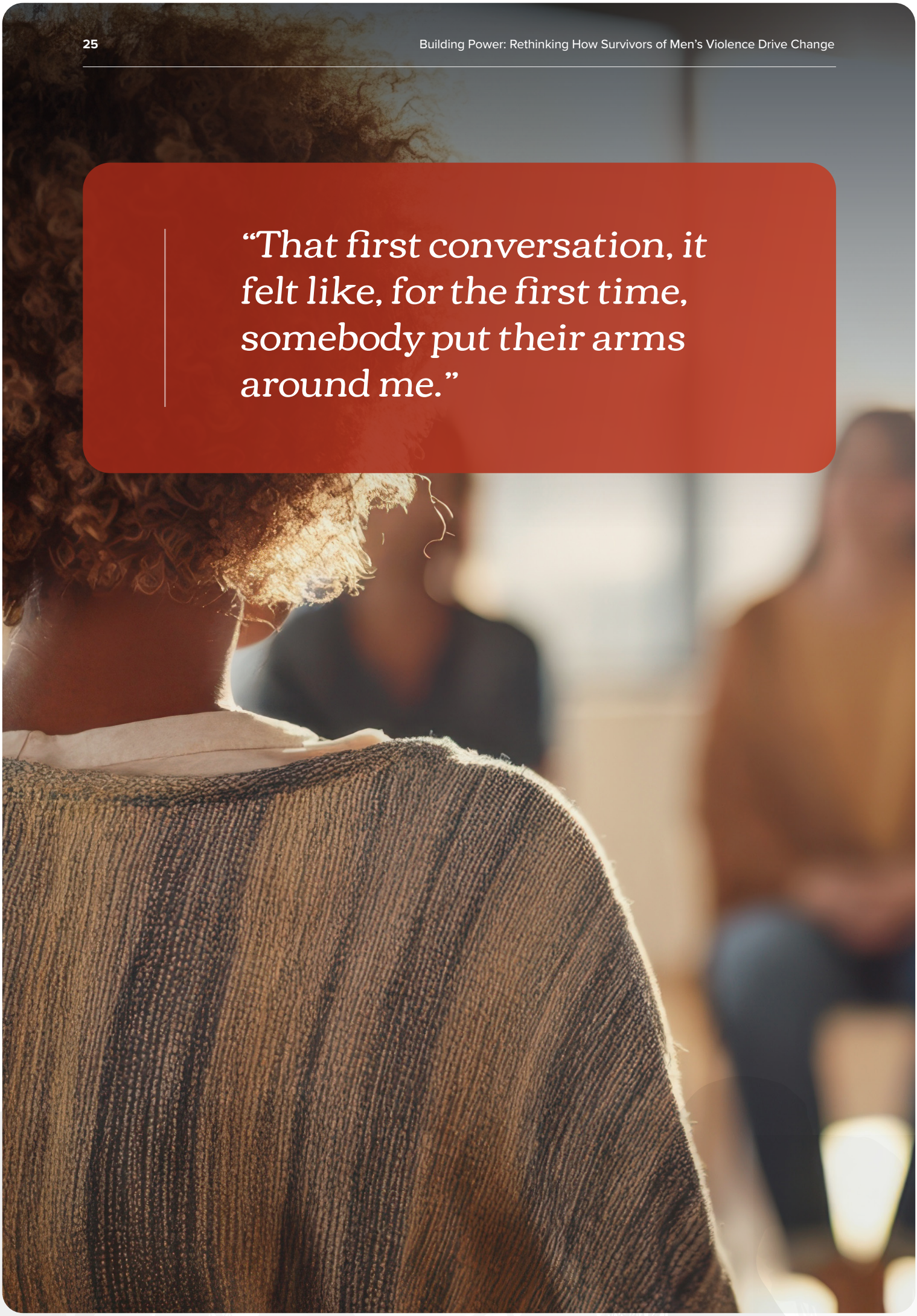
# Reimagining Capacity

Most organisations are poorly funded and operating at full capacity and yet, not necessarily in the right places. Staff time, funding, and training are concentrated on compliance and crisis management. Few roles are dedicated to power-building, organising, or leadership development.

When no one is paid or trained to imagine a different way of working, that imagination starts to disappear. Finally, we rarely ask within services or policy, what survivors' healing *would* look like if it were defined by them. Instead, we design services to make survivors fit into risk frameworks.

## True transformation would begin by reversing that question:

**What would our organisations look like if they were built around survivors' capacity, rather than their perceived vulnerability?**



*"That first conversation, it felt like, for the first time, somebody put their arms around me."*

# Reimagining Safety and Risk and Building the Alternative


Lived experience engagement is broader than survivor voices alone. Mother Forward, Ohio, USA, 2025.

If we have learned anything from survivors, it is that safety is never absolute. It is negotiated, dynamic, and constantly changing. Survivors are experts at managing risk. They make complex judgments daily. Yet our current models of support rarely recognise this expertise.

## From Containment to Connection

For too long, "safety" has been defined as *containment*. The dominant logic of the safe house, remove risk, close the door, keep danger out, has undoubtedly saved lives. But it has also reinforced the idea that safety means isolation and withdrawal. Only recently has the argument that abusers should be removed from the home, not victims, began to become mainstream. Survivors themselves tell us that this kind of safety, while essential in crisis, cannot be the end goal.

At Love & Power, we work from a different starting point: that safety and risk can coexist. True safety is not the absence of risk, but the presence of agency, connection, and collective care and yes, robust risk analysis, management and safety planning. Instead of asking how to *contain* survivors, we ask how to *expand* their choices and power.

**Survivors shared their thoughts on how risk was managed by themselves and the services they came into contact with:**

*"I actually said to the police, I feel like you're now part of my abuse. I'm encouraged to be isolated and shamed."*

*"Do you hide away? Or do you continue? No, I'm going to continue."*

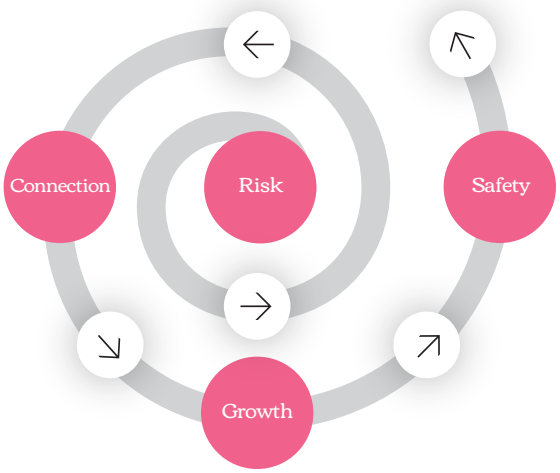
*"So there's always (the abuse) hanging over me. That will be there for the rest of my life. You know, I acknowledge when I go in, I look at the exit. I, you know, get in my car, sometimes in the dark and I can't get my car. Yeah. So I do have like, trigger moments but I think at that point, To be honest, I can stop what I'm doing and I could stop saving and changing lives. I could go and sit in my house and lock all my doors but if you (he) wanted to get me, he could smash the door and come in."*

# The "Risk vs Hope" Model

To help shift this thinking, we developed a Risk and Hope Assessment framework (Love & Power (2026)). Traditional risk assessments focus on what might go wrong; dream assessments ask what might go *right*.

Our work begins by acknowledging the risks, personal, financial, relational, reputational and then mapping them alongside survivors' ambitions and goals. The act of naming both creates space for balanced, informed decision-making. It asks: *What's the worst that could happen?* and *What's the best that could happen?* side by side. This approach recognises that growth often happens in the same space as risk. It doesn't deny danger, but it doesn't let fear define the limits of possibility either.

Safety + connection can go hand in hand, we imagine:




It is important to note that we don't believe this thinking should be applied at all costs. When someone is in the middle of high social, emotional, financial or physical threat, organising for change may not be high on their objectives or appropriate or safe. What we do want is to build this option for/with them if and when they are ready.)

# From Risk Management to Transformation

When organisations think differently about safety, new forms of empowerment become possible. In practice, this looks like moving from a logic of *protection* to one of *participation*. These transformations are not theoretical, they are already happening where survivors are trusted to lead. Our work focuses on training survivors to develop both themselves and others, creating ripple effects of safety and strength that extend far beyond individual lives.

| Traditional Approach | Transformative Approach |
|---|---|
| Silence | Story telling |
| Isolation | Community building |
| Dependency | Leadership development |
| Compliance | Confidence and collaboration |
| Shame | Pride |
| Fear | Joy |

# Spotlight: Survivor Sanctuary

Survivor Sanctuary is a survivor-led organisation that emerged when survivors themselves identified a gap in the existing landscape, not for services or advocacy, but for care, connection, and belonging outside of formal systems. In response, they built their own space. This act alone demonstrates survivors' capacity to analyse need, mobilise skills, and create solutions where institutions at a local level have not.

*"Thank God for Survivor Sanctuary," Laura reflected. "When everything else fell away, this became the place where I could put the pieces back together."*

The work of Survivor Sanctuary is primarily focused on peer support and collective care, rather than strategic organising aimed at building collective power to influence systems or policy. In this sense, it is best understood as empowering, oriented towards care, connection, and mutual support, rather than power-building.

*"Seeing volunteers do amazing work and watching people form lasting friendships - that's what keeps me going."*

For Laura, justice has taken on a new meaning. Though the criminal justice process failed to hold her perpetrator accountable, she finds strength in knowing that her story, and the community built from it, continue to have impact:

*"After the not-guilty verdict, I said to a close friend, I hope he knows about Survivor Sanctuary. I hope he's looking over his shoulder, wondering where I'll pop up next. That's another kind of justice for me. By sharing my story, I've inspired people in my own team to speak up too."*

While this report is centrally concerned with survivor power-building and strategic organising, Survivor Sanctuary remains a valuable example. It offers clear insight into the skills, agency, leadership, and collective capacity that survivors already exercise when they are trusted to identify needs and act together. These qualities form a crucial foundation for power-building efforts, even when they are expressed through care-led rather than campaigning or advocacy-focused work.

## A Note on Responsibility

Reimagining safety does not mean ignoring risk. It means understanding that *growth without care is dangerous, and care without growth is stagnation*. As organisers, we hold responsibility for both. We are mindful of what organisers sometimes call "marching people up a hill to fail" mobilising energy and hope without the support or infrastructure to sustain it. True collective safety means building systems that hold risk *and* nurture an ambition for a better future for all of us, allowing survivors to develop, network and act without being left exposed or alone.

# What Happens Next

## We hope that this report adds to the underdeveloped conversation around lived experience leadership.

As an organisation we work to embody many of the themes discussed in this report, of healing, safety, power and joy as we try to shape conversations and thinking beyond service delivery.

## For Organisations

**We invite organisations to partner with us in piloting new approaches to survivor organising.**

Whether you're a service provider, funder, local authority, or community group, there is space to experiment, to create models that work *with* survivors, not *for* them.

Over the next year, we'll be developing practical guides and tools for organisations that want to embed survivor-led organising into their work.

We're looking for partners who are ready to test, learn, and share. Funders can play a vital role here by backing innovation and giving permission to take thoughtful risks.

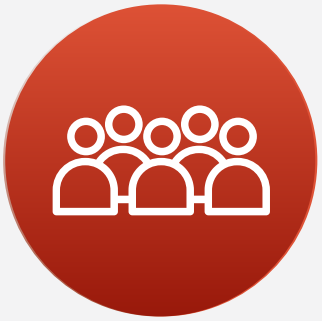
## For Survivors

**To survivors reading this, we want you to know there is space for you here.**

Your voice and skills have the power to change things for the next person. We invite you to organise, to co-lead, and to build together.

You don't need to have it all figured out to get involved. Many of us started exactly where you are now, frustrated by what wasn't working and hopeful that something better could.

We hope that you will consider a Love & Power membership.



## For the Public

**If you care about ending domestic abuse, you have a role to play. Listen to survivors.**

Challenge the silence that isolates people experiencing abuse. Support organisations like Love & Power that make survivor leadership central to their work.

Ordinary people have always driven extraordinary change, from the suffragettes to the queer rights movement, and this is no different.

# Conclusion

## Every major movement began with people who refused to accept safety as enough. Services keep survivors safe; organising makes survivors powerful.

When we measure Love & Power it's not just campaign wins we're after - but also the courage of women finding each other, rebuilding trust, and acting together. Safety grows through connection. Power grows through community.

The future we're building rests on one belief: survivors are not the aftermath of violence, they are the architects of change. Together, we can create a world where surviving is only the beginning.

# Acknowledgments


## Firstly, a huge thank you to all the survivors who met with us to share your experiences, insights, and hopes for the future.

Many of these conversations left us feeling renewed and inspired, though they were not always easy. Revisiting painful moments that carry both motivation and grief takes immense courage, and we are deeply grateful for your honesty, your trust, and your energy.

We also want to honour all those who have experienced men's violence, and to remember those who did not survive, through both homicide and suicide. Our deepest thanks go to their families and loved ones, including campaigners such as Nick Gazzard, Claire Throssell, and Luke and Ryan Hart, who continue to fight for change in their names.

Thank you to the survivors who build networks, lead campaigns, fundraise, write books, train, and take action — and to those who channel their strength into raising a more thoughtful generation. Each of you gives us all hope.

We are grateful to Refuge for their support in sharing our research invitation with members of their Survivor Panel, enabling us to hear from survivors willing to contribute their insight and experience.

And finally, thank you to Nina, for believing in this work and understanding what it takes to make it possible.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Methods / Co-authorship note

We spoke with 10 women who identified as having experienced at least one instance of male violence or abuse. While participants were not required to share details of the abuse, many chose to. Some had survived attempted murder. Others spoke about coercive control and the long-term impact of economic abuse, isolation, and single parenthood. Another reflected on incidents that they had only recently come to recognise as violence, often after working in the women's sector and learning more about how abuse is defined in law.

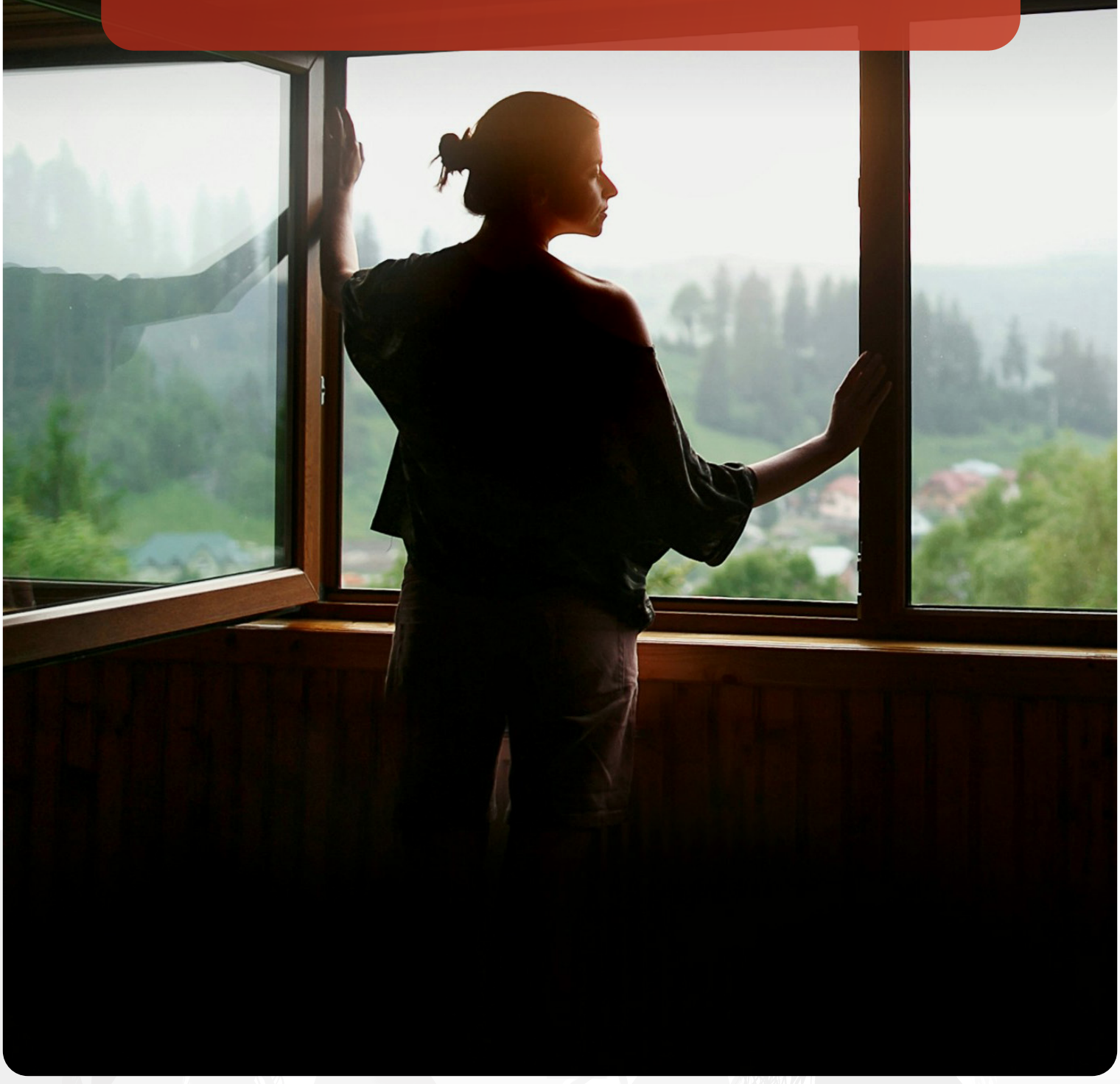
Participants came from a range of contexts. Some were identified as they had already shared their stories publicly to raise awareness. Others worked in the women's sector and kept their personal experiences private. Others were active in other forms of justice work, outside explicitly feminist spaces. Some participated in raising awareness about domestic abuse online, but didn't link that to their personal or professional experiences.

We asked each woman about the language she used to describe herself. Some used "survivor," others preferred a person with "lived experience." Some embraced both "victim" and "survivor," using them to express the timeline of their experience, where once they had been a victim, they now stood in survival. Others hesitated to use any label at all, even when their experiences met legal definitions of abuse. For some, this was because their lives had never felt physically at risk; for others, because the abuse or its impacts hadn't ended. They shared how ongoing realities, like needing to hide their location, keep their children offline, or manage ongoing contact with perpetrators, made the term "survivor" feel premature. One survivor cited that the term "survivor" felt hierarchical and disrespectful to those who had not survived. Many expressed that no one term captured their reality fully.

Participants were recruited in a range of ways. Refuge kindly shared our research call with their Survivor Panel. Others were approached directly after sharing their testimony publicly. A number were found through existing LinkedIn connections, often through current or former involvement in the women's sector. We made a conscious decision not to issue a public call for participants to avoid situations where survivors at high risk might volunteer and then be unable to safely take part, potentially leading to further harm or isolation. We acknowledge that not being able to work with high-risk participants limited the representation of participants. Sadly, at this time, we didn't have the resources to be able to engage them safely.

Each participant was informed that their identity would remain anonymous, other than in Laura's case who already had a public profile and consented. Interviews were conducted online, lasted around an hour, and followed a semi-structured format. Most participants had an initial introductory call and completed a short onboarding form designed to flag any potential risks. Participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, or not answer specific questions, as well as the limits of confidentiality under safeguarding legislation.

*"When everything else fell away, this became the place where I could put the pieces back together."*



LOVE& POWER

Love and Power welcomes people from all genders, backgrounds and circumstances. We work with people who are getting involved with feminism for the first time as well as seasoned activists, and we recognise that women's other identifies like race, class, geography, religion, disability status all affect their experience of womanhood.

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Oak Foundation commits its resources to address issues of global, social and environmental concern, particularly those that have a major impact on the lives of the disadvantaged. With offices in Europe, Africa, India and North America, Oak Foundation makes grants to organisations in approximately 40 countries worldwide.

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