

Sources of lived experience in the family violence sector

Issues Paper

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters, community and culture.

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About Safe and Equal

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. The interests of people experiencing, recovering from, or at risk of, family violence is at the heart of everything we do. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving, and respected. We recognise the gendered nature of violence in our society, and the multiple intersecting forms of power and oppression which can compound the impacts of violence and limit people's access to services, support, and safety. We work closely and collaboratively with other organisations and support the leadership of victim survivors to amplify their voices and create change.

We provide specialist expertise across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery approaches and the inter-connections between them. Our work is focused on developing and advancing specialist practice for responding to victim survivors; building the capability of specialist family violence services and allied workforces, organisations and sectors that come into contact with victim survivors; building the capabilities of workforces focused on primary prevention; and leading and contributing to the translation of evidence and research, practice expertise, and lived experience into safe and effective policy, system design and law reform.

We develop family violence practice and support workforces to ensure that victim survivors are safe, their rights are upheld, and their needs are met. The prevalence and impact of family and gender-based violence will be reduced because we are building a strong and effective workforce responding to victim survivors that can meet the needs of the community we serve, while also having a growing and impactful workforce working to prevent violence.

We work to strengthen and connect organisations, sectors, and systems to achieve safe and just outcomes for victim survivors, irrespective of entry point, jurisdiction and individual circumstances. Joining efforts across prevention, response, and recovery, we work to ensure the family violence system is informed and supported by a well-resourced and sustainable specialist sector. Our contributions to primary prevention workforces, initiatives and alliances contribute to social change for a safer and more respectful community.

We are building momentum for social change that drives meaningful action across institutions, settings, and systems for a safer and more equal society. Our workforce and practice development efforts are coupled with a partnership approach that builds community awareness and commitment to change. Our expertise and efforts enable citizens across the community to recognise and respond to family and gendered violence, hold perpetrators to account, and support the ongoing recovery and empowerment of victim survivors.

We are a strong peak organisation providing sustainable and influential leadership to achieve our vision. The work we do and the way we work are integrated and align with our values. This is achieved through inclusive culture, and a safe and accessible workplace supported by robust systems and processes.

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Executive Summary

Building on the research and findings in the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*, and with the goal of embedding the lived experience of victim survivors within the peak and the broader specialist family violence service sector, this issues paper seeks to explore and understand the different sources of lived experience and how they can be harnessed and integrated into our work.

The specialist family violence sector is broadly underpinned by an intersectional feminist framework. In the context of embedding lived experience, it is essential to understand the significance and importance of engaging multiple forms of knowledge: **the diversity of lived experience**. This paper explores three different but equally valuable and reinforcing ways that lived experience can be embedded within the specialist family violence sector.

Lived experience in the workforce refers to individuals who work in the sector as practitioners, leaders, advisors, researchers, administrators, and in many other roles. This lived experience is the backbone of family violence specialisation, with its origins in the personal experiences of women who were instrumental in establishing the first refuges and support services for women and children. However, as the sector has become more professionalised, lived experience in the workforce has become less visible. It is important to acknowledge that while lived experience in the workforce is not essential, it should be recognised and viewed as valuable, meaningful and a strength of the sector.

The **lived experience of clients**, also known as client voice, is integral to the growth and strengthening of service delivery. Specialist family violence services are wholly accountable to the clients they support. Client knowledge and experience is a valuable asset for services to learn from and helps paint a collective picture of many different experiences and journeys through the system.

The third source of lived experience this paper explores is the **lived experience of survivor advocates** – those who apply lived experience to formal activities to influence policy development, service planning and practice, and contribute to broader systems reform, social change and community awareness. Despite issues around resourcing and sustainability, engaging survivor advocates in projects of any scope and size can have significant and invaluable impact and can contribute to the identification of systemic gaps and service improvements.

None of these sources can exist as representative of all lived experience – nor are any more valuable than any other. There exist multiple ways for the lived experiences and expertise of victim survivors of family violence to be embedded and drive the work of the sector. This paper encourages an understanding that all sources of lived experience are necessary to ensure responses to family violence are effective, inclusive, and safe.

In considering the progression of this work, we must acknowledge and understand that differing levels of access to power mean that different sources of lived experience are not representative of each other. Utilising a ‘power with’ approach, as well as co-production with clients and survivor advocates, provides a way to distribute power more evenly and provides those with lived experience more opportunities to lead and contribute to decision making.

Introduction

Safe and Equal has a role in leading efforts to embed the voices of victim survivors in all parts of the family violence system. This paper seeks to build on the findings of the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* research to define and explore different sources of lived experience which inform the work of the family violence sector.

This paper is informed by:

- The findings from the Experts by Experience Framework research
- A review of literature and resources
- Informal conversations and formal consultations with survivor advocates, including the Expert Advisory Panel
- Workshops, consultation, and a survey of Safe and Equal staff¹
- Consultation with the specialist family violence leadership group.

This paper captures thinking at a point in time. As the work to embed the voice of lived experience in the family violence sector progresses, so too will our understandings.

Background and context

Lived experience as a concept and practice has been in circulation for decades, and over the years has taken many different forms and definitions.^{2 3} Historically excluded groups, in particular First Nations communities, have been drawing from their lived experience as a source of knowledge, survival and resistance long before the concept was applied by the community sector.⁴ Community sectors have approached lived experience participation differently, with differing levels of intensity and different definitions.^{5 6}

¹ Safe and Equal Internal Report - Embedding the Voice of Lived Experience in the Peak Body: Organisational readiness and culture 2021

² Loeffler E, & Bovaird, T. (2016). User and Community Co-Production of Public Services: What Does the Evidence Tell us? *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39, 1006–1019.

³ Werner-Seidler, A., & Shaw, F. (2019). The Social and Emotional Impact of Involving Individuals with Mental Illness in the Research Process. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(11), 1634–1640.

⁴ Cataldo M (2021). Working with Lived Experience Workshop Series

⁵ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

⁶ Lamb K, Hegarty K, Amanda, Cina, Fiona, and the University of Melbourne WEAVERs lived experience group, Parker R. (2020) The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Domestic Violence Victoria. Melbourne, Australia. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/family-violence-experts-by-experience-framework/>

The term *lived experience* refers to the experience of people on whom a social justice issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact. The term *lived expertise* can be understood as the knowledge, insights, understanding and wisdom gathered through lived experience.⁷ For the purposes of this paper, these terms are used to describe a lived experience of family violence.⁸ Safe and Equal recognises that lived experiences are intersectional and people will bring different insights gained through experiences of overlapping systems of discrimination and oppressions. Lived experiences of patriarchal violence are compounded by colonisation, racism and white supremacy, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, among others.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the *lived experience* of family violence⁹ must be foregrounded in the historical and continuing context of white colonisation and the resulting impacts of displacement from Country, cultural dispossession, systemic racism, and state-sanctioned disruption of community kinship systems. Despite the ongoing impacts of colonisation, Aboriginal communities are strong in culture and Country, and have the solutions to shape self-determined futures.¹⁰

The *Victorian Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors* recognises the inclusion of lived experience as a fundamental element that underpins all work undertaken by the specialist family violence sector; a critical component of the specialist family violence praxis; and a key indicator for quality governance and leadership.¹¹

There is increasing expectation from government and other authorities that client experience is reflected in the design, delivery and evaluation of services to ensure quality service provision

⁷ Baljeet Sandhu (2017). The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change. The Lived Experience Report. <https://thelivedexperience.org/>

⁸ Family is a term that has different meaning and understanding for different communities. Family can include extended families, kinship networks, intergenerational relationships, chosen family, family-like or carer relationships.

⁹ *The Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force* defined family violence against Aboriginal people as an issue focused on a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. This definition acknowledges the spiritual and cultural perpetration of family violence by non-Aboriginal people against Aboriginal partners, children, young people and extended family members, abuse of Elders, and lateral violence within Aboriginal communities.

¹⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission 2020. Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report ISBN 978-1-925917-22-2 (Online) <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani>

¹¹ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/specialist-family-violence-services/the-code-of-practice/>

and governance.¹² ¹³ One of the key messages from the Royal Commission into Family Violence was the need to embed the lived experiences of victim survivors in all aspects of the family violence system and responses to family violence.¹⁴ Subsequent reporting by the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor has found that the government's approach to embedding lived experience has focused on the establishment of the Victim Survivor Advisory Council (VSAC),¹⁵ and that more needs to be done to increase engagement with diverse voices and to increase engagement with lived experience across the whole family violence system.¹⁶

In 2019 - 2020, The University of Melbourne and the WEAVERs (Women and their children who have Experienced Abuse and Violence: Researchers and advisors) developed the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* to support best practice engagement with survivor advocates within the specialist family violence sector. This work was commissioned by Safe and Equal (formerly Domestic Violence Victoria), with funding from a coalition of philanthropic funders through the Family Violence Philanthropy Collaboration Project.

The *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* identified that the role of lived experience in the sector is not consistently understood or valued, and that practitioners with lived experience can be reluctant to disclose this in a professional context for fear of negative consequences.¹⁷ The research recommended further exploration of how to harness the strengths and insights of the family violence workforce's lived experience.

Safe and Equal is now working to embed the lived experienced of victim survivors within the peak and the specialist family violence service sector more broadly. This includes exploring the different forms of lived experience that exist in the sector and progressing discussions about how these come together to generate knowledge, evidence and practice.

¹² Department of Health and Human Services (2019). Client voice framework for community services. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/client-voice-framework-community-services>

¹³ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020).

¹⁴ Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016). Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol IV, Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

¹⁵ Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2019), Report of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor 2019, Melbourne, Vic: Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor.

¹⁶ Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2018), Report of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor 2018, Melbourne, Vic: Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor.

¹⁷ Lamb K, Hegarty K, Amanda, Cina, Fiona, and the University of Melbourne WEAVERs lived experience group, Parker R. (2020) The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Domestic Violence Victoria. Melbourne, Australia. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/family-violence-experts-by-experience-framework/>

The diversity of lived experience

The specialist family violence sector works from an intersectional feminist framework¹⁸; not only to address individual experiences of violence but also to collectively transform the social context that makes violence possible in the first place. This is achieved through primary prevention strategies, systemic advocacy, political reform, and social change campaigning. To be effective, prevention of and responses to family violence need to be informed by multiple forms of knowledge – that is, empirical evidence, lived experience and practice expertise - all of which are mutually beneficial and none more valuable, meaningful or relevant than the others.¹⁹

Just as there are multiple ways to embed evidence in our work, or gain practice wisdom and experience, there are many ways that lived experience of family violence and of the service system can be harnessed and embedded into the work of the sector.

Lived experience in the workforce

People with lived experiences of family violence bring their experience with them to this work every day: as practitioners, leaders, advisors, researchers, administrators, and in many other roles. Their lived experience, whether historical or current, informs and influences their knowledge and practice in both explicit and implicit ways.

In Australia, like other parts of the world, family violence specialisation grew out of the feminist movement, with a focus on women's liberation from violence and control within patriarchal power structures. The sector is the result of grassroots efforts by women's liberationists, many of whom had a personal experience of family violence and were instrumental in establishing the first refuges and support services for women and children.²⁰

Over time, the specialist family violence sector has professionalised from grassroots responses to a coordinated service system, with formal education and minimum qualification standards. The sector has proudly honed and retained the skills and expertise that makes family violence specialisation so unique and important. However, through this process of professionalisation, lived experience in the workforce has become less visible.

While lived experience is not a defining feature, it remains common amongst this qualified and professional workforce. As lived experience is not critical or required to equip a professional

¹⁸ Intersectionality keeps power dynamics at the centre of practice by acknowledging that power is not distributed equally, including between clients, survivor advocates, professionals and services. While this framework broadly underpins the specialist family violence sector, it is important to note that terms such as 'intersectionality' do not necessarily resonate with all communities.

¹⁹ Specialist family violence praxis is a way to conceptualise how we integrate different forms of expertise into our work, while resisting hierarchy of expertise (some views or experiences being given more weight or importance than others). This praxis is multi-directional. Evidence, experience and practice continually inform each other.

²⁰ Theobald, J., Murray, S. & Smart, J. (2017). *From Margins to Mainstream: The Domestic Violence Services Movement in Victoria, Australia, 1974-2016*. Melbourne, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing Ltd

to work in family violence, the fact that it exists within the sector is acknowledged and discussed inconsistently. For some working in the sector, there is even a sense that lived experience is devalued or stigmatised.²¹ Professionals with lived experience make informed decisions about where, when and how much of their experience is safe to share, balancing bringing their whole self to work and not sharing ‘too much’ for fear it may be interpreted as ‘unprofessional’. There is an opportunity to shift this to more explicitly acknowledge that while lived experience is not essential to working in family violence, it does exist within the specialist workforce and is a strength of the sector.

Broad and explicit recognition signals that lived experience in our workforce is valued and meaningful. This recognition can begin to build a workplace culture that is welcoming of professionals who are also victim survivors, without requiring individuals to disclose their experience if they do not wish to. This is part of resisting individualising the issue of family violence and shifting to collective understandings and action, while also fostering a space and an authorising environment for more explicit or visible engagement with different sources of lived experience – such as that of clients and survivor advocates. Recognition of workforce lived experience needs to be reinforced by appropriate infrastructure and industrial conditions to support the safety and wellbeing of the workforce, including staff with lived experience. Systems and structures must be put in place, including accessible recruitment and induction processes, appropriate supervision structures, and supports including Family Violence Leave and an Employee Assistance Provider equipped to provide family violence counselling.

Lived experience of clients

The lived experience of clients, often described as client voice,²² provides rich information about the efficacy of service provision and is important for services to consider and learn from.²³ Engaging with client voice includes any contact with a worker, through risk assessment and safety planning, case planning discussions and records, as well as submitting complaints and providing feedback in direct service delivery. It also extends to organisational and systemic engagement through client contributions to monitoring and evaluation, quality audits, service reviews or policy consultations, and co-design activities to inform quality improvement, service improvement and system design.²⁴

The governance processes and leadership of specialist family violence services must be accountable to clients. This is part of the ongoing development of specialist family violence

²¹ Lamb K, Hegarty K, Amanda, Cina, Fiona, and the University of Melbourne WEAVERs lived experience group, Parker R. (2020) The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Domestic Violence Victoria. Melbourne, Australia. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/family-violence-experts-by-experience-framework/>

²² Client voice describes the essential input into any activity that asks for and records the views of clients.

²³ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/specialist-family-violence-services/the-code-of-practice/>

²⁴ Department of Health and Human Services (2019). Client voice framework for community services. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. <<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/client-voice-framework-community-services>>

practice, which must always be informed by victim survivors' own voices, lived experiences, knowledge and expertise.²⁵

Utilising client lived experience means specialist family violence services and practitioners can paint a collective picture of the many different experiences of and journeys through the system, including giving voice to the experiences of victim survivors who are not engaged further as survivor advocates.

Lived experience of survivor advocates

The expertise of survivor advocates is another form of lived experience which informs, influences and advances the work of the sector. Survivor advocates are people with lived experience of family violence who are engaged in formal activities to influence policy development, service planning and practice, and contribute to broader systems reform, social change and community awareness. This can extend to people who have experienced the grief and loss of losing a family member or friend to family violence and wish to advocate for change. The term 'survivor advocate' is commonly used within the family violence sector²⁶ and in the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*.

Importantly, survivor advocates can provide input not only through responding to proposed plans or approaches, but also through leading and imagining different and innovative prevention and practice approaches. Survivor advocates are collaborators of the specialist sector in our efforts to hold the broader system to account, as well as contributing to identifying gaps and service improvements within our family violence services.

Survivor advocates that are advocating from within or on behalf of an organisation are both advocating alongside and against a system. This can present a tension with survivor advocates balancing relationships, influence and speaking their truth. Through the course of their work and advocacy, it is common for survivor advocates to receive disclosures from others. This can be difficult to hold, and family violence services have a responsibility to ensure advocates are provided with adequate support and debriefing. To date, there have been some outstanding initiatives within the sector to support and amplify survivor advocacy through formal mechanisms, though resourcing and sustainability continues to be a prevailing issue. Initiatives have included media advocacy programs, victim survivor advisory groups, project

²⁵ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/specialist-family-violence-services/the-code-of-practice/>

²⁶ Contemporary dialogue about survivor advocacy often assumes the concept has broad application across all parts of our community, which can stand at odds with the principles of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination. The right of Aboriginal people to self-determination is paramount. This is recognised in multiple international and domestic human rights instruments, as well as the Safe and Equal Code of Practice, and importantly *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families* (Dhelk Dja), Victoria's Aboriginal 10-Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028.²⁶

reference groups, policy consultation and engagement as consultants, among other approaches.²⁷

Survivor advocates, both as individuals and collectives, also organise and undertake advocacy activities independent of any single organisation or sector, through strategically leveraging networks, news media, social media, and coalition building.

There is no single way for specialist family violence services to enable or engage with survivor advocacy. The most appropriate approach will depend on the type of activity in focus, and level of participation and resourcing available. Engaging advocates in even seemingly small projects can have invaluable impact and be aligned to best practice principles of the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*.

Key considerations for progressing this work

Each source of lived experience is distinct and comes with a different position on issues and level of access to social power. Social power can be understood as being attributed through structural or physical characteristics, from which societal systems assign meaning in a way that privileges people with certain identities or experiences at the expense or oppression of another social group. This could include formal education, socioeconomic class background, current economic situation, level of employment or hierarchy within an organisational structure; it can be gender, sex, sexual orientation, height, weight, and skin colour. Social power is contextual, that is, it can change depending on the environment and relies on external hierarchies. Conversely, personal power is internal and developed through an awareness of self and is independent from societal culture.

Someone speaking at the table as a client holds a different subject position to that of a survivor advocate or service provider. Similarly, a survivor advocate holds a different subject position to a service provider. For this reason, we must not conflate different sources of lived experience as representative of each other. We must also acknowledge and recognise that an individual's lived experience can exist across these sources – for example, a person may currently be accessing support through a family violence service, whilst also working in the sector, and/or advocating.

It is important to identify and address power imbalances. Unexamined power dynamics can uphold structural hierarchies and marginalisation, undermine rights and safety, and reproduce control over victim survivors' lives in a way that can be similar to family violence. Equally, power can be positive and transformative. Utilising the intersectional feminist approach of 'power with' can meaningfully support people with lived experience to experience their own empowerment and uphold dignity and control over their lives.

As we work to embed lived experience more explicitly within the family violence system, some sector representatives have raised concerns about creating or reinforcing a hierarchy of

²⁷ Lamb K, Hegarty K, Amanda, Cina, Fiona, and the University of Melbourne WEAVERs lived experience group, Parker R. (2020) *The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Domestic Violence Victoria*. Melbourne, Australia. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/family-violence-experts-by-experience-framework/>

expertise – where some forms of knowledge are seen as more important or valuable than others. This suggests that lived experience, evidence and practice expertise are necessarily discrete or mutually exclusive forms of knowledge, and that empowering one must come at the expense of another.

However, the concept of ‘power with’ can be applied in this context to meaningfully embed all forms of lived experience in all parts of the system. Co-production²⁸ is a way to distribute power more evenly, giving those with historically less power - in this case clients and survivor advocates - more opportunity to lead and contribute to decision making. This requires a commitment to coming to the work without preconceived ideas, assumptions or solutions. Instead, we need to remain open to radically listen, which requires a suspension of judgement, curiosity to understand, and a willingness to act and truly centre lived expertise.²⁹

Additionally, there is a need to build pathways for people with lived experience of family violence and the services system to access paid opportunities in the sector. The family violence sector is experiencing strain and stress with increasing demand and complexity, and without adequate resourcing this is impacting on workforce retention. There is an opportunity to attract and retain a skilled workforce that is representative of the community through removing barriers for people with lived experience. There is also a need to foster intentional and supported pathways for victim survivors to step from contributing to client voice into advocacy and the workforce, noting that this is not necessarily a linear pathway.

Conclusion

There exist multiple ways for the lived experiences and expertise of victim survivors of family violence to be embedded and drive the work of the sector. Each source, whether through the workforce, client voice, or survivor advocacy, is mutually beneficial, reinforcing, and valuable. No source undermines or overrides the others. No source is sufficient to meet our broader objectives of ensuring responses to family violence are effective, inclusive, and safe; and ultimately ending family violence, on its own. A combination of all sources of lived experience is necessary. The sector now has a role in applying this approach and beginning to demonstrate how to meaningfully integrate lived expertise, empirical evidence and practice expertise into our practice, policy, and advocacy.

As a sector, we have an opportunity to acknowledge and articulate the lived experience which exists within the workforce, while also strengthening the formal pathways for embedding client voices and increasing best practice engagement with survivor advocates in the work. These are interrelated sources of lived experience, and one cannot succeed without the other.

²⁸ The Family Violence Experts by Experience framework defines co-production as mechanisms which allow services and those with lived experience of the service, system or a form of marginalisation to come together to design policies and services that achieve better outcomes. Co-production is an attempt to re-write the power dynamics of conventional service provision, in which the state designs interventions on behalf of service users without acknowledging the autonomy, rights and choice of that individual.

²⁹ Geraldine Bilston (2022) History and Incorporation of Lived Experience Explainer Video. Available <https://geraldinebilston.com/lived-experience-in-the-family-violence-sector/>