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"Next time you'll know what we're about": Follow-up focus groups with survivors of gender-based violence

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Abstract

Focus groups are a common research method for engaging with survivors of gender-based violence. In a project exploring women's experiences of victim blame from professionals and agencies, follow-up focus groups were held with the same participants and at their request, to allow more time and space to discuss the topic. The women who took part said that meeting again helped them to feel more comfortable with the research focus and process, with the researcher, and with each other. It also led to more in-depth and comprehensive findings that would have been captured by traditional one-off groups. This paper discusses the logistics of this adaptation to the qualitative method and the benefits to the scope of research findings and the experience of participants.

Keywords: focus groups: qualitative methods; gender-based violence; survivors; victim blame.

Introduction

Focus groups are often used in research to explore the lived experiences of those affected by social issues such as gender-based violence (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Liamputtong, 2015). It is a method which can be applied to more 'vulnerable' participants, such as young people, and with 'sensitive' topics, such as sexual health or violence (see Pösö et al, 2008; Sheriff et al, 2014)[1]. However, as with all methods, researchers need to consider the potential impacts of focus groups on those who are taking part, especially when engaging with participants who have been harmed by sexual abuse or domestic violence. While sharing experiences of violence in a research context can be a positive experience for survivors, this is dependent on *how* the research is conducted and the considerations that are in place (Campbell et al, 2010).

This paper discusses an organic adaptation to the traditional focus group format which was developed in a project exploring women's experiences of victim blame (Author, 2022). At the request of the women who took part, I ran follow-up focus groups with the same participants and this design resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of victim blame than would have been obtained through one-off group meetings. It was also described as a positive and supportive experience by those who took part. This paper considers how flexible methodologies can create more comfortable research environments for participants, especially survivors, and provide space to challenge traditional framings and assumed 'truths' around gender-based violence.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold; first, it explores focus groups as a feminist research method and describes the practicalities of running groups with survivors of men's violence. Secondly, it presents an organic adaptation to the traditional focus

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[1] For a detailed discussion on the complications of viewing certain participants or topics as vulnerable or sensitive, see Liamputtong, 2007.

group method – follow-up groups – and discusses the benefits of this design for research and for the women who took part.

Focus groups as feminist research method

While typically associated with market research and advertising, focus groups are a flexible and adaptive method (Chiu, 2003) which can be used to research social issues, structural inequalities, and the experiences of marginalised communities (e.g., Kitzinger, 1994; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Liamputtong, 2015). Focus groups can facilitate in-depth exploration of topics through shared, subjective meaning-making between participants and researchers (Wilkinson, 1998; Sherriff et al, 2014; Westmarland & Bows, 2018), whilst allowing space to consider the social contexts of people's experiences. As Jenny Kitzinger states:

> "We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Our personal behaviour is not cut off from public discourses and our actions do not happen in a cultural vacuum" (1994, p.117).

Researchers argue that focus groups can be amplifying spaces for those who do not usually have a voice, such as people from minoritised or under-represented groups (Sprague, 2005; Wilkinson, 1999; Mishra et al, 2023) or who have experienced violence, injury, or ill-health (Kitzinger, 1994; Chiu, 2003; Liamputtong, 2015). Arguably, by their design focus groups have the potential to be supportive spaces where previously unspoken experiences can be voiced and acknowledged by others (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999; Moran et al, 2003; Liamputtong, 2007; Pösö, Honkatukia & Nyqvist, 2008). This method may also redress the power imbalances inherent in typical 'malestream' scientific enquiry (Aitken & Burman, 1999). As with other qualitative methods, focus groups can be compassionate, containing spaces for participants to share their thoughts and experiences in ways which they choose, making them a particularly appropriate method for research with survivors of sexual or domestic violence (Campbell, 2002).

While it is important not to overstate the benefits of taking part in research (Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1994), focus groups can provide a space for shared meaning and connection among participants (Farquhar & Das, 1999). As crimes such as sexual violence can "sever the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity" (Brison, 2002, p.40), such spaces may be especially valuable for survivors and can help to challenge shame, self-blame, and isolation (Mishra et al, 2023). It seems that these benefits extend to focus groups held online (Mishra et al, 2023), which may have the additional value of being more accessible for participants from geographically isolated communities or for whom privacy is a crucial consideration (Reisner et al, 2017; Roald, Schruijer & Neergård, 2024).

However, there are some criticisms of focus groups as a research method. The reduced anonymity in a group setting can complicate disclosure and put off participants from engaging (Smithson, 2008; Westmarland & Bows, 2018), especially those who may feel more 'visible' due to their experiences or identities (Sprague, 2005). There are still issues of power as researchers have full control over the research direction, method, and 'ownership' of the collected data (Gillies & Alldred, 2002). If participants feel *too* comfortable in a group setting, they may forget they are taking part in research and share more than they would otherwise (Finch, 1993; Maynard 1994), while dynamics within groups where participants already know each other may make it harder to discuss certain topics, such as gender-based violence (Pösö et al, 2008). While it is important to consider the potential impacts of speaking about personal or 'sensitive' issues, such as violence or trauma, others have argued that these concerns are not reflected in survivors' experiences of engaging in research (e.g., Campbell et al, 2010); instead, researchers may be disempowering rather than protecting participants through these concerns (Liamputtong, 2007). As with any research method, it is the application which determines the impact and experience for participants more than the method itself (Kelly, Regan & Burton, 1992).

One way to minimise power imbalances is by sharing control over the research with participants (Farquhar & Das, 1999; Pain, Whitman & Milledge, 2019). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a more emancipatory form of enquiry which can mitigate some of the issues with traditional methods by increasing participant autonomy (Park, 2006; Lykes & Hershberg, 2012) and has been championed as a more ethical approach for researching social inequalities and gender-based violence (e.g., Sullivan et al, 2005; Houghton, 2017; Johnson & Flynn, 2021; Cornish et al, 2024). Yet whilst admirable in its intentions and outcomes, early career researchers and PhD-level students are unlikely to have the resources, time, or experience to embark on a fully participatory approach. It can be a daunting detour for those with a background in the positivist methodologies typically taught at undergraduate or Masters' level.

With these arguments in mind, it is possible to adapt traditional methods in ways which can improve participants' experience and the quality of research, without fully committing to a PAR approach. The project described in this paper goes some way to address the potential issues with focus groups by offering participants more influence over the research design and outcomes.

Women's experiences of victim blame

The current project used focus groups to explore women's experiences of victim blame from agencies and professionals (Author, 2022; 2025b). Despite an extensive knowledge base on the phenomenon of victim blame, spanning over a century (Goldman, 1910; Madigan & Gamble, 1991; Taylor, 2020), attempts to tackle this damaging social process have been unsuccessful. Victims and survivors[2] are still blamed more than perpetrators or the systems which enable men's violence against women and girls (e.g., Wild, 2023; Velasco & Sanmartín, 2025). This persistence may be partly due to the dominance of cognitive theories as explanations for victim blaming, which focus on the attitudes and biases of individuals such as the oft-cited Just World Belief (Lerner, 1980) or Defensive Attribution theories (Shaver, 1970). These individualistic framings overlook the socio-cultural contexts of victim blame and other derogatory attitudes towards survivors, such as rape myths and rape

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[2] This study uses both 'victim' and 'survivor' to account for the complexities of either term when referring to individuals who are subjected to and impacted by gender-based violence. Whilst men are also victims and women can be perpetrators, the deeply gendered nature of this issue is acknowledged here through the focus on women's experiences of violence and victim blame.

culture (e.g., Burt, 1991; Rentschler, 2014; Fanghanel, 2020; Anderson & Overby, 2021), as well as the structural inequalities which underpin these societal responses, such as sexism, misogyny, and racism (Thiara, Roy & Ng, 2015; Manne, 2018; Savigny, 2020). As these cognitive theories dominate discourses around victim blame, they are the basis of prevention strategies, campaigns, and education initiatives, which have been mostly ineffectual in improving the ways that society responds to victims and survivors (e.g., Kelly, 2010; Burrowes, 2013; Taylor, 2020). Changing beliefs and attitudes is a difficult undertaking and such interventions are rarely effective when the social context remains unacknowledged and unaltered (Eigenberg & Garland, 2008; Pinto & Bright, 2016; Eberhardt, 2019).

The focus of this project was to establish a more comprehensive understanding of victim blame, especially the experiences of survivors who feel blamed by professionals and agencies. I chose focus groups as the research method due to the benefits previously discussed; while I was keen to commit to the principles of PAR, my lack of research experience, time, and other required resources made it impossible to fully engage with this approach. Therefore, I opted for qualitative methods, specifically focus groups, in hopes that this approach would "fully understand women's experience and theorise these experiences with a view towards social change" (Westmarland, 2001, p.5). The practicalities and benefits of this method and its adaptation are discussed here[3], as well as women's experiences of engaging with this design.

Setting up the groups

I held focus groups through agencies which support survivors – local Rape Crisis centres (RCCs) – rather than in independent community spaces for two reasons: to improve access for participants and to ensure support was available for those who took part. In Sara Scott's research with survivors of abuse, she emphasises the importance of recruiting participants who are "well supported and coping with life" (1998, 5.3) and one way to do this is to reach out to people already connected with services and support networks. While I considered several potential host agencies, including NHS services[4], collaborating with RCCs was the easiest option. I hoped that holding groups at familiar, accessible locations would make it easier for women to engage (Farquhar & Das, 1999) and these agencies were able to provide support for childcare and travel costs, which I was unable to fund.

To arrange the groups, I contacted all the RCCs listed on the national Rape Crisis England and Wales website[5] with project information and an invitation to participate. Six months later, I contacted again the RCCs which had not responded. Several centres declined to participate for various reasons: staff shortages; staff and/or service users not interested in the topic; already running research groups; not wanting to overburden service users; imminent closure of the service. Of the 55

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[3] I have detailed the process of arranging and running focus groups as such specific guidance would have been invaluable during my PhD research.

[4] I had hoped that running groups through NHS services would provide a direct comparison between women's experiences of statutory and feminist agencies, but the arduous and protracted nature of the NHS research ethical approval process ultimately prevented this option.

[5] At the time of the research, there were 55 listed centres at https://rapecrisis.org.uk/find-a-centre/. At time of writing, there are 37.

centres contacted, five opted to take part in the research and to protect the anonymity of participants, I have not specified the locations of these centres. Once confirmed, I arranged dates and times for the groups which best suited the availability of staff and service-users.

I ran ten focus groups in total: six initial groups, three follow-up groups, and one feedback group (this final group was held online). I also held an online interview with a woman who wanted to update me on her experiences with the criminal justice system. 36 women participated in total and the number of women per group ranged from ten to two. Even though between four and eight participants are recommended for a group discussion (Kitzinger, 1995), I asked the women in the group of two if they still wanted to meet (as we had expected others to join us), which they did. They also met with me again in a follow-up group.

<u>The women who took part</u>

While I wanted the research to be as inclusive as possible, I set the following criteria to prioritise the wellbeing of those who took part: participants were women; were 18 years or older; had experienced some form of sexual violence; were currently receiving support from Rape Crisis; were interested in exploring their interactions with agencies within a group discussion; were not at significant risk of suicide, self-harm, or violence from others. I initially considered setting the age range from 14 years to explore the experiences of younger women, but ethical stipulations meant that only adult women could be included in the project. It was left to the RCCs to interpret ‘women’, ‘sexual violence’, and ‘support’ and therefore decide who would be invited to take part; whilst relying on gatekeepers was far from ideal, Rape Crisis staff knew the women using their services and were best positioned to protect their wellbeing and to pass on project information.

At the start of each group, I went through consent forms and asked for demographic information. Not all participants chose to share this information but those who did present the following picture:

- The women were aged between 22 and 71 years. Most women were aged between 40 and 60 years.
- Eight women said they had a disability, 12 said they did not.
- They were a mix of full- and part-time employed, unemployed, home makers, and retirees. Three women described themselves as carers and one as an artist.
- 10 women said they were heterosexual or straight, one was queer, one was ‘mostly queer’, and one was bisexual. One participant described her sexuality as ‘none’ and another as ‘WOMAN!’.
- The largest ethnic group (16) was white British. Other women identified as white Italian, white Irish, Pakistani British, and South Korean. Seven participants were part of an existing group for women from a South Asian community, which was not specified to protect the location and identity of the group members.

As not all the women shared information about these aspects of their identities, it is hard to complete a full intersectional analysis of those who took part. The breakdown of women’s ethnicities shows that the study was not representative of the general population of the UK: for example, no Black women are included in this data set, although one woman spoke in the groups about her experiences as a Black woman, but she did not complete a demographics form.

Running the groups

As survivors of men's violence often feel that their sense of control has been limited or taken away, the potential tensions between structure and space (Westmarland & Bows, 2018) were a key consideration. I used a loosely structured question schedule to initiate discussions and explore the commonalities and differences of women's experiences of engaging with agencies, whilst hoping to extend conversations beyond what was already known; closed questions might have limited the scope of what was shared or may have felt too confronting. After introductions and small talk to 'warm up', I asked an opening question: 'which agencies have you had contact with and what was it like?'. In each group, this was enough to start conversation, and I only had to guide discussions with short prompts to explore points more fully ('could you elaborate on that?') or offer opportunities for less assertive members to engage ('has anyone else had contact with the police?'). I ended each group with a request for feedback on what it was like to participate and their hopes for the research, as a way of moving conversations towards a more present-focused, optimistic topic (as recommended by Kelly, 1988). This approach allowed both the containment of structure and the flexibility of space to explore the 'what' and 'how' of women's experiences.

At all points of contact with participants, I explicitly stated that there was no expectation to speak about experiences of violence. I hoped that this would feel containing and minimise the likelihood that women would find the process distressing or traumatising, as well as to clarify the project's focus. After each group, I stayed at the RCCs to help clear up and offer debriefing space for anyone who wished to speak one-to-one; a couple of women took up this offer to talk privately or 'off the record'.

Role of researcher

Several researchers have spoken about the complexities of holding dual roles (e.g., as support worker and researcher) and how this may amplify power imbalances or complicate the meaning of informed consent (e.g., Finch, 1993; Scott, 1998; Coy, 2006). I considered my positioning as a therapist and researcher (specifically a PhD student) and while I chose to be transparent about my work in psychotherapy, I did not overly emphasise this point and I made it clear that I did not work for Rape Crisis, as I did not want to blur the boundaries between a focus group and a therapeutic group. I decided not to start the groups with the typical discussion around housekeeping 'rules' (e.g., turning phones off, not talking over each other), as this might have felt too much like support groups or other therapeutic spaces and may have muddied the intention of the meeting for the participants.

Follow-up focus groups

I planned for the focus groups to run for between an hour and ninety minutes, to allow space to speak to the topic without overburdening women. In the first group, the women spoke for over two hours and still had more to share as we wrapped up. One participant, Sue[6], suggested that we meet again:

> I'm happy to moan at you! And the further you get through your research, the more you'll think, 'oh, I need some information about that data…' It would probably be worth arranging to come back (Sue).

Other women in the group agreed with Sue's suggestion and a comment from Ginny made me reflect on the traditional design of focus groups.

> We will feel easier with you next time because we've been in this meeting today, so if we see you again, we'll know what you're about. And next time, you'll know what we're about (Ginny).

Three months later, I ran a second focus group at this RCC with many of the same women and a couple of others who had been encouraged to come along. This was another two-hour discussion, which built on the previously shared interactions with agencies and generated a deeper exploration of victim blame.

After this experience, I offered to meet again with the subsequent focus groups. I held follow-up groups at three RCCs and planned to return to two more, but these meetings were cancelled for several reasons: lack of centre funding and work commitments, a court hearing, and ill-health for participants. One woman asked to meet for an online interview as she wished to share her experiences of the criminal court process which had taken place after the group had met.

While other projects have used focus groups as a follow-up point of contact with participants (e.g. following surveys or interviews), there are few examples of researchers running return groups with the same participants. One such project is a study with women in rural communities in Australia, where follow-up focus groups were used to deepen participation engagement (Pini, 2002). In their exploration of police interview transcription processes, Haworth et al (2023) used return focus groups to invite feedback on their findings from participants. Similarly, Frisina's research (2006) with young people in Italy used what she terms 'back-talk focus groups', as a chance to discuss findings with participants and allow them greater influence over the research. While this adaptation to the method emerged during the current project rather than having been determined from the outset, it is surprising that other researchers have not used this design, considering the benefits noted by Pini (2002), Haworth et al (2023), and Frisina (2006) and those which are discussed below.

In addition to providing more space for women to share their experiences and thoughts on the research process, these follow-up groups allowed me to 'sense-check' my early findings. In these return groups, I shared an overview of my initial themes and asked the women what they thought; in most cases, they agreed with my early findings. This also springboarded conversations into exploring *why* women felt they were badly treated by professionals and agencies, in terms of structural and

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[6] Some women chose pseudonyms for the research, others wanted to use their real names, and some asked me to choose a name for them.

systemic issues (see Findings and Themes). This was a stark departure from the cognitive theories of individual biases which dominate conceptualisations of victim blame, and without the opportunity to discuss these findings in this follow-up context, these deeper understandings would have been missed.

Online feedback group

A few women gave feedback on the experience of taking part in the research, either during the focus groups or through a brief survey shared with them after. I also offered a specific opportunity for women to share their thoughts on participating as well as on the research findings and what they thought I should do with the findings. I had intended to hold this group inperson, but the Covid-19 pandemic forced me to consider online options. This adaptation was fortuitous as it allowed me to invite women from several RCCs to attend, rather than choosing a single geographical location which would have prevented some from taking part. I held the group via Zoom as RCCs were already using this platform to provide online support during the pandemic. While the nature of online versus inperson contact is likely to have had an impact on the conversation, this was already a distinct group with a unique focus (providing feedback and discussing next steps).

Findings and Themes

I transcribed the focus group recordings by hand to become as familiar as possible with the material and conducted thematic analysis using NVivo 10 software, to identify commonalities and themes in the women's experiences. Considering the limitations of the dominant framings of victim blame, I wanted to be as inductive as possible in my analysis. Four themes were developed from the data:

1. Blame and other negative messages were communicated to women through four aspects of agencies: individual staff; processes and policies; physical spaces and resources; messaging and expectations (Author, 2025a).
2. More than blamed, women felt devalued in other ways: dismissed, silenced, ignored, objectified, medicalised, humiliated, and not believed. They also felt blamed and made responsible for things other than violence, including their need for support, not 'getting better', agency failings, childcare issues, housing or financial difficulties, and men committing further violence against them or others.
3. Women felt that they were treated poorly because of who they were more than what had been done to them. They attributed the negative responses from professionals to their gender, age, class, ethnicity, race, culture, sexuality, neurodivergence and disability, more than to their experiences of sexual or domestic violence.
4. Agencies which created space for women – space for action (Kelly, Sharp & Klein, 2014), spaces to speak (Wilson, 2016), spaces to be and be with (Author, 2022) – communicated respect, value, and dignity to the women and were able to combat some of the negative messages that they received elsewhere.

These themes show that the ways professionals and agencies respond to women survivors are far more complicated than traditional framings of victim blame allow, as the process is about more than victimisation and extends far beyond blame[7]. The discussions which developed in the follow-up groups illustrated the many ways that women were devalued and disrespected by agencies across a range of sectors. They also included professionals that have been overlooked in existing literature such as religious leaders, employers, and community-based organisations. Without an open and flexible methodology which could both expand upon and 'drill down' into women's experiences, and which was not confined to rigid, pre-set definitions of victim blame, violence or agencies, the research may have merely replicated what was already known and thus reinforced simplistic understandings of this process.

More importantly, this adaptation to the research design was experienced as positive and supportive by the women who took part, in several distinct ways.

Women's experiences of follow-up focus groups

The fact that many women returned for a second group suggested they were getting something from the experience, as I had not been able to offer money or other compensations for participation. In the group discussions, the feedback survey, and the online feedback group, women identified several benefits of the adaptive design: space to know the process and the person; space to be heard; space to make meaning: space for connection and community. As one of the key findings was the importance of agencies creating space for survivors (see above), it was interesting that this played out in the research context as well.

1. Space to know the process and the person

Women said that meeting again with the same researcher made it more comfortable and less arduous to attend the focus groups. In each group, women described having to tell their 'story' to many different professionals, which carried an emotional toll as well as creating anxiety that they would not be believed or would be otherwise responded to poorly.

> It is physically draining. You could tell your story to one person but to constantly have to keep repeating the same thing… It massively knocks your confidence (Selena).
>
> It's the *fatigue* you get when you've got to start over each time… That you've got to pour your guts out once more (Beverley).

For some women, they decided to come back to a follow-group because they knew it would be with the same researcher: "if it was somebody else, it would be harder" (Selena). This echoed Ginny's comment about knowing me but also that having me know them and "what we're about", would make it easier for them to speak and to trust that they would be heard and understood in this space.

Several women also said that it had been helpful to know in advance that there was no expectation to talk about violence and to have this confirmed by the initial focus

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[7] For detailed discussion of research findings and the implications for service providers, see Author (2025b).

groups. While some did choose to speak about their experiences of abuse, it was not asked about or focused on but held gently and validated by the groups. For survivors of men's violence, trusting others can be a complicated process (e.g., Brison, 2002); therefore, being able to build familiarity and 'test out' the researcher, process, and group was important for creating an environment that felt safe enough for women to share their experiences. It is unlikely I would have been able to create this space within the contact of a single focus group.

2. <u>Space to be heard</u>

Meeting for a second time gave women the opportunity to follow-up on points they had previously made, share reflections, and recount new experiences or thoughts that had come up. Ellen had made notes on an incident she wanted to share but had forgotten at the first group: "sorry… I've got a lot to say on the subject!". This experience was especially significant as it referred to professionals not mentioned by any other women (paramedics), which further strengthened the commonality of survivors' experiences across services.

Women explicitly said that they felt heard within the research space. As not feeling heard was a common aspect of their negative interactions with professionals, it was doubly important that they felt listened to during (and after) the research, rather than ignored or fobbed off, as was the case elsewhere.

> A big part of it is that you are interested and listening. Rather than writing a prescription then on to the next person (Yoshimi).

For some women, this was the first time they were able to talk about the interactions they had had with police or GPs, counsellors or support workers, and they valued the opportunity to do so.

> It's nice to talk about certain experiences. You don't get to otherwise, do you? (Selena).

Being heard included the opportunity to handover responsibility to someone else. Many women said they felt burdened and 'responsibilised' (Rose, 2000; Brown, 2015) for how they were living their lives, by professionals who were positioned to help them; it felt important that they could 'offload' these difficult interactions to someone else, in a context that could raise awareness and potentially contribute towards positive change.

> I'm glad there's someone to listen to me at least! And I hope it makes a difference to other survivors (Kirstie).
>
> You feel you might just be able to help someone in the future through this, the research that you're doing (Erin).

During a conversation about research findings and outputs, Yoshimi joked 'you know, we're pinning our hopes on you, that you will be able to help'. While this was a little daunting to hear, it did suggest that being part of the group had generated hope for the women, that their experiences could be used to influence change and to help others.

> We'll end up lobbying Parliament and changing the rules! (Erin).

Women also appreciated the opportunity to speak with and be heard by each other, and their comments suggested that this was not a common experience, even within spaces and services specifically set up for survivors of men's violence.

> It's helped me, definitely, so thanks ladies for coming along. And for the talk, especially the stronger stuff. It's hard – nobody gets it until they've been through it (Jess)
> It's been absolutely brilliant. I'm glad I came now (Cecilia).

Considering that survivors often have few 'spaces to speak' with those who have the capacity to understand them (Wilson, 2016), it was heartening to know that the focus groups had created interactions where women could feel heard. In some cases, these connections continued outside the research (see 'space for connection and community').

3. Space for meaning making

Building on previous conversations created more space for women to make sense of their experiences and of men's violence more generally; for Grace, meeting again helped her to "understand more about these things". This opportunity to reflect upon and crystalise perspectives was similarly noted in Barbara Pini's (2002) work with women in rural communities, where return conversations provided opportunities for participants to understand each other, to feel less alone and more empowered to make meaningful changes in their lives.

Follow-up groups allowed for a deeper level of discussion where women negotiated these understandings between themselves and essentially conducted their own data analysis. They discussed what they saw as the reasons *why* they were treated poorly by services - underfunding, understaffing, target-driven rather than service-user centred - but also spoke to wider social issues underpinning negative reactions towards survivors: misogyny, patriarchal structures, gender and racial inequalities. One group spoke about the complicated intersections between abuse, gender, and disability:

> Did you know that more boys are disabled from birth than girls, but more women are disabled than men? Which means at some point in women's lives they become disabled and the only explanation I could find in the research for this is how violence, rape, sexual abuse manifests itself in bodies and minds in different ways, and women end up disabled. We're literally being made disabled. I don't think anyone acknowledges that (Casey).

Others described how their responses to violence were medicalised and pathologised by professionals, as were more general health or hormonal problems. They shared research and books in support of their meaning making (e.g., *The Body*

Keeps the Score) and joined the dots between agency-specific issues, such as lack of funding and resources, to the dominance of medical model frameworks and pharmacological interventions.

> That's the psychiatric route: it's drugs to sedate you, control, take the power away… (Dee)
> Yeah, forget about PTSD. As a woman, never mind trying to get them to diagnose it. They see it as soldiers who've been in frontline combat (Beverley).

Some women described pressure from family or friends to engage romantically or sexually with men, regardless of their wants or preferences. Conversations extended to the wider cultural expectations placed on women and the pervasiveness of heteronormative assumptions, regardless of their experiences of violence.

> With what's happened, I don't want anything to do with men. And a lot of people say, 'but why haven't you got a partner?' I don't want one. I'm not interested. 'But you can meet them in bars and pubs...' But I don't want to! (Cecilia)
> Funny you should say that… I was in this abusive relationship before, then I was on my own for ten years and was just not interested in men whatsoever. I ended up getting in this relationship because of being hassled by a couple of friends… and a year and a half in, this happened *again*. And it's like well, I told everyone I didn't want a man (Erin)
> But don't you think society pressures you in another way? If you're not interested in a bloke, you must be a lesbian… Why can't I just be me? (Yoshimi).

A group of women from the same South Asian community shared their experiences of being dismissed by professionals who treated them poorly due to their gender *and* their ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

> This is something that is exclusive to this community, it's different to the white communities… But here we understand it (Shideh)
> It's just seen as 'something that happens over there' (Clare).

Again, it is unlikely that these wider contextual framings would have been reached within a single ninety-minute group discussion.

Follow-up groups also helped some women to make sense of their individual experiences. A comment from one participant triggered a realisation for another woman: "oh god, that's why I react like that to that!" (Dee). In another group, women gently challenged the blame that one participant had received from a family member: "I don't want to upset you, but what does she know?" (Nancy). Several women discussed a rape myth around the belief that young women often lie about sexual assault to avoid getting in trouble, and other group members respectfully challenged it, leading to an interesting discussion about how such myths are maintained and the impact that this has on survivors.

> There's always that doubt in the back of your mind. Are they going to believe me? Are they going to think I've seen something on telly? (Dani)

Again, the additional space, the familiarity with the process and with each other, may have made it easier for women to negotiate meaning in this way and even disagree with each other on potentially contentious topics.

4. Space for connection and community

Another benefit of focus groups was the chance for women to connect with each other, both as women and as survivors, and meeting again provided an opportunity to strengthen these connections.

> That's why I wanted to do this one, because I really enjoyed it last time (Riley)
> It's nice, in a weird way (Rose)
> It's just nice to meet other women as well, who you might not otherwise speak to in the street (Riley)
> It breaks the isolation (Ellen)
> And when else do you get to sit and talk about stuff like that? (Rose).

In all three follow-up groups, there was evidence of connections forming between the women, as the focus on the 'sameness' of their experiences fostered a sense of kinship; as explained by Ellen, this directly challenged feelings of loneliness and isolation that they otherwise felt. This connection was evident in women's words but also through murmured agreements, nods, and physical contact (putting a hand on another woman's shoulder, touching their heart in solidarity).

> I feel a sense of relief, a sense of relief. I hope it lasts! (Mary)

> It makes you feel like you're not the only one, you see somebody else struggle with it as well. At least I know there is somebody else (Grace).

Women also used the space to reflect on their strengths and ability to overcome challenges, such as speaking in a group, and to cheer each other on.

> I'm really glad I met these ladies. I was dreading having to talk in a group, I didn't think I'd be able to (Yoshimi)
> I didn't think I could do this today (Cecilia)
> Well, you are one of us and we are wonderful women! (Erin)
> Yeah – girl power! (Yoshimi).

Some of these connections continued beyond the research. Women exchanged suggestions for resources, podcasts, and support groups as well as their contact details and invitations to meet up. Some discussed activism activities, such as writing articles, attending events, or setting up groups where none existed. Others gave advice on how to deal with agencies to better get their needs met, such as chasing up police investigations.

> Ring the police with the reference numbers and badger them, badger them all the time. I wasn't going to let it go, I was like, 'I've kept my mouth shut for twenty-eight years, I'm not going to let it go' (Jess).

The concept of community came up in the discussions and the importance of being around others who were kind, safe, and understanding. While this included some compassionate professionals (such as Rape Crisis staff), friends and family, women spoke most passionately about the value of being with other survivors.

> If we felt more connected in our lives generally and had things to look forward to, like, 'ok this is shit but I know that in two days I've got my support group', that would make such a difference (Casey).

> You can just come and listen. The majority of the time we're just sitting around nattering about everyday things. I like arts and crafts, because doing stuff with your hands and concentrating on something else helps (Alice).

> Today, truthfully, it's been good for me. It's because of us, it's because of this place (Selena)
> We all know each other, don't we? Because we're here (Amelia)
> Now this community here is showing that they care. I'd like you to know that this community does care. You can feel it (Beverley).

Again, it was heartening to see that the research space could help women connect with each other, even if just for a few hours, and that in some cases these connections seemed to last for longer.

Victim blame in research

A final point of reflection is the potential for victim blaming within research settings. Several women described taking part in other research projects which had been problematic experiences. Grace said she felt "coerced" into participating as her counsellor was conducting the research. She was also upset by the language used in the recruitment materials, which described a study on the impact of child abuse as 'exciting and fun'; as she explained, "I understand what the researcher is trying to communicate... But how do I combine this with the fact that my father told me that he was assaulting me because it was exciting?" As well as being coercive and insensitive, this experience caused her to lose trust in Rape Crisis, a place that had previously been a safe and supportive space for her.

Three other women had taken part in an NHS research study and felt invalidated, infantalised, and disrespected by the researchers, who seemed more interested in gathering data than treating them as people.

> One of the ladies was talking about her experience. She got upset and they basically told her to stop because she'd taken too long. We sat there trying to support each other, holding hands… When someone has given up their evening to talk about their experiences, to give you relevant information, listen to them. Right? (Riley).

Another woman felt belittled by a researcher who assumed she was not computer literate due to her age, when she was running a thriving online business. While she laughed about it in the group – “I didn’t know there was an age limit on the internet!” (Ellen) – it had been upsetting for her to feel dismissed in this way, when she had given up her time to be part of a research project. This interaction also reinforced her feelings of being seen and treated negatively due to her age and gender.

These negative experiences emphasise the importance of recognising research as another site of engagement between survivors and professionals, agencies, and systems of power. Research is conducted by people and through institutions which are subjected to the same biases, blind spots, and structural restrictions as any other organisation. Researchers can treat participants poorly and may even end up recreating the issues or processes that they are trying to understand and prevent. Therefore, it is crucial that all aspects of research approach and methodology are considered through a trauma-informed lens, especially when engaging with survivors. Prioritising a design which creates supportive spaces and can be flexible, as needed, is one way to mitigate the harms that research can inflict upon survivors. This is not because participants are ‘sensitive’ or ‘vulnerable’ (again, see Liamputtong, 2007 for a critique of such framings) but because research is yet another space where survivors can be judged, silenced, objectified, or otherwise disrespected.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper illustrates the possibilities that can arise from taking a flexible and organic approach to research, rather than adhering rigidly to traditional designs. The adaptive focus group method resulted in a far more illuminating piece of research, which challenges existing framings of victim blame and may explain why attempts to prevent this damaging social process have been unsuccessful. It also created a more comfortable space and beneficial experience for the women who chose to participate.

It is important to state again that the method used in this project was not a PAR approach; I set the topic and research questions, chose the design, and carried out the analysis, interpretation, and output creation with minimal input from participants. Yet it was a more inclusive and collaborative process than I had assumed could be possible from PhD-level research. I hope that this exploration of how focus groups can be adapted as a feminist research method highlights useful points for consideration and reflection, especially for researchers working with survivors of gender-based violence.

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