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An Evaluation Report: Steps to Freedom a Domestic Abuse Victim-Survivor Programme

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AN EVALUATION REPORT: STEPS TO FREEDOM, A DOMESTIC ABUSE VICTIM-SURVIVOR PROGRAMME

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1. Introduction / Background

This report presents findings from a research project funded by Nottingham Trent University (NTU), in collaboration with Nottingham Central Women's Aid (NCWA), which explores the barriers women face in accessing and engaging with domestic abuse (DA) survivor recovery programmes.

Programmes such as The Freedom Programme, Own My Life, Power of Change, and the new Steps to Freedom are critical for supporting recovery and empowerment following experiences of abuse. However, they often face challenges in accessibility and uptake. Despite high demand for support, engagement can remain limited, particularly among women still in abusive relationships or those unaware of available services. This is especially concerning given that Office for National Statistics (2024) data indicate that in the year ending March 2024, 1.6 million women had experienced some form of DA, with many not recognising their experiences as abuse due to the covert nature of coercive control.

Aims of the evaluation:

- Understand access and engagement with the Steps to Freedom programme.
- Identify barriers/enablers to completing the programme.
- Gather victim-survivor-led suggestions for improvement.
- Strengthen collaboration between NTU and NCWA to support future learning and service development.

2. About the Programme

Steps to Freedom is a 10-week victim-survivor¹ recovery programme piloted and implemented by NCWA. It was developed to address gaps in existing support models and to provide an accessible, trauma-informed, victim-survivor-led alternative for those recovering from domestic and sexual abuse who have escaped or may still be in an abusive relationship. Victim-survivor programmes are widely recognised as central to recovery and empowerment, offering safe spaces for resilience-building, peer support and reintegration (Tutty et al., 2017; Williamson & Abrahams, 2014). While existing victim-survivor programmes such as the Freedom Programme², Own My Life³ and Power to Change⁴ have been widely implemented and evaluated, they are not without limitations. Research has highlighted that many victim-survivors face barriers to access, including childcare, financial constraints and limited cultural inclusivity, while some models have been critiqued as overly rigid or reductionist, offering little space for victim-survivors to reconstruct their identity and agency (Macrae & Andrew, 2000; Williamson & Abrahams, 2014). Thus, research has highlighted a need for flexible interventions that centre victim-survivors' diverse experiences and priorities. It is within this context that the Steps to Freedom programme was developed.

The Steps to Freedom programme was created to support empowerment, recovery from trauma, and the development of resilience within a safe peer community. Victim-survivors are brought together in weekly facilitated sessions, delivered face-to-face with some online flexibility, in small groups that encourage trust, openness, and shared learning. Research has shown that peer support and victim-survivor networks play a

¹ The hybrid term victim-survivor has been and will continue to be adopted throughout this report to acknowledge that some women will still be living with an abuser while attending the Steps to Freedom programme. Victim-survivor is also a term used to honour both the harm experienced and the strength shown. It recognises that women may feel like a victim in some moments, and a survivor in others.

² The Freedom Programme is designed for women as victims of domestic violence and was created by Pat Craven evolving from her work with perpetrators. The programme runs for 11-12 weeks and helps victims explore what they have experienced.

³ Own My Life is a 12-week course that supports women to rebuild and regain ownership of their lives following the effects of domestic abuse.

⁴ Power To Change is a 10-week programme designed to provide education and support for women who are or have been in an abusive relationship.

crucial role in healing, offering encouragement, validation, and practical coping strategies (Evans & Feder, 2014; Stylianou et al., 2021).

The Steps to Freedom programme is made up of ten weekly sessions (see Appendix One). The content of the sessions is broad and addresses issues that victim-survivors themselves have identified as important. This includes things such as setting boundaries, building resilience, exploring healthy relationships, understanding image-based and technology-facilitated abuse, parenting through abuse, and safety planning. This scope reflects a trauma-informed ethos that recognises not only the need for knowledge and understanding about how abuse plays out in relationships, but also the importance of equipping victim-survivors with strategies for healing and day-to-day resilience (Pugliese et al., 2024). The approach is consistent with Cattaneo and Goodman's (2015) Empowerment Process Model, which emphasises that recovery is most effective when guided by victim-survivors' own goals and supported by flexible, person-centred interventions. The sessions do not stop once victim-survivors complete a weekly session, as part of the programme involves providing those who attend with a personalised reflective journal.

Equally important, the Steps to Freedom programme embeds inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. Feminist intersectional scholars remind us that experiences of domestic and sexual abuse are shaped by overlapping social identities such as race, class, sexuality and disability, which can increase vulnerability and restrict access to support (Crenshaw, 1989; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010). By recognising these barriers, the Steps to Freedom programme aims to provide an environment that is not only safe but also representative of diverse lived realities.

The intended outcomes are ambitious but vital. Victim-survivors should leave the programme with enhanced confidence, greater understanding of coercive control and healthy relationships, and strengthened strategies for resilience and healing. Importantly, victim-survivors report that the programme fosters a sense of belonging and sisterhood: "I bloomed a little, and then I got my friends, whom I call my sisters." (Victim-survivor 3), echoing evidence that recovery is as much about rebuilding identity and community as it is about addressing trauma (Tutty et al., 2017; Williamson & Abrahams, 2014).

3. Methodology

Steps to Freedom was evaluated as a collaborative project between NTU and NCWA. Funding was secured by NTU, and through prior engagement with NCWA, it became clear that the organisation was piloting a new victim-survivor recovery programme and was keen to explore its effectiveness and accessibility. This partnership created an opportunity to carry out a small-scale but focused evaluation that placed victim-survivors' voices at the centre of the research process.

A mixed-method approach was adopted to capture a breadth of experiences. In the first phase, an online survey was co-designed by the research team and NCWA programme facilitators using Qualtrics software. The survey included questions about barriers to access, perceptions of programme effectiveness and inclusivity, and suggestions for improvement (see Appendix Two). Twelve women who had engaged with the programme's first cohort responded to the survey, providing valuable insights into victim-survivors' experiences. The second data collection phase involved qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups with eight victim-survivors. After completing the survey, victim-survivors were invited to participate in either a one-to-one interview or a focus group, depending on what felt most comfortable. This approach reflects evidence that group discussions allow victim-survivors to articulate and validate their experiences collectively, offering rich insights into the barriers they face (Dziegielewski et al., 2005). At the same time, individual interviews provide a private space for reflection on recovery, which victim-survivors often describe as empowering and personally beneficial (Dragiewicz et al., 2023). Combining these methods ensured that victim-survivors could contribute in ways that suited them while producing meaningful, in-depth data. Furthermore, group processes have been shown to foster a sense of community and belonging, further strengthening victim-survivor voices in evaluation (Barocas et al., 2024).

Throughout the evaluation, careful attention was given to ethical considerations. Victim-survivors were provided with information sheets and consent forms, anonymity was maintained, and support contacts were offered to mitigate potential distress. Ethical approval was obtained from NTU's School of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Given the sensitive nature of the questions asked and the

data collected, appropriate steps were taken to protect victim-survivors. These measures included providing detailed information about the study before the survey, focus groups or one-to-one interviews commenced and making it clear that victim-survivors could withdraw at any time or skip any questions they did not wish to answer. At the end of the survey and interviews, a full debrief was provided along with signposting to relevant specialist support organisations.

One potential limitation of the evaluation is the small sample size and the challenge of generalising the findings. However, due to the nature of the evaluation, the sample was purposely chosen to represent those who had taken part in the Steps to Freedom programme, with the objective being exploratory. Denscombe (2021) supports purposive sampling as a suitable sampling method for targeting a small group of individuals with privileged knowledge on a topic. Although we initially hoped that all victim-survivors would participate in a follow-up interview or focus group, we soon realised that this was not practicable for those who may still be, or have been, victim-survivors of domestic abuse. To address the small sample size, we have obtained ethical approval to extend the project for an additional year of evaluation. The following steps will involve ongoing collaboration with NCWA, focusing on assessing a larger sample of victim-survivors participating in the Steps to Freedom programme, in addition to evaluating any of the organisations that attended an event put on by NTU in collaboration with NCWA to raise awareness of the programme, which may have decided to facilitate the programme. That said, the accounts included within this report can be utilised as a learning resource for key organisations delivering the programme, as they provided a practical ‘toolkit’ for supporting those working to assist victim-survivors in accessing relevant programmes.

4. Who Took Part: Victim-Survivor Demographics

The programme was attended by victim-survivors aged between 25 and 55, with the average age falling in the mid to late 30s. As shown in Figure 1, the age distribution indicates a fairly even spread across the brackets, with slightly higher representation in the 30–39 age range.

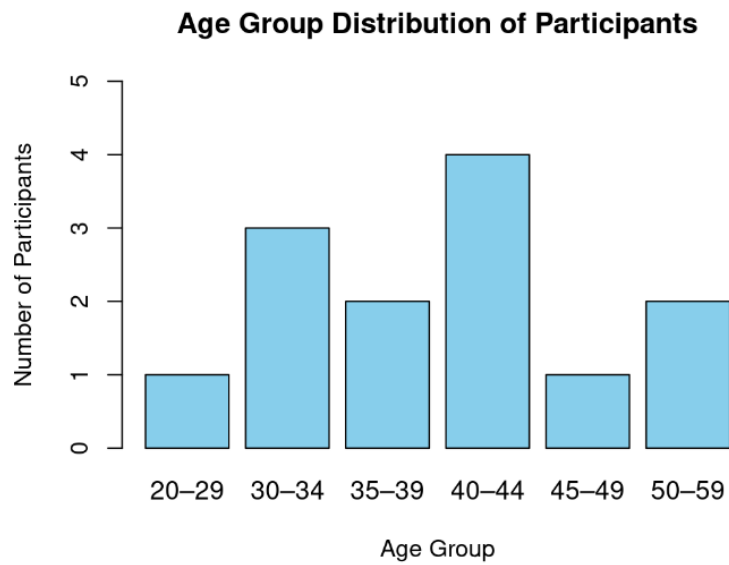


Figure 1: Age Group Distribution of Survivors

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of victim-survivors identified as White, with additional representation from Asian, Black, Mixed, and African Asian backgrounds (Figure 2). This suggests that while the programme reached a range of ethnic groups, certain communities were more prominently represented.

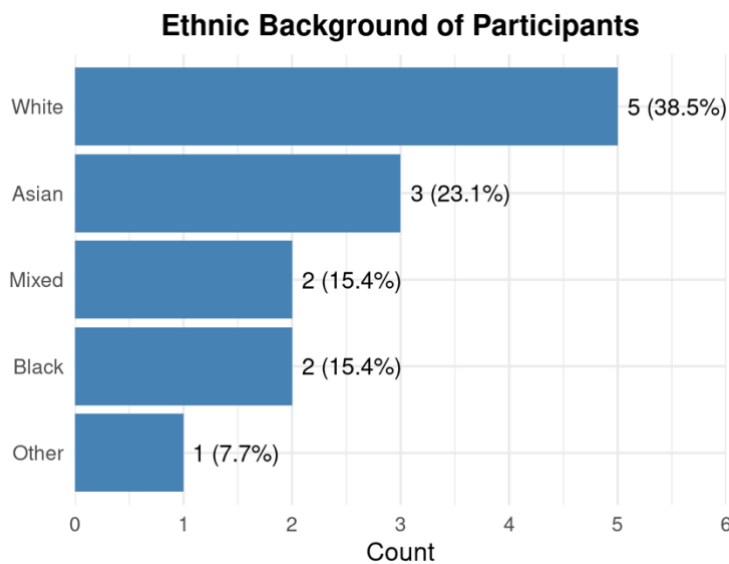
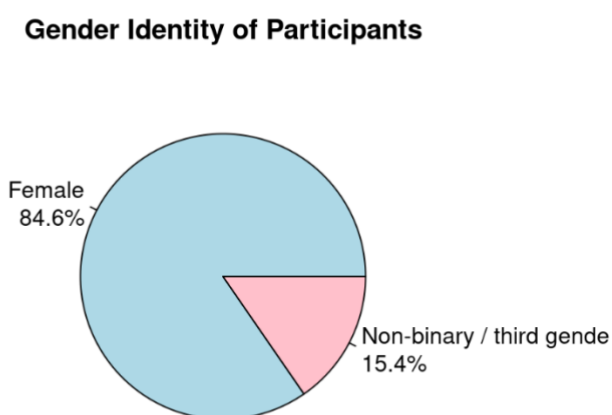


Figure 2: Ethnic Background of Victim-Survivors

Regarding gender identity, most victim-survivors identified as female, while two victim-survivors identified as non-binary/third gender (Figure 3). This reflects the gendered nature of the programme's focus and an element of gender diversity within the victim-survivor group.

Figure 3: Gender Identity of Survivors



5. Key Questions We Asked

The evaluation was guided by a set of core questions designed to capture victim-survivors' lived experiences of the Steps to Freedom programme. As discussed earlier, these questions were developed in collaboration with NCWA to reflect organisational priorities and, more importantly, to ensure that victim-survivor voices shaped the evaluation. Specifically, the evaluation explored:

- What structural, emotional, or situational challenges (such as childcare, financial pressures, ongoing contact with perpetrators, or mental health) limited victim-survivors' ability to attend and complete the programme?
- Which aspects of the programme design and delivery did victim-survivors find most helpful in sustaining their involvement?
- How did the programme affect victim-survivors' confidence, resilience, sense of identity, and understanding of abuse dynamics, particularly coercive control?

- What changes would make the programme more inclusive and accessible, for instance, concerning cultural representation, language provision, or session flexibility?

These questions reflect recommendations in evaluation research that highlight the importance of centring victim-survivor voices when assessing and developing domestic abuse services (Westmarland & Bows, 2019; Williamson & Abrahams, 2014).

6. Findings from the Survey and Interview Data

Several victim-survivors noted they had accessed other domestic abuse services or forms of support before joining the Steps to Freedom programme, including advocacy, helplines, counselling, social workers, community outreach and other victim-survivor programmes. This context highlights that victim-survivors' feedback on the Steps to Freedom programme was shaped by comparison with earlier services and by their immediate experience.

6.1 Barriers to Access and Engagement

Victim-survivors reported a range of barriers that made attending and sustaining engagement with the full programme somewhat of a challenge. Ongoing contact with perpetrators remained a major obstacle, with some victim-survivors highlighting that abuse continued post-separation and disrupted their ability to focus on recovery. This reflects wider research showing how coercive control often extends beyond the relationship (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016).

Practical difficulties such as having no fixed abode, childcare and financial pressures also had the potential to limit attendance, echoing findings from Dziegielewska et al. (2005) that structural barriers frequently prevent victim-survivors from accessing services: "In my situation, it was difficult in a way; there was a point when social services took me back to the area where I fled" (Victim-Survivor Five): "I had a bit of difficulty with my kids being off sick, so I had to stay off with them or attend appointments, so I maybe missed two sessions" (Victim-Survivor One).

Transport and transport costs were also identified as a barrier, in the context that victim-survivors can often face dilemmas between their children's needs and the transport

costs to attend programmes. Research by Power et al. (2018) shows that poverty trade-offs, such as choosing between food and other essentials like transport, are common among those on low incomes. One victim-survivor discussed how feelings of embarrassment or discomfort can act as a barrier, and this can be especially traumatising for those victim-survivors who may have experienced financial abuse from a partner. However, others mentioned they were more than willing to travel to attend the programme, as doing so provided an emotional boost:

“It takes about half an hour to drive down here, but that half an hour I know that I am going to come here, and I will be set for the whole week until Friday, and I know that sounds ridiculous because it is like my fix” (Victim-Survivor Seven).

Work commitments created additional pressures, while emotional challenges such as heightened anxiety and trauma symptoms made sessions overwhelming for some. Finally, limited awareness of the programme outside NCWA referrals was noted, suggesting that greater publicity could enable more victim-survivors to benefit. As shown in Figure 4, these barriers were the most frequently reported challenges in the survey.

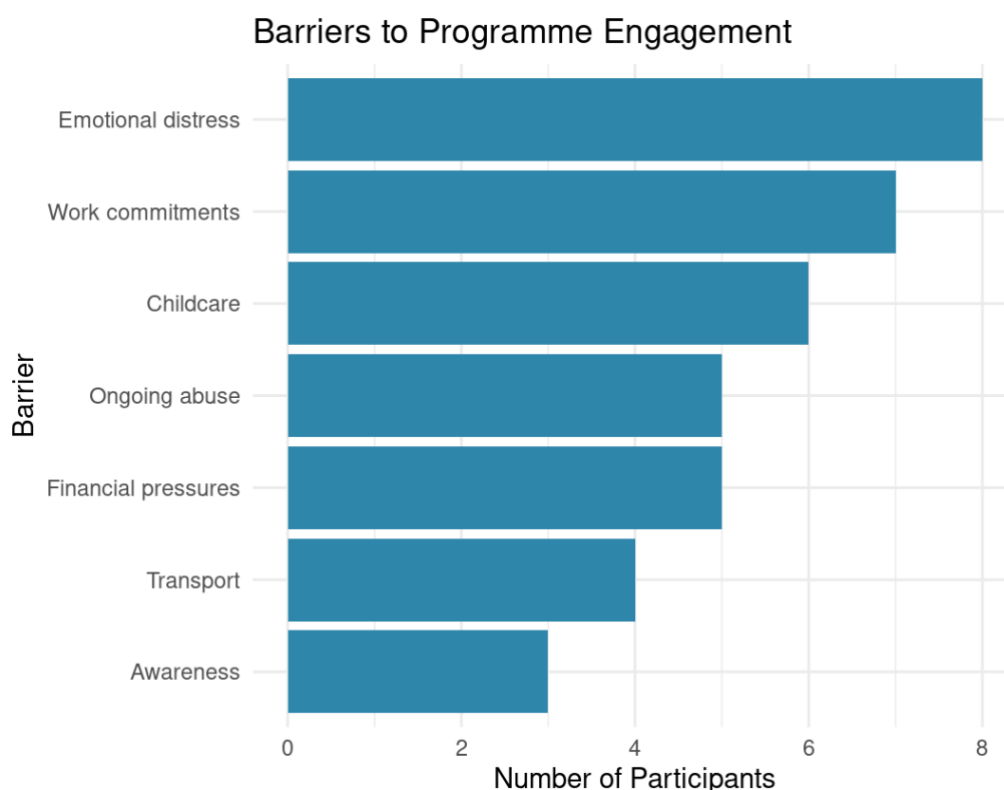


Figure 4. Barriers to Programme Engagement reported by survey victim-survivors

6.2 What Victim-Survivors Found Helpful

Despite challenges, victim-survivors consistently emphasised the aspects of the programme that supported their engagement. The group format created a strong sense of peer support and sisterhood, reducing isolation and providing validation through shared lived experience:

“Sometimes when you go through abuse, you feel alone especially when you have family that you cannot explain it to because they think that abuse is a normal thing that women go through it is just part of marriage apparently so just knowing that women were going through the same thing as you they had the same feelings as you and that you’re not crazy like people make you think.....You know you are not alone in this situation” (Victim-Survivor One).

“You feel so strengthened when you know that you're not alone. I realise that there are people in this room who believe in me, people who were supposed to believe in me, like my family, my immediate family, and my people who raised me. So, it was to me, it was like I got a family” (Victim-Survivor Four).

“You think you are alone and it's only you, but there are others. That does not sound very good because I do not want anybody else to go through it. But hearing other people took a weight off my shoulders because I thought it was just me. So mental health-wise it has helped me massively” (Victim-Survivor Two).

This mirrors evidence that group-based recovery can foster belonging and connection (Evans & Feder, 2014; Tutty et al., 2017). Practical resources, including the reflective journal, were described as extremely useful tools for processing experiences, while the online resources option offered flexibility for those balancing employment or childcare responsibilities.

As shown in Figure 5, peer support and shared experiences were the most frequently identified strengths of the programme, followed by the use of journals and the availability of online access.

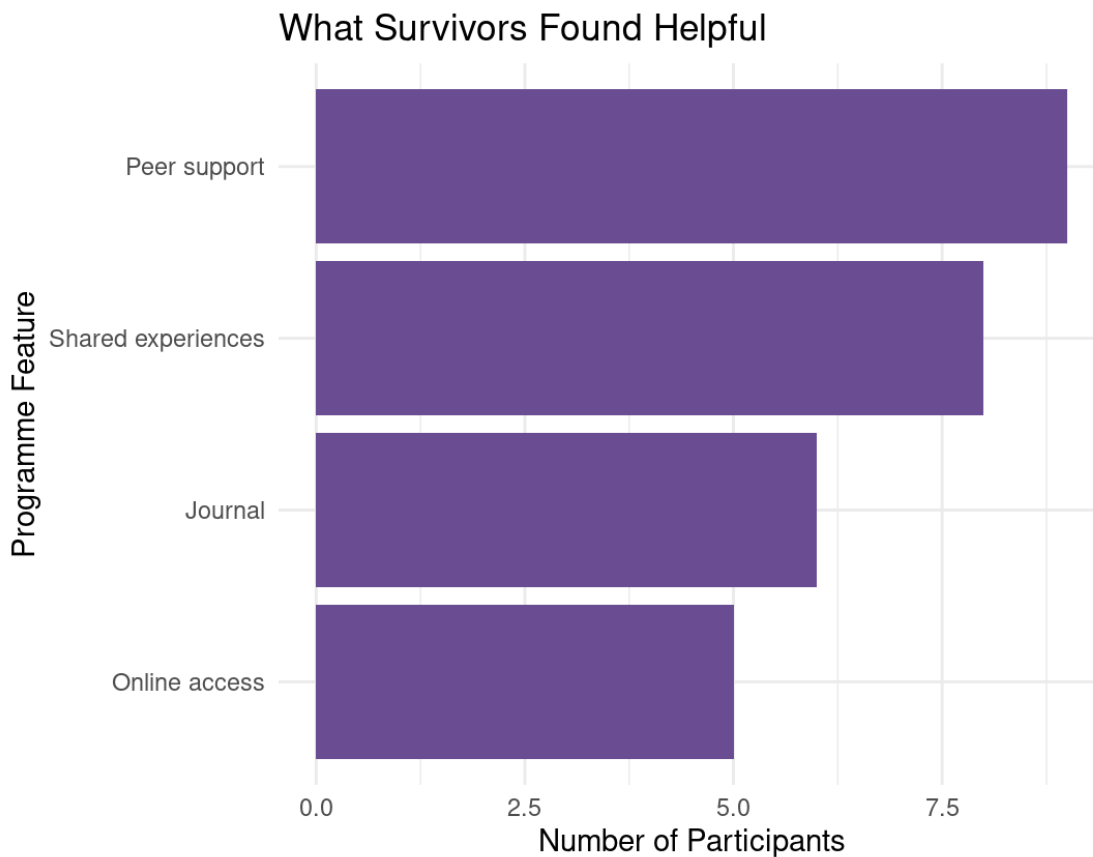


Figure 5. What survivors found most helpful about the programme

6.3 Impact of the Programme

Victim-survivors described substantial positive impacts from taking part in the Steps to Freedom programme, including reporting a stronger understanding of how abuse works in relationships (particularly coercive control) and healthy relationships, which helped them reframe past experiences and recognise warning signs in the future. Many also spoke about increased confidence:

“So, when I came to that programme, I felt so strengthened when you know you know that you are not alone. By the end, we felt the whole world was inside us” (Victim-Survivor Two).

Resilience and self-worth were also highlighted as having a positive impact:

“This programme empowers you in terms of emotional stability and self-realisation. I would also like to say that the programme is not about knowing more about other people. It is about knowing more about yourself” (Victim-Survivor Five).

“When we came on a Friday, each one of us would say that it was so difficult to come out and be there, but I am glad that I am able to make it [...] by the end of the programme, we were so motivated, we felt the whole world inside us, to come in deflated and come out happy” (Victim-Survivor Four).

Some even described the programme as “lifesaving” (Victim-Survivor Seven). These findings align with empowerment models that view confidence, agency, and social connection as key markers of recovery (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). Importantly, the group fostered lasting social bonds and a sense of sisterhood that reduced isolation: “so that lonely woman inside me was no more alone” (Victim-Survivor Three).

As shown in Figure 6, most victim-survivors rated the programme’s effectiveness, format and inclusivity at the high end of the scale (ratings 4–5) and indicated a strong likelihood to recommend the programme.

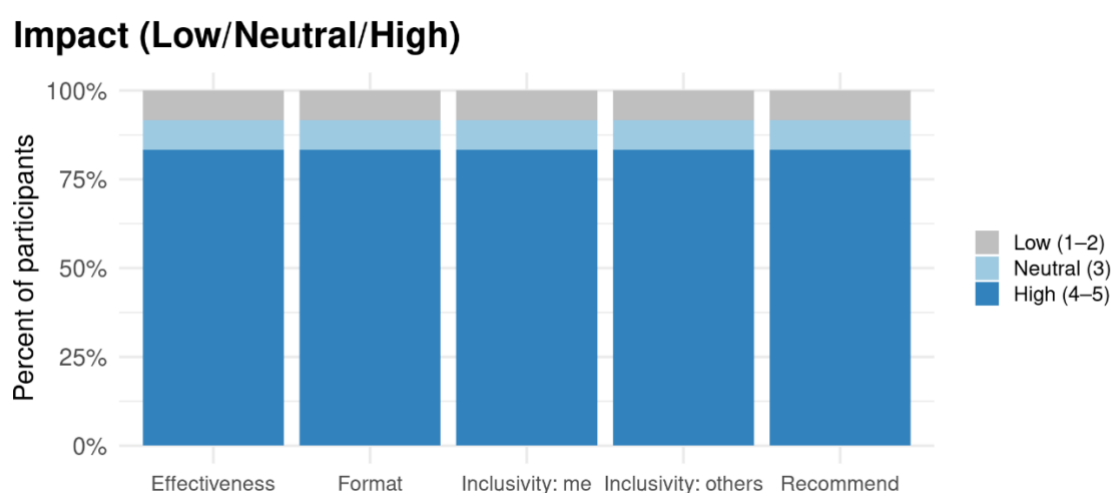


Figure 6. Impact of the programme (percentage of survivors rating each measure Low/Neutral/High).

6.4 Suggestions for Improvement

Victim-survivors also offered constructive feedback to strengthen the programme. Key recommendations included greater flexibility in delivery (different session times and hybrid options) to accommodate work and childcare responsibilities. Some victim-survivors requested additional trauma-informed features, such as mindfulness and

grounding techniques, to support emotional regulation during and following sessions. Others highlighted the need for more inclusive materials, including case studies that reflect ethnic minority experiences, LGBTQ+ and disability, especially raising awareness around coercion and control where a perpetrator will use a person's disability as a tool for abuse, such as by manipulating medication or withholding disability aids ultimately adding an additional layer of vulnerability for victim-survivors from this demographic group (Curry, Hassounah-Phillips & Johnston-Silverberg, 2001). Suggestions were also made for options in multiple languages and continued sensitivity to religious needs, such as prayer or reflection breaks. One suggestion was for stronger follow-up communication once referrals were made to help victim-survivors feel supported before starting the Steps to Freedom programme. As shown in Figure 7, flexible delivery and inclusive materials were the most frequently cited areas for improvement, followed by calls for trauma-informed practices and stronger follow-up support.

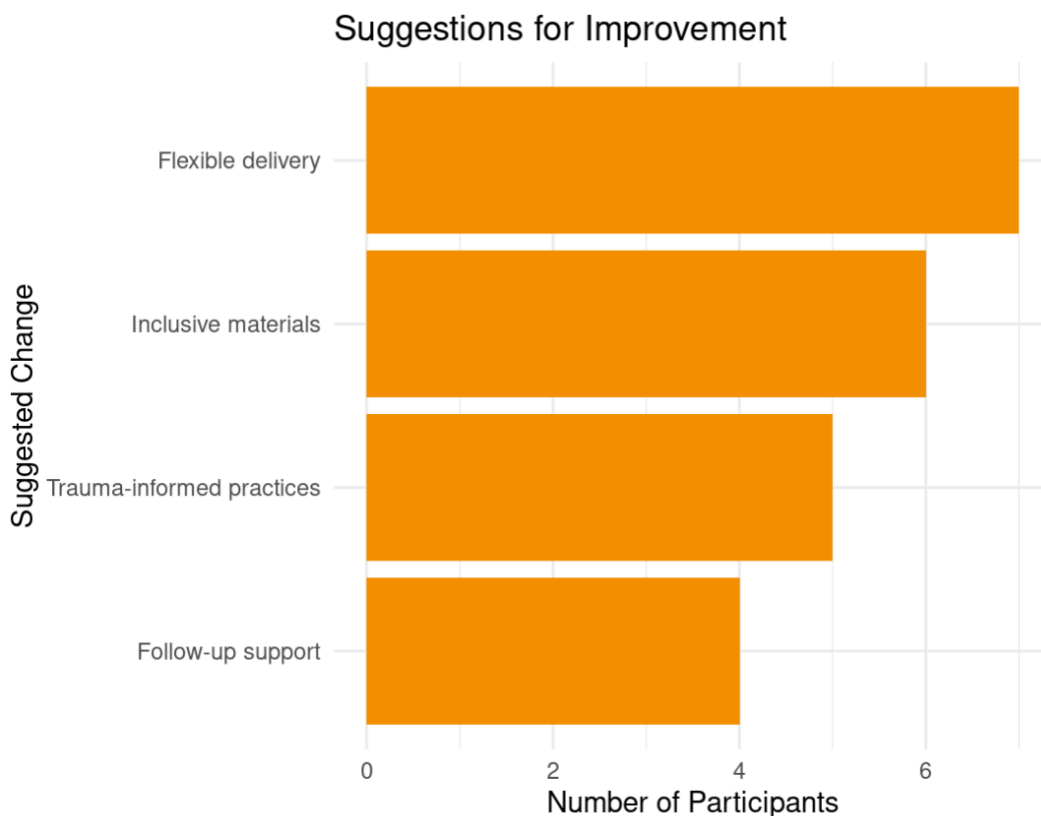


Figure 7. Suggestions for programme improvement provided by victim-survivors

7. Findings from the Interviews

This section of the report presents findings from eight victim-survivors who participated in the one-to-one interviews and focus groups. The interviews aimed to allow the victim-survivors to expand on their lived experiences, barriers to engagement, and the perceived impact of the programme. The findings provide rich insights into how trauma-informed, peer-supported environments can foster healing, empowerment, and personal growth.

7.1 Barriers to Engagement

Many of the victim-survivors described the emotional difficulty of attending the first session, quoting emotional challenges such as anxiety, fear of judgement and vulnerability: “The first challenge was my social anxiety... I was so vulnerable.” (Victim-Survivor Four): “When I first came, I literally was crying. Because I did not like groups, I did not like people” (Victim-Survivor Three).

These reflections illustrate how trauma can present as social withdrawal and fear, creating a significant obstacle for initial engagement with domestic abuse support services (Carlisle et al., 2025). The emotional burden of joining a group setting was intensified for some by the anticipation of sharing a space with others who had similarly abusive experiences: “You know that when you enter a room, so 10 different people means 10 different stories” (Victim-Survivor Four).

Facilitators were consistently praised for their empathetic, intuitive, and attuned ability to read body language and respond sensitively to non-verbal cues: “They [facilitators] can read your faces... they know if something is bothering you” (Victim-Survivor Eight).

The victim-survivors valued the facilitators’ proactive approach to emotional well-being: “There was a video, and I just blanked out... and they were like, ‘Are you OK?’” (Victim-Survivor Five). Their approach was described as helpful in creating a safe and welcoming space: “For me, I think that the kind of sense of safety” (Victim-Survivor Six). This awareness helped build trust with the victim-survivors and encouraged continued engagement: “If I did not feel comfortable after the first one [session], I would not have returned... I felt so welcome and so accepted” (Victim-Survivor One), these feelings were something expressed by all of the victim-survivors and thus reinforcing the importance of

trauma-informed interaction and emotional learning facilitation, particularly in the first session, something that helped build a rapport.

7.2 What Victim-Survivors Found Helpful

As previously highlighted in the survey results, victim-survivors spoke about the programme encouraging a sense of community and belonging. For many, this was the first time they had truly felt heard and accepted, specifically for those who were experiencing familial isolation: “I lost my friends and my family back home” (Victim-Survivor One), with one suggesting “I have had more help from these women than my family” (Victim-Survivor Five). Despite being from intersecting backgrounds, the diversity of the cohort was perceived as positive, where, irrespective of skin colour, sexuality or religion, the victim-survivors understood inclusivity as experienced through their commonality of lived experiences: “Our experience... was kind of similar, even though we are from different backgrounds and different diversity” (Victim-Survivor One). She went on to speak about feeling: “more accepted than by my own people” These findings stress how culturally responsive programmes that may lack diversity do not necessarily act as a barrier. More importantly, that lived experience through the value of gendered support plays a crucial role: “We all had in common womanhood” (Victim-Survivor Four). This sense of shared gendered identity and emotional safety was perceived to be a powerful aspect of the programme. The attention to pronouns in the first session was likewise considered essential, and that diversity was not felt to be a barrier: “I didn’t see anything different to be honest, they [facilitators] involve everyone, they listen to what you have to say” (Victim-Survivor Seven). The programme was described as inclusive, with attention to pronouns cited as an essential aspect of the first session.

The programme’s structure was felt to provide emotional regulation and reflection. Victim-survivors appreciated the flexibility to step out of the sessions if and when they needed to: “I was feeling a bit overwhelmed... so I went out for a bit, but they did follow me. There was another room where I could sit and just drink coffee and relax” (Victim-Survivor One). The victim-survivors also appreciated being advised on the topics for upcoming sessions, an action which helped them mentally prepare for sensitive topics, enhancing their sense of control and safety.

The inclusion of creative activities, specifically the affirmations, was spoken about in a very positive way; the affirmations were viewed as something victim-survivors could use to refer back to and reflect on: “It was like a square... your boundaries for friendship, relationships...I have got that stuck on my wall” (Victim-Survivor Seven). Positive psychology stresses that the use of reinforcing affirmations, such as “I am deserving”, can help train the unconscious mind in unhelpful thoughts, replacing them with empowering beliefs, reducing stress, and increasing confidence. Research views the use of affirmations as uplifting for those who have experienced domestic abuse (Kadian, 2023).

The main finding from the evaluation interviews, similar to the survey findings, was the recurring theme of empowerment: “This programme, I think, I will use the word empowered in terms of emotional stability” (Victim-Survivor Three), where a collective identity allowed for expressions of emotions to be released:

“There have been weeks where some of us had a really, really crap week or day. You can come to that safe space and feel like you can talk about it and cry about it, because sometimes we hold back” (Victim-Survivor Two).

All eight of the victim-survivors expressed increased confidence and desire for continued engagement, so much so that the anticipation of the weekly sessions became a source of hope and stability: “I look forward to a Friday... you knew Friday was going to be a good day. I want it to go on forever. I would come every week (Victim-Survivor Six). Figure 8 summarises the victim-survivors’ experiences upon completing the Steps to Freedom programme.



Figure 8. Keywords used to describe the programme provided by victim-survivors

7.3 Suggestions for Improvement

Based on the interviews and focus groups, several actionable suggestions were made to strengthen the Steps to Freedom programme and better support the needs of future cohorts of victim-survivors.

1. Access to Programme Materials

An expression was made for additional digital access to session materials, particularly for moments of emotional distress or reflection outside of group meetings: “If they need to refresh their memory or for reassurance in the early hours of the morning, they can log on through their phones and access information” (Victim-Survivor Three).

Including resources used during the sessions, such as the Power and Control Wheel, which was mentioned in one of the focus groups, available online, would support trauma-informed care by offering accessibility during moments when the body might resist movement or engagement.

2. Linguistic Inclusivity

Several victim-survivors highlighted an option for materials to be provided in multiple languages: “Options for those where English is not their first language... handouts in their language” (Victim-Survivor Five).

This suggestion emphasises the importance of recognising intersectional identities and tailoring support to reflect diverse cultural experiences.

3. Postpartum and Post-Abuse

Victim-survivors emphasised that additional content on trauma could be included. One victim-survivor shared the long-term effect of postpartum depression and the lack of familial understanding: “My family did not accept that postpartum existed... post-abuse struggle is real” (Victim-Survivor Five).

Including content on postpartum mental health and the emotional aftermath of abuse could validate these experiences and help lessen any feelings of isolation.

4. Empowerment and Employability

Empowerment was a central theme, but one victim-survivor suggested focusing on rebuilding confidence and preparing for employment: “Like how to be employed after being abused... I feel afraid going to meetings with other people, especially around where men are” (Victim-Survivor One).

This suggestion highlights the importance of practical skill-building sessions focusing on workplace anxiety and social reintegration.

5. Victim-Survivor Voices in Supporting Future Cohorts

Suggestions were made to include quotes from previous attendees to help reduce anxiety for new cohorts. For example: “Statements directed to different cultures, just to say we did this, and you can too” (Victim-Survivor Seven).

This could nurture a sense of continuity and reassurance, especially for those who may feel culturally or socially marginalised.

6. Optional Homework and Reflection Tasks

Some victim-survivors expressed interest in additional tasks to complete between sessions, alongside the reflective journal: “Homework... more tasks to do on the activity completed in the session and bring it back the following week” (Victim-Survivor Three).

This could strengthen learning, promote personal reflection, and enhance engagement with the programme content.

Finally, ensuring ongoing support and the availability of continuous group meetings was considered essential. Maintaining peer support for those who have completed the programme supports long-term recovery and community building. Previous group members could facilitate follow-up group meetings once the programme has ended.

8. Summary

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the Steps to Freedom programme meaningfully impacted the lives of the victim-survivors who participated in this study. Through their voices, it became evident that the programme offers more than just structured support; it provides a space for healing, connection, and empowerment. The emotional safety fostered by empathetic facilitators and the sense of belonging encouraged through peer support were all perceived as central to positive experiences.

Despite initial internal and structural barriers (anxiety, childcare, transport finance) and social (stigma, awareness), all the victim-survivors described the Steps to Freedom programme as helping them rebuild confidence, process trauma, and start reclaiming their identities. One victim-survivor reflected: “We were raw, we were pathetic... but we were better than how we entered” (Victim-Survivor Five).

Victim-survivors provided some suggestions, such as promoting cultural and linguistic inclusivity, including more content on postpartum and post-abuse challenges, and creating more opportunities for empowerment related to employability. These suggestions reflect a desire for the programme to develop in ways that recognise the complexity and diversity of victim-survivor lived experiences.

Finally, all the victim-survivors stated they would recommend the programme to others, highlighting that the Steps to Freedom programme is not merely a support group but a facilitator for change. Through continually listening to victim-survivor voices and adapting the programme accordingly, it can become even more effective in helping victim-survivors transition from mere survival to self-determination: “You can come to this programme and empower yourself” (Victim-Survivor Six).

9. Conclusion

What can we learn from the evaluation of the first cohort of the Steps to Freedom programme? While structural, emotional, and situational challenges (such as childcare, financial pressures, ongoing contact with perpetrators, and emotional impacts) were identified as potential challenges for a victims'-survivors ability to stay engaged, it is essential to remember these types of challenges often do not occur in isolation and is something that needs to be considered moving forward for those who facilitate the programme. The finding that most victim-survivors were referred through a partner organisation also says something about the infrastructure required for multi-agency working and the need for working closely with other organisations that support victim-survivors of domestic and sexual abuse.

While minor suggestions were made to improve content and delivery, the overall satisfaction was highly positive, with all 12 of the first cohort completing the 10 weeks of sessions. This indicates the programme's success, especially since trauma-informed practice was valued as essential in helping victim-survivors recover from the aftereffects of domestic abuse through the shared aspect of collective identity and the feeling of sisterhood the group creates. More importantly, the victim-survivors viewed the programme as more than just a learning platform: "It's more than just a course, you're not only learning, but there is also so much more to it" (Victim-Survivor Four) with one victim-survivor suggesting "Coming here is amazing. This is the first time I have cried as I kept it all in, but these are tears of happiness" (Victim-Survivor Six).

10. Recommendations

Overall, victim-survivors were very positive about the Steps to Freedom programme, describing it as both impactful and supportive. At the same time, this evaluation has highlighted several areas where the programme could be further strengthened to maximise its reach and effectiveness. Victim-survivors pointed to practical barriers such as childcare, transport costs, and work commitments, which at times made participation difficult. Addressing these challenges through the continued provision of childcare, transport support and more flexible delivery. For example, offering varied session times and online hybrid options would enable more women to attend and sustain engagement

and reaching out to work alongside transport organisations in supporting victim-survivors to be able to attend the course, subsidised transport such as bus passes or pre-arranged taxi services could help elevate feelings of financial embarrassment and reliance on others to support them financially. In addition to strengthening survivor support, this evaluation also highlights the broader policy imperative to ensure sustainable funding and infrastructure for trauma-informed recovery programmes. For interventions like Steps to Freedom to thrive, they must be robust, evidence-based and supported by multi-agency partnerships and strategic investment.

Although the programme already reached a diverse group of victim-survivors, there remains scope to progress inclusivity. Victim-survivors noted the importance of greater representation of ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ experiences, alongside stronger consideration of disability and religious identity. Incorporating culturally responsive case studies, providing materials in multiple languages, ensuring continued sensitivity to faith practices such as prayer or reflection breaks, and incorporating materials that highlight how those with disabilities experience abuse would help to make the programme more accessible and representative of diverse victim-survivors.

Currently, most victim-survivors joined the programme through NCWA referrals, which indicates a need to expand outreach more broadly. Linking into educational settings, health services, and community organisations and using avenues such as radio broadcasts could help reach victim-survivors earlier in their recovery journey, particularly those not already connected to specialist support. Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback and the full completion rate among the cohort, there is a strong case for both broadening the referral network and scaling the programme's delivery. We recommend that the programme's outcomes be disseminated through briefing papers and stakeholder events targeted at funders and commissioning bodies. Demonstrating its impact through both qualitative and quantitative evidence can support efforts to secure investment and roll out the programme more widely, enabling more victim-survivors to benefit from its trauma-informed, empowerment-based approach.

The trauma-informed ethos of the Steps to Freedom programme is one of its real strengths. Even so, some victim-survivors expressed a wish for additional practices to support emotional regulation during sessions. Activities such as mindfulness, grounding

and other trauma-informed techniques could help victim-survivors to manage difficult emotions and sustain their involvement more comfortably.

Finally, the evaluation highlighted the value of working in partnership. Collaboration between specialist services such as NCWA and research institutions, and most importantly, victim-survivors themselves, can enrich programmes, bringing together practice knowledge, lived experience and external research expertise. Continued collaboration of this kind will be vital in ensuring that the Steps to Freedom programme continues to develop, is informed by victim-survivor voices and remains sustainable in the long term.

As previously mentioned, the next steps will involve ongoing collaboration with NCWA, focusing on evaluating additional cohorts of victim-survivors participating in the Steps to Freedom programme and evaluating the practitioners who choose to facilitate the delivery of the programme.

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12. Appendix One

10-week programme outline

Session 1 – Introduction.

Session 2 – Gendered rights and intersectionality.

Session 3 – Empowerment and Awareness of Abuse Dynamics.

Session 4 – Empowerment and Awareness of Image-based Abuse and Tech-facilitated Abuse.

Session 5 – Boundaries.

Session 6 – Building Resilience after Trauma.

Session 7 – Parenting through Domestic Abuse.

Session 8 – Healthy Relationships and Communication.

Session 9 – Post-Separation Abuse and Safety Planning.

Session 10 – Visualisation and Goal Setting.

13. Appendix Two

Interview Questions.

Referral Process

1. How did you learn about the Steps to Freedom programme?
2. How would you describe your experience with the referral process?

Programme

3. What would you say has been the main benefit of attending the Steps to Freedom programme?
4. Were you able to attend all the sessions of the Steps to Freedom programme?
5. If not, what challenges impacted your ability to access or complete the Steps to Freedom programme?
6. Which aspect of the Steps to Freedom programme was most impactful?
7. What impact did the Steps to Freedom programme have on you, either positive or negative?

8. Are there any aspects of the Steps to Freedom programme that you feel need changing?
9. Were there any topics not addressed in the Steps to Freedom programme that you would have liked included?
10. The Steps to Freedom programme includes an online portal. What features would you like to see in the portal?
11. The Steps to Freedom programme includes a reflective journal. Would making changes or improvements in the journal make it more effective?

Inclusivity

12. How inclusive do you feel the Steps to Freedom programme is?
13. What aspects of the Steps to Freedom programme helped create a sense of inclusivity?
14. Do you have any suggestions that could be included in the Steps to Freedom programme to increase inclusivity?
15. How did the group setting impact your experience of the Steps to Freedom programme?

Moving forward

16. What factors would influence your likelihood of recommending the Steps to Freedom programme?
17. How likely are you to recommend the Steps to Freedom programme to others who have experienced domestic abuse?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add?

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