



**Ascent**

*imkaan*

## **Good Practice Briefing**

# **uncivil partnerships?**

reflections on collaborative working in the ending  
violence against women and girls sector



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## Introduction

### **ASCENT - Support services to organisations**

Ascent is a partnership within the London Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consortium, delivering a range of services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, under six themes, funded by London Councils.

ASCENT Support services to organisations, is delivered by a partnership led by the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) and comprised of five further organisations: AVA, Imkaan, RESPECT, Rights of Women, and Women and Girls Network.

This second-tier support project aims to address the long-term sustainability needs of organisations providing services to those affected by sexual and domestic violence on a pan-London basis. The project seeks to improve the quality of such services across London by providing a range of training and support, including:

- Accredited training
- Expert-led training
- Sustainability training
- Borough surgeries
- One-to-one support
- Policy consultations
- Newsletter
- Good practice briefings

### **Good practice briefings**

The purpose of the good practice briefings is to provide organisations supporting those affected by domestic and sexual violence with information to help them become more sustainable and contribute with making their work more effective.

For more information, please see:

[www.thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk](http://www.thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk)



## **Imkaan**

*imkaan*

Imkaan is a London based Black and 'minority ethnic' women's organisation. We are the only UK based, national second tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and 'minority ethnic' (BME) women and girls. The organisation holds nearly two decades of experience of working around issues such as domestic violence, forced marriage and 'honour-based' violence. We work at local, national and international levels, and in partnership with a range of organisations, to improve policy and practice responses to BME women and girls.

Imkaan works with our members to represent the expertise and perspectives of frontline, specialist and dedicated BME women's organisations that work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Imkaan also delivers a unique package of support which includes quality assurance; accredited training and peer education; sustainability support to frontline BME organisations; and facilitation of space for community engagement and development. Our research activities support the ongoing development of a robust evidence base around the needs and aspirations of BME women and girls, as well as promising practice approaches to addressing violence.

Imkaan is at the forefront of programmes and initiatives relating to forms of violence that disproportionately affect BME women and girls.

### **This briefing**

The briefing paper draws on Imkaan's work with our members, our own experiences of being a small, BME led women's organisation and the work of diverse social justice activists and thinkers. We have pulled together different ideas on how we can approach collaboration in ways that are more in line with an intersectional feminist value base, rather than a corporate approach to partnership working.

As with our previous briefings, this is not a 'how-to' guide or an in-depth research piece. This is also not a technical or legal guide on partnership structures. This paper has been written with a view to provoking thought and dialogue within and between organisations and individuals, with the hope that this will help to strengthen our work as a sector, and contribute to moving us closer to our vision of a safe and equal world.

## Background

As a sector, we have a long history of collaborative working, which is rooted not only in the more recent pressures from funders and commissioners, but also in the ways that we have collectively sought to create change at all levels. The London Violence Against Women and Girls Consortium is an important example of diverse organisations coming together to deliver a range of services which are focussed on everything from preventing and responding to VAWG to supporting sector sustainability.

Despite the challenges we face, the ending VAWG sector has been built, not just on our individual work and activism, but on the basic principle that we are part of a wider, diverse, feminist struggle. We know that in our work with individual women and girls, we are unlikely to be able to provide an adequate response to all of a girl's/woman's needs, and that we may need to engage with different agencies in order to ensure that she receives the best possible service. We know the benefits of sharing local knowledge and skills. We know that in our strategic advocacy, we hold different areas of expertise, and when we work together well, we are often stronger and more effective. Yet, the area of partnership can be fraught with difficulties and tensions, and increasingly we find ourselves in working relationships which are based on the need to survive, rather than a genuine commitment to collaboration and collective resistance.

Imkaan is often asked to offer advice and support to our members around partnership challenges at local level. As a small, BME led women's organisation, we have not been immune to these challenges and our experiences of partnership can mirror those of our members i.e. we experience some partnership situations as a space of inequality and anxiety rather than empowerment. Thankfully we also work with individual women and organisations that are committed allies. In those cases, our experiences of partnership working have been positive, respectful and mutually beneficial.

We believe that meaningful, collaborative working to ending violence against women and girls requires care, rigour and a genuine commitment to equality and social justice. As part of thinking about how we can work in those ways, we have explored some

interconnected areas (not an exhaustive list) that are potential points of exploration as our sector seeks to strengthen partnerships and work collaboratively.

## **Power Matters**

Violence against women and girls is rooted in structural inequality. Although we have seen important shifts across our societies, women and girls continue to be subjected to unequal ‘treatment’ in all spheres of life. Women and girls are constantly navigating and negotiating patriarchy, a system which sustains and upholds men’s power over us. As a sector, we are therefore inevitably engaged with power relations, whether in the lives of individual women and girls using services, or in our interactions with funders, commissioners and policy makers. Power matters to us. Despite this, we do not always engage in meaningful dialogue about the ways that power works *within* our sector. Differences which include size of organisation, nature of provision, areas of focus, and organisational ‘identity’ can all impact access to resources, treatment within public policy, ability to influence / challenge and other key areas. Therefore, in a context of partnership / collaborative working, *power matters*.

In Imkaan’s work within the ending VAWG sector, we encounter organisations that struggle to engage with themselves as holders of any kind of power. For those organisations, it appears to be particularly difficult to acknowledge this; especially when we are all dealing with the impact of cuts, funding structures which marginalise women’s services, and a broader public policy context which fails to sufficiently prioritise violence against women and girls. Organisations can experience themselves as struggling, fighting for funding, or having less voice than larger, well-funded charities. It can be difficult then to take a step back and acknowledge, where they do hold power. For example, where a larger, non-BME women’s organisation may be privileged, in policy or commissioning terms, over a small local BME women’s organisation. In such a situation, the achievements of the larger organisation may be viewed purely as reflective of the quality of services, the volume of work, or the organisation’s leadership. On the other hand, there may also be a reluctance to recognise that a BME organisation with strong leadership, delivering excellent services, knowing its local community and working equally hard or harder will still be required to navigate the more complex landscape of interlocking oppressions (e.g. sexism and racism) that is likely to place them at further disadvantage. If this

difference, which is rooted in structural inequality, is not understood and addressed, then this can impact the way that the relationship develops and works (or not).

We too often hear our members, who are mainly small, local BME-led organisations, describe the challenges of working in partnership with larger non-BME organisations. This can include ongoing micro-aggressions (such as questioning of professionalism), attempts to enforce limitations on the parameters of work (e.g. assuming / demanding that an organisation only works around issues such as forced marriage, because they are a BME service provider), exclusion from local partnerships, policing of feminist credentials, competition for BME specific funding contracts, and even bullying of staff. Power matters even when one does not *feel* powerful. Consider that men often deny the power they hold and the privilege that this carries. Yet, feminist practice is able to hold a mirror up to that power and demand that it is dismantled, including at an individual level. It is therefore critical that as a sector, we consider where power is held including around sites of oppression such as disability, ethnicity, sexuality and class.

Rather than avoiding the exploration and disruption of power and oppression, collaborative working to address violence against women and girls should, as a default, seek to be consistently rooted in anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. While this is not easy, it is likely to offer a space for deeper, more meaningful relationships across differently positioned organisations.

## **Truth-telling**

In a context where organisations experience being ‘pushed’ into partnerships through funding and commissioning regimes, we may find ourselves in structures that do not immediately feel as if they are based on mutual interest or genuine commitment to building relationships i.e. partnerships which feel ‘forced’, pragmatic (i.e. in order to survive or avoid being entirely subsumed) or opportunistic. The NCVO website has useful information on the benefits and risks of collaborative working<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this, it is important to be clear about our motivations for engaging in a partnership, even if we are committed to moving beyond our initial interest. Some questions that may be useful are:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/collaboration/what\\_is\\_collaboration/benefits\\_and\\_risks\\_of\\_collaboration](https://knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/collaboration/what_is_collaboration/benefits_and_risks_of_collaboration)

- Why are we, as an organisation, involved (or thinking of becoming involved) in this partnership?
- What are we committed to (e.g. building on this relationship, safeguarding / securing funding, genuine ally-ship)?
- As the more powerful partner, are we committed to being a pragmatic partner or an ally? What does that involve? If we are committed to being an ally, are we willing to engage in the work that it takes to be an ally? i.e. *‘an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group of people’*<sup>2</sup>
- As the partner holding less power, are we able to sustain ourselves within the space of this partnership? How will we manage dynamics that may be unequal / oppressive?
- What would be the consequence / impact of not being in this partnership?
- What does success look like for this partnership? Does success include creating an equal, respectful partnership dynamic?
- What are we willing to do to be successful in this partnership or to make this partnership a success?

*Ultimately, if the primary purpose for a partnership is to ensure financial security, in order to secure critical ending VAWG provision, then it is important to ‘own’ this and define the parameters of your work and manage expectations. If there is a deeper commitment to build on this, then it requires an openness about what that might take, and a willingness to do the work involved.*

## **Respect**

As individual organisations, we are often able to highlight the importance of respect and equality in women’s lives. Yet it can be a challenge to translate this to the context of partnership working. A failure to foster mutual respect is likely to be detrimental to a partnership; and while it does not mean that a partnership will fail to produce good outcomes, it can mean that opportunities for growth and collaboration are missed. It

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<sup>2</sup> <https://theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/allyship/>



can also mean that the partnership space is experienced as stressful and 'draining' rather than a space of positive challenge and empowerment.

Respect goes beyond the contested ideas of politeness. In the partnership space, it may require:

- Recognition of the ways some institutionalised practices define and privilege particular expertise, approaches, strategies and professionalism
- Valuing of individual and organisational expertise, strengths and specialisms
- Acknowledgement of power imbalances and the challenges that emerge as a result
- Commitment to disrupting systems of power
- Taking meaningful action to address and redress these imbalances
- Recognition of the ways that failure to address these issues affects trust

Of course, doing any of this requires effective communication. Communication can be work in its own right, but is also key to developing and sustaining respect. Communicating in ways which encourage openness and contribute to building trust, can help to create space for partners to develop a deeper understanding of each other's work, approaches, strengths, challenges etc.

Ultimately, if we want to work with women and girls to achieve the best outcomes from safety through to autonomy, it is helpful if we are able to create partnerships that support this work, and that reflect the kind of shift that we want at societal level. If we are unable to engage respectfully, what does this mean for our work, and for us, not just as service providers but as agents of change?

*Engaging respectfully, through anti-oppressive behaviours and communication, also supports truth-telling and disrupts embedded power.*

## **Conflict Management**

Even in the most equal, productive relationships, there are likely to be moments of tension and conflict. Exploration of shared values, commitments and goals can help to create a foundation that can be revisited when tensions emerge.

Agreeing an approach to conflict management at the outset is also an important aspect of any partnership agreement or memorandum of understanding. This could, for example, include encouraging openness, reflection and a willingness to deal with conflicts as soon as possible after they have arisen. However, a conflict management strategy which fails to take account of power imbalances, is unlikely to be as effective as one which is rooted in anti-oppressive practice. For example, if staff within a less powerful organisation feel unable to challenge or raise concerns, for fear of losing funding, the idea of openness becomes less relevant. The partnership approach to conflict management has a greater chance of working when differences and inequalities are acknowledged, held, and managed effectively. This usually requires the disruption of embedded hierarchies of power.

An important aspect of conflict management is willingness to be reflective, manage defensiveness, listen, open space and learn. Effective reflexive processes should enable self-critique and scrutiny, which again should involve analysis of power and difference. It is helpful if organisations create space to do this internally, ensuring that staff involved in the partnership, and those whose work might impact the partnership, are able to engage in ways that demonstrate a commitment to moving things forward.

On a practical basis, conflict management may require external support. It is important that where external support is sought, this is not designed to collude with discriminatory practice in order to create further alienation.

*A well-managed conflict can lead to the strengthening of a partnership. Failure to effectively resolve tensions can have a negative impact on current and future work and can place individuals and organisations in stressful situations. It may be useful to acknowledge that a resolution can also involve an agreement to renegotiate parameters and manage expectations differently. While this may not always be the ideal result, it can also be the most pragmatic.*

## **Allocation of Resources**

Allocation of resources probably causes more difficulties in partnerships than any other issue. While some organisations are relatively financially stable, we are a sector that is generally under-funded. In the last decade, the situation has arguably worsened as cuts to local authority budgets, pressures on public sector services and the

shrinking of the welfare state have reduced the pots of available funding. This has had a knock-on effect on staffing levels, workload and pressure on actual time. Even within the second-tier space, small organisations such as Imkaan are struggling with the sheer volume of work.

As the ending VAWG sector, we are feeling the strain. However, some organisations are better able to attract resources than others. This includes funding, pro bono support, media connections etc. On the other hand, a lack of capacity impacts on an organisation's ability to 'get out there' and proactively build relationships, develop a public profile and influence policy and commissioning. For 'by and for' organisations, dealing with multiple, intersecting discrimination, making the case is generally harder, and the 'reward' is likely to be less. Our sector itself is not a level playing field, and within the partnership space, many organisations are unwilling to match their stated commitment to collaborative working with the actual equal sharing of resources. 'Sisterhood' is often left at the door when conversations turn to the matter of money. Too often, the loudest voice or more visible partner in any situation is able to make the case for greater resources (i.e. we are larger and working with more people so we should have a bigger slice of the cake). Larger, more visible providers are able to have more influence with funders, commissioners and policy makers. Rather than strengthening our sector, this risks a widening of the gap and reinforcing embedded inequities.

If we are to push back as a sector against wider marginalisation, we *all* need to be stronger. An organisation that is better able to attract resources, could use this in ways that bring benefit to others. For example, a more ethical approach to resource allocation within a partnership might be based on a qualitative needs analysis that includes recognition of multiple disadvantage (including how organisations may experience that disadvantage). It is also important to think about facilitating access for sister organisations, this can include explorations of how time, funding, skills etc. can be shared within a partnership.

*Collaboration and meaningful partnership are not metaphors! Collaboration involves the sharing of resources and benefits in ways that help to strengthen all partners.*

## Conclusion: Transformation is Possible

As elements of violence against women and girls work have become mainstreamed, we have seen an increasing disconnect between service provision and a clear social change agenda. Yet our sector's work is rooted in a feminist vision, one which locates critical support to individual women and girls, within the context of ending violence against all women and girls.

We will not achieve this without dealing with interlocking systems of oppressions. As US activist and academic, Peggy McIntosh (WHITE PRIVILEGE AND MALE PRIVILEGE: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies, 1988) states, when reflecting on how she used her work on male privilege to begin to address her own white privilege,

'...I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance and if so, what we will do to lessen them.'

As feminists, we should be outraged by all forms of oppression, even when we belong to the dominant group and benefit from this. Organisations that are 'by and for' specialists (e.g. led by and for disabled women and by and for BME women) have been made increasingly vulnerable in the current policy and commissioning context. This should outrage other women's organisations – but this outrage should not be simply emotional or metaphorical. The partnership space provides opportunities for collective resistance, collaboration which can help to strengthen sister organisations, and ally-ship which includes ethical distribution of resources.

If we are to eliminate violence against women and girls, and create truly equal societies, it requires meaningful collaborative work which is transformative not only in its results but also by its very nature. This requires a shift at individual level as well as transformative practice between organisations. This is not about a homogenous ending VAWG sector voice, but more about how we manage differences, disrupt discriminatory practices and dismantle oppressions across our work.

**We really can be stronger together, but only if we are willing to be.**

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