

The conversation:

I draw sustainability from the women I work with

We'd like to start a conversation about the unique, complex and significant challenges of working in the family violence sector, in the hope that sharing our stories will bring clarity, ideas and value to all of us in our work. There is a diverse range of ways to understand and practice self-care. This regular feature is an opportunity to bring those different points of view to life, and share them across the sector.

In this issue, our conversation starts with Senior Trainer and Team Leader, Lisa French, by asking about her personal experience of building sustainability over ten years of direct service and program design across the family violence sector.

What does resilience mean to you in family violence work?

Resilience is a term I struggle to identify with and for me the more important question is, 'What does it mean to remain connected to the work for it to be sustainable?' Sustainability for me is about remaining connected to values, ethics and the feminist practice framework so the work remains politicised and isn't diluted.

What does 'burnout' mean in this field?

The concept of burnout stems from a psychological frame that can individualise the complexities and struggles of the work, which renders the structural nature of the work invisible. In our field – as feminists working in a system that constantly reinforces gender stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs – constant interaction with systemic and societal structures that increase the risk of violence to women is not just tiring, it can be demoralising.

What is unique about the idea of stress and burnout in the family violence sector?

The emergence of new frameworks and expansion of feminist frameworks in defining family violence will have significant implications for the interventions we use with women and perpetrators. The welcome expansion of the family violence workforce is leading to diverse understandings of family violence, which impacts on the way we work together, with women and children, and the way we engage men.

Join the conversation



Do you want to join the conversation? Email us today dvrcv@dvrcv.org.au if you'd like to share your conversation about how you care for and sustain yourself in your work and it could be printed in the next issue of the Advocate.

What do you see as stress that is specific to family violence workers today?

Increased funding and focus can put organisations in a difficult position which can impact on shared advocacy, but these are issues that many in the sector are actively engaging with and working through.

Also, the level and pace of change, coupled with increasing demand stretches specialist family violence practitioners in an unprecedented way and requires them to engage in direct service and advocacy in a highly political, ever changing environment which can be exhausting and isn't sustainable in the long term.

What practical methods have you developed to build your own sustainability?

The way that I understand sustainability is through the women who have fought and advocated before me. Their words, actions and strength inform the way that I conceptualise it.

One practical tip for connection, sustainability and accountability involves critical reflection and more listening. It is important for me to continue engaging in critical reflexive practice to deconstruct what we bring to the work; our different powers and privileges.

I draw sustainability from women I work with; that's a significant source of strength for me. Tips like 'go for a walk' or 'make time for yourself' are sensible and lovely but don't work for me. Instead I ask, 'Who can I draw strength from?'

Yes, you need to speak to your manager and your workload needs to be manageable, but feeling connected to the work and people is what builds my long-term resilience.



How have managers, human resources or team leaders nurtured your resilience?

I think that strong feminist leadership can promote a sense of 'being in this together' that is meaningful and promotes collective action. Individuals can lack the power to create change so I appreciate leaders who engage in a conscious practice of recognising the different power and privileges inherent in the workplace by asking, 'How can we advocate collectively?'

How have your colleagues nurtured resilience in you?

Listening to, and being present for, each other makes our experiences visible. The sense of 'I see you, I hear you' is important to maintain sustainability and connection to the work. Holding each other accountable by having critical conversations also ensures my work remains political and structurally focused, and isn't reduced to an individualised practice.