

LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE



By Amanda Hailes

We've heard how vital it is to increase our own power by challenging self-limiting beliefs and practices and unlocking the power of lived experience in our discussions on sharing and building power.

Amanda Hailes writes about her own experience of doing this here.

Living with any disadvantage can be incredibly difficult.

Disadvantages such as childhood trauma, poverty, domestic abuse, mental ill health, addiction, coercion, exploitation, losing custody of children, homelessness, violence, sexual violence, street prostitution, being involved in the criminal justice system and imprisonment.

Most of these disadvantages come with labels, stereotypes and stigma.

When disadvantages become layered on top of each other, becoming multiple disadvantages, they can become suffocating. Each disadvantage ricocheting off the next until it becomes impossible to escape them.

I know what it's like to try and survive multiple disadvantages because the list of disadvantages above are my disadvantages. The disadvantages I have faced throughout my life.

The impact of struggling to survive all my disadvantages became overwhelming. I'd asked for help and support from the services so many times throughout my life, going round and round in circles, with no help and support. I ended up spinning in circles, my life spiraling out of control.

I felt so totally alone, my mental ill health was impacting on everything in my life, and it became frightening, not knowing who to turn to and feeling totally helpless. I felt I had been discarded by the services and discarded by society.

I ended up losing everything, my children, my family, my home and myself.

My life has changed so much over these past few years, I escaped homelessness, I escaped street-based sex work, I escaped crack cocaine and heroin addiction, I escaped.

For over a decade I was a voluntary outreach worker in the red-light district in Hull. I

handed out coffee and condoms to the women working the streets, knowing nothing had changed. Women being failed by services and systems that were still broken, in fact over recent years it had got even worse.

But I didn't know what to do.

My life echoed the other women's lives and their lives echoed my life.

In this country, thousands of women are struggling to survive not only multiple disadvantages, but women are also having to survive going from one service, to the next, and to the next to be 'signposted' to the next and back to the first and put on overly long waiting lists, going round and round in circles, with no real help or support. Support so desperately needed.

Multiple disadvantages cannot be tackled one by one with each service doing their own individual thing. Services must work together using a trauma informed approach, employ those with lived experience and look at bridging those gaps so women aren't labelled – hard to reach, marginalised, having chaotic or transient lifestyles or be beyond help – when in fact it's the services that are hard to reach, the services that are chaotic.

We need to support women far better before their lives reach crisis point.

Too many women are dying, too many women are being failed by broken services and by broken systems, and we need to give better help and support women who are struggling to survive multiple disadvantages.

The system and in turn the services are outdated and were conceived and introduced in the 1940s.

We need to look at a totally new approach for modern day Britain, because over the past eight decades we have changed as a society and therefore society's needs have changed. This should be reflected in the services that people need today and into the future.

In 2017, myself and 11 other women from Hull, with lived experience of street-based sex work and working and surviving the streets, published a book called *An Untold Story*, containing poetry, prose, stories, artwork and photos of our experiences, which was funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation.

We each had to use a pseudonym because of the stigma we might face.

It was during this time that I found my voice – the voice of lived experience – and to tell you the truth, I haven't shut up since!

But I felt, if I was going to challenge that stigma, I couldn't do it behind a fake name, so I choose to use my own name.

I speak for the women without a voice, women who are silenced because of fear or stigma, the women who are disregarded and discarded.

Our little collective, *An Untold Story – Voices* – four women including myself and Susie with lived experience and Emma and Anna who are incredible friends, colleagues and advocates – highlights multiple disadvantages, which we have done in a

creative way, with the book, a photographic exhibition 'Absence of Evidence' in collaboration with Henry/Bragg Art and more recently a gallery exhibition and short film made by Other Cinemas, at Humber Street Gallery in Hull.

We talk honestly and openly, even if that honesty is brutal, using our lived experience, our different perspectives, our viewpoints of an often secretive, underground and dangerous world, in our own words. We do this to shape policy and practice, legislation and systems change. We push for the voices of lived experience to be heard.

By having the voices of lived experience, occupational experience and decision makers around the same table, each bringing their own expertise and each having a voice, we can begin to rebuild the new foundations needed to support and build these new systems and services.

Amanda Hailes is part of the Hull-based women's collective *An Untold Story – Voices*, campaigning for women's rights and social justice, and is a spokesperson for *Sound Delivery Media* and a trustee of the *Lankelly Chase Foundation*.

