

A GUIDE TO PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Themes include: art activism, the impact of grassroots action and refusals to be bystanders to injustice. Responsibility remains with educators to ensure that materials are age appropriate for their students.

Domestic Violence Revolutionaries in Newham

Seven women a month are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales. Disabled women are twice as likely to face domestic abuse as nondisabled women. The government says that domestic abuse is “any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional.” Newham has been home to groundbreaking new ways of dealing with domestic violence which have had national impacts.

Powerhouse and Beverley Lewis House - women with learning disabilities defending their rights

A diverse group of women from East London got together to talk about things that mattered to them and a subject that came up often was domestic violence and abuse. The group included women with and without learning disabilities, and they called themselves the Powerhouse (POWER stands for Protecting Ourselves, Women with learning disabilities for Equal Rights).

By 1991 the group met every week and discovered that domestic violence refuges were not set up to help women with learning disabilities. They said: “If we could say what we really want, it would be a safe house, just for women with learning difficulties, with women workers and women counsellors, at a confidential address, where we could stay for a while and get strong by being able to talk about our experiences and learning to do more things for ourselves”. They campaigned for a refuge just like this, and argued that it must be diverse: “Black women are in the Powerhouse, disabled women, lesbians, mothers, Asian women and women without learning disabilities”. The women said: “remember that women with learning difficulties are the experts about ourselves”.

East Thames Housing agreed to build the refuge and the Powerhouse women were involved in planning and design. Alison Hazel, committee member, wrote: “the architects made plans about the actual design of how the house was going to be. We didn’t understand their writings and drawings so we gave it back and said... we needed things more in pictures. We asked them to make a model of the house so we could understand how the house was going to be. I felt more stronger... and more confident in bring the right things out to the architects to make them listen to women with learning disabilities”. Powerhouse remains at the St Luke’s Community Centre in Canning Town (<http://www.thepowerhouse.org.uk>). One Powerhouse member reports: “I like to make decisions for myself” and another says: “We come here, because we like it”.

The safe house opened in 1995 and staff believe it remains the only specialist refuge for women with learning disabilities in the UK. Powerhouse named the house after Beverley Lewis, a young black deafblind woman who died in 1989.

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

Beverley Lewis House works hard to fulfil the original vision. It has 12 beds for women with learning disabilities who have either been abused or are at serious risk of being abused. Residents get holistic help, including art therapy, drama therapy and life skills training, and one said: "The staff team, therapists and behaviour analysts have provided consistency, hope, positivity, stability and warmth, throughout this difficult time." See <https://www.east-thames.co.uk/blh>

Refuges and safe houses are facing funding problems across the UK. For more information see www.womensaid.org.uk

If you have been affected by domestic abuse, you can call the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline 0808 2000 247 (see <http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>)



Mosaic created by the first Beverley Lewis House residents

Secondary sources

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Powerhouse and Beverley Lewis House collectives, *Powerhouse and Beverley Lewis House Collectives*, London, 1996b, Tizard Learning Disability Review, Volume 1 Issue 4, pp. 39-43

Special thanks to everyone who gave of their time and expertise to help compile this guide, which was researched by Bethan Rigby. In particular: Tae Catford and all the women of Powerhouse, and the residents and Gary Reeman and Sarah Hellawell of Beverley Lewis House. All mistakes are our own!

To download this and other stories of community action for justice in Newham go to <http://journeytojustice.org.uk/projects/newham-history/>