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Graphic by Vinnie

In Love & Anger: Executive Summary

Towards a transferable model of emancipatory praxis with birthmothers severed from their children by addiction.

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1. Introduction.

This is a summary report of an action research-based study of the pioneering Tina's Haven pilot project, delivered in East Durham from November 2022 to December 2023.

Twenty-one women in addiction recovery participated in the Tina's Haven pilot project, and an additional seven in an eight-week follow-on nature-based volunteering project.^{1 2} The majority of these twenty-eight women (circa 70%) were birthmothers severed from their children by addiction.

The study shines a light on the plight of birthmothers severed from their children by addiction as a result of violence against women and girls (VAWG), early trauma, exclusion from their families and communities, being marginalised and stigmatised by state services; and further harmed from involvement with legal institutions that are known to blame and punish women for the abuse they have been subjected to (Learmonth et. al. 2022, Morriss and Broadhurst 2022, UK Parliament 2022, Dalgarno et. al. 2024). This study, and the Tina's Haven pilot project emerges within the context of the following:

- ❖ Marginalised and vulnerable females in the region being found 1.7 times as likely to die early than in England and Wales as a whole; and the average age at death falling by ten years, from 47 to 37 (Agenda Alliance and Changing Lives 2023)
- ❖ Mortality rates from drug poisoning decreasing for males and increasing for females in 2022; and drug related deaths in the North East being consistently the highest of any English region for ten consecutive years.³
- ❖ In 2024, "the North East continues to record the highest overall care rates" (Health Equity North 2024:9). The North East, having 113 per 10K children in the care system in March 2023, 1.6 times the national average of 71; with six out of twelve North East local authorities in the highest 10%.⁴

The intention of the Tina's Haven project is to develop a transferable model of holistic and emancipatory praxis, that will bring about self-empowerment and solidarity among birthmothers severed from their children by trauma-based addiction. This involves removing known barriers to their social and political freedom and rights by influencing changes in social attitudes, institutional practices and policy, and the law (including its interpretation).⁵

This report draws upon practice-based learning from the rich and dense evaluative findings of the pioneering and seminal Tina's Haven pilot project. It makes a significant contribution towards creating a transferable model of praxis; and is testimony of the journey so far.

2. The key question inherent to the study.

The four practice disciplines applied to the Tina's Haven pilot project were:

1. 'The 12-Steps' to addiction recovery, supported by ANE Health and Housing (ANE).⁶
2. The Arts and nature-based practice, delivered by The Barn at Easington.⁷
3. 'Own My Life' (OML) - a 12-week course to help women who have been subjected to abuse to regain ownership of their lives, from The Women's Liberation Collective.⁸
4. Trauma-responsive practice, supported by a freelance trauma therapy practitioner & trainer with a background in children's social care.

A central question examined throughout the study is: Is the nucleus of Tina’s Haven located within the intersection of the four different practice disciplines applied to the pilot project?

In pursuance of the above question, the aims of the study were threefold:

- a) To embed a process of cyclic and reflexive learning into both the Tina’s Haven project and the emerging transferable model of practice.
- b) To evaluate the efficacy of the Tina’s Haven pilot project in removing barriers to the social and political freedom and rights of birthmothers severed from their children by trauma-based addiction.
- c) To identify and analyse any inherent nuances, tensions, and contests between the different practice disciplines applied to the project.

3. Methodology and Tina’s Haven theory of change.

Female oppression and VAWG are conceived in this study and the Tina’s Haven project as structural; in accordance with national and international definitions, including the World Health Organisation (WHO).^{9 10} It follows that birthmothers severed from their children by addiction need systematic and structural remedies to remove barriers to their social and political freedom and rights. In order to measure the changes necessary; this study blends a logical process of project evaluation (Kellogg Foundation 2004), with Black feminist theory; which goes beyond a practice of changing individual and collective consciousness to a level of transforming “unjust social institutions” (Collins 2000:277-28). The domains of power and empowerment, as they are conceived by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, form the Tina’s Haven theory of change as illustrated in Table 1.¹¹

Table 1: Tina’s Haven theory of change, based upon “Black Feminist Thought,” Collins (2000)

Domains of power	Measures of empowerment
<p>1) Interpersonal Domain – Influences everyday lived experiences and individual consciousness by replacing individual ways of knowing with dominant groups thoughts.</p>	<p>Changes in skills, knowledge, personal growth, and individual consciousness of birthmothers severed from their children by addiction, so that they can understand and analyse their everyday lived experiences.</p> <p>Improved interpersonal relationships, particularly among females.</p>
<p>2) Hegemonic Domain – Provides the link between institutions in the structural domain and organisational practices by justifying ‘common sense’ ideas behind social policy, manufacturing ideologies, and recycling old ideas in new forms.</p>	<p>The development of bilateral female solidarity; particularly between birthmothers/ women in addiction and practitioners.</p> <p>Developing a bigger movement that struggles collectively for societal change.</p> <p>Creating spaces and platforms for birthmothers severed from their children by addiction to have voice and agency, and to be heard.</p> <p>Changes in values, attitudes, and collective consciousness; including shifts in ways of thinking and being in the world.</p>

Domains of power	Measures of empowerment
	Challenging the hegemonic narratives that seek to stigmatise, and victim blame birthmothers severed from their children by addiction, by developing a counter-narrative that is authentic, positive, and hopeful.
3) Disciplinary Domain – How organisational/ institutional practices and processes reproduce certain unequal power relations through the bureaucratic hierarchies of organisations, and by disciplining and controlling employees and ‘clients.’	Transforming the practices, processes, cultures, policies and strategies of organisations and institutions towards more egalitarian ways of working to bring about equality and social justice. Permeating the dichotomy between ‘professionals’ and ‘service users’ that serve to maintain hierarchies and unhelpful barriers.
4) Structural Domain – Organises oppression through a network of interconnected social institutions that regulate citizen’s rights.	Changes in the policies and practices of statutory agencies and institutions; including changes in the law and/ or interpretation of the law to bring about an end to oppression and discrimination against birthmothers.

4. Findings of the study.

The collective biography of birthmothers involved in this study tells of childhood and teenage trauma and abuse, often leading their journeys into addiction; state intervention into their adult lives upon becoming pregnant and having children; and then state collusion with VAWG that the women have been subjected to throughout their lives. These findings reflect a predictably familiar pattern with other North East based research (Van Zyl, et. al. 2022b).

The Tina’s Haven pilot project modelled a holistic and emancipatory praxis centred upon birthmothers in trauma-based addiction, seeking to remove interpersonal, cultural, systematic, and structural barriers to their social and political freedom and rights by bringing about: agency, self-empowerment, critical consciousness, female solidarity, and collective action.

This study establishes that complementing addiction services in a mixed-sex setting with arts and nature-based community practice; trauma-responsive support; rights based feminist community development; and learning for women subjected to abuse to regain ownership of their lives, enhances, and strengthens women’s recovery from addiction and VAWG (also see Sanders 2003, 2006).

The Tina’s Haven pilot project is shown to have begun replacing a dominant narrative of stigma surrounding birthmothers in addiction, with stories of bravery, hope, connection, unity, and love.

A wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to the study to identify the outcomes of the Tina’s Haven pilot project across the four domains of power and empowerment (Collins 2000). These are briefly summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Brief summary of the outcomes of the Tina's Haven pilot project across four domains of power.

1. Interpersonal level.	2. Hegemonic level.
<p>Improved well-being, healing, and spiritual connection from being immersed in nature.</p> <p>Personal development, learning and growth.</p> <p>Improving relationships and developing connections between women in addiction.</p> <p>Positive experiences of female-only spaces.</p> <p>Self-empowerment of women in addiction, including birthmothers.</p> <p>The emergence of critical consciousness in birthmothers/ women in addiction.</p>	<p>Solidarity building among birthmothers/women participants and practitioners/artists.</p> <p>Shifts in world views (paradigm changing) among birthmothers/women participants, practitioners-artists; and partner organisations and external agencies.</p> <p>Towards building a counter hegemony, evidenced in changed values, beliefs, and attitudes among birthmothers/women participants, practitioners-artists, partners and external agencies, and members of the public.</p> <p>A more authentic, positive, and hopeful narrative about birthmothers in public media.</p>
3. Disciplinary level.	4. Structural level.
<p>Heightened shared understanding and insights into different practice models applied to the pilot project. Including insights into inherent tensions between different disciplines.</p> <p>Changes in organisational practices within partner organisations and collaborators to become more female focussed.</p> <p>Organisational culture change, and changes in strategy within partner organisations, including becoming more female focussed, and arts and culture becoming more accessible to marginalised birthmothers/ women in addiction.</p> <p>The creation and development of safe and forgiving female-only spaces across partner organisations.</p>	<p>The changes at a structural level were incremental. and included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Wider recognition of the potential of feminist empowerment programmes to improve understanding of VAWG in children's social care and criminal justice systems. b) Recognition of the potential social-economic value and efficacy of the Tina's Haven model by a commissioner of public funding. c) Investment of £100k public funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to sustain and develop a holistic and emancipatory model of practice with women in addiction in East Durham. ¹²

5. Conclusion: A holistic model of emancipatory praxis with birthmothers.

This study presents biographical and practice-based evidence, combined with a review of the literature to question the effectiveness of gender-neutral 'whole family' and 'trauma informed' approaches towards interrupting the cycle of birthmother and child severance and removal (e.g. Mason et al. 2020, Grant et. al. 2023). Instead, this study of the Tina's Haven pilot project advocates for a fusion of trauma responsive, reflexive, feminist emancipatory practices, that are situated within a critical analysis that recognises the pervasive, gendered, and structural nature of VAWG (also see Teris 2019).

The following emerge as key components of a transferable model of emancipatory praxis with birthmothers severed from their children by addiction:

- a) At the heart of the transferable model of emancipatory praxis are safe and forgiving female-only spaces, that are protected by the Single Sex Equality Duty (SSE, Equality Act 2010), on the basis that a mixed-sex approach would not be an effective way of addressing the subjective experiences of birthmothers severed from their children by trauma-based addiction.¹³
- b) Within the heart-centre of the model, is connecting with the struggle for social justice and rights for birthmothers by surrounding them with love and connection supported by feminist consciousness-raising and solidarity building.
- c) Also, at the heart-centre of the model is the subjective-self of the artists and practitioners. It is imperative towards building trust and female solidarity that those involved in steering and delivering an emancipatory model are able to overcome dominant conceptions of detached professionalism.
- d) There is no place in an emancipatory model for divisions and hierarchies; we are all part of the same struggle for social justice and rights for birthmothers severed from their children, because these are fundamental to women’s rights. Within this struggle, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism are recognised as interlocking systems of oppression.

The three interconnecting and synergising practice disciplines emerging from the findings of this study are illustrated in Figure 1.

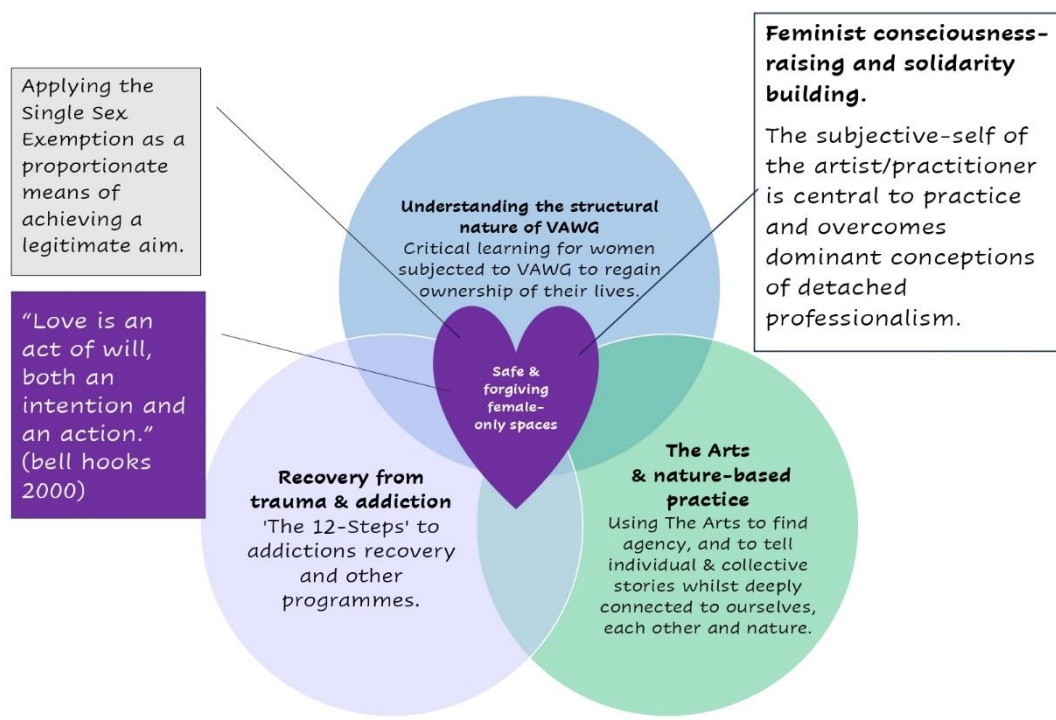


Figure 1: Three interconnecting and synergising practice disciplines emerging from the findings of this study.

6. Recommendations.

Measures are now in place to sustain the emancipatory model of practice established by the Tina's Haven pilot project in East Durham, including developing Arts and nature-based practice, and the OML course, as integral to the female programme in a mixed-sex recovery setting. A crucial next stage in the development of the Tina's Haven project, could be to carry out detailed strategic work, **led by birthmothers severed from their children by addiction** to bring about their social and political freedom and rights. In relation to the issues and barriers identified in this study, consideration could be given to the following:

- a) Influencing funders and commissioners to invest in holistic, trauma-responsive, and emancipatory practices with birthmothers in trauma-based addiction; for the purpose of bringing about, agency, self-empowerment, and female solidarity. This should include grants to recovery and addiction female-led community groups, including partnerships and collaborative projects that will strengthen solidarity and collective agency.¹⁴
- b) Call upon mixed-sex treatment and recovery organisations to provide safe and forgiving female-only spaces in accordance with the SSE (Equality Act 2010).
- c) Seek resources for a Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment of the emancipatory model of praxis in relation to its social, environmental, and economic value by reducing inequalities and improving the well-being of birthmothers.¹⁵
- d) A call to action to The UK Women's Sector to understand and respond to the needs of birthmothers severed from their children by trauma-based addiction, including:
 - i) Promoting rights-based emancipatory feminist praxis with birthmothers.
 - ii) Strengthening networks and pathways of holistic support, well-being, healing, and recovery from addiction and VAWG.
 - iii) Policy and campaigning work to support birthmothers using human rights instruments such as the SSE (EA 2010), Human Rights Act 1998, and the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) CEDAW.¹⁶
- e) Call upon Government to re-invest in early intervention, with the intention of shifting the emphasis back towards keeping children within birth-families as a way of reducing the soaring numbers of children entering the care system. And to make statutory provision for therapeutic supports available when children and birthmothers are reunited, on parallel lines and scale to the Adoption Support Fund.¹⁷
- f) Call for statutory support for birthmothers when they are severed from their children as a result of children's social care and family court systems. However, this would need to be shaped by and for birthmothers, on their terms; and not infringe upon or undermine their rights.
- g) Campaigning with others for an urgent systemic shift in children's social care and family court systems to bring to the forefront the rights and needs of both children and birthmothers, and to put measures in place to support the relationship between them. As a signatory of CEDAW, it is incumbent upon the UK government that these systems operate within the structural definitions of discrimination against women and VAWG as they are contained in United Nations conventions and WHO.¹⁸

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<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldchifam/100/10002.htm>

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Notes and references.

¹ Intending to avoid the stigma and stereotyping associated with the term 'addict', the terms used in this report are "women in addiction," 'women in addiction recovery' and those who have relapsed back into 'active addiction.'

² Evaluation Report – Women in Recovery & Empowerment (WIRE) pilot project, The Barn at Easington, funded by East Durham Trust. Dr Sue Robson, PhD, MA, BA Evaluator, Tina's Haven November 2023 (unpublished).

³ Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2022 registrations - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2022registrations>

⁴ Children looked after in England including adoptions - <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2023>

⁵ For the purpose of this study, "praxis" is defined as "the process of using a theory or something that you have learned in a practical way." <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/praxis>

⁶ ANE Health & Housing - <https://www.addictionsnortheast.com/>

⁷ The Barn at Easington - <https://www.thebarnateasington.co.uk/>

⁸ The Women's Liberation Collective - <https://www.ownmylifecourse.org/wlc>

⁹ Definition of discrimination against women: any distinction, exclusion, or restriction, made on the basis of sex, with the purpose or effect of impairing the enjoyment by women of political, economic, social, cultural, or civil human rights on equal footing with men UN Convention (CEDAW) - Summary <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/convention-on-the-elimination-of-all-forms-of-discrimination-against-women-cedaw>

¹⁰ "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Violence against women (United Nations definition adopted by World Health Organisation) https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women#tab=tab_1

¹¹ This model of systems change based upon the work of Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins is now advocated by the national charity, Women's Resource Centre - <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=75160612-5a76-49a5-827d-94ea97c92d58>

¹² The Barn at Easington were awarded £100,041 from National Lottery Community Fund on 20.23.2024 to develop Women in Empowerment & Recovery (WiRE) in collaboration with ANE.

¹³ Equality Act 2010, Part 7: Separate and single services. Separate services for the sexes: paragraph 26: 729. This paragraph contains exceptions to the general prohibition of sex discrimination which allow the provision of separate services for men and women. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/notes/division/3/16/20/7>

¹⁴ According to "Financial relationships with third sector organisations", 'Grant-Aid' is one of three funding channels for commissioners to consider for projects that are in 'close alignment' with government objectives -

https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Financial_relationships_with_third_sector_organisations.pdf

¹⁵ See a guide to Social Return on Investment - https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/aff3779953c5b88d53_cpm6v3v71.pdf

¹⁶ CEDAW was established in 1979 and is often referred to as the Women's International Bill of Rights. Unlike domestic UK and European legislation on sex discrimination and equal treatment, the Convention is solely concerned with the position of women rather than discrimination faced by both sexes (which would include discrimination against men). The Convention places obligations on State parties (countries that have agreed to the Convention), to eliminate discrimination against women. The substantive model of equality enshrined in CEDAW is based upon the principle that discrimination is socially constructed and is not a natural principle of human interaction. Substantive equality recognises the need for concerted action against inequality, and the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate it. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

¹⁷ Guidance Adoption support fund (ASF), Local authorities and regional adoption agencies (RAAs) can apply for therapeutic funding for eligible adoptive and special guardianship order families. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adoption-support-fund-asf>

¹⁸ As endnotes 9, 10 and 16.