

FROM SURVIVOR CENTRED **TO** **SURVIVOR LED:**

Lessons from Promising
Survivor-Led Gender-Based
Violence Accountability Initiatives

Irish Consortium
on Gender Based
Violence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survivor-centred initiatives, dating back to at least the 1970s, have come to be regarded as the gold standard in Gender-based Violence (GBV) accountability across many parts of the globe, particularly since they were endorsed by the United Nations Security Council through Resolution 2467. However, recent research highlights the ambiguity of the concept of survivor-centredness and suggests that it is often not realised in practice. The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV) commissioned this project to seek evidence of established and emerging good practice, with which to inspire a pivot within policy and practice from survivor-centred to survivor-led gender-based violence (GBV) accountability initiatives.

Scope

The research focused on survivor-led accountability initiatives in humanitarian, development, and peace support contexts, identified from accountability work at the global level as well as in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Europe. They reflect GBV prevention, risk mitigation, and response efforts at the micro, meso, and macro levels and with regard to diverse forms of GBV, including Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), childhood and adult sexual violence, and systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV).

Findings

Heeding the warnings of various scholars and a United Nations Experts Group, the report eschews the use of 'best' or 'good' practice and, instead, characterises the initiatives presented as examples of 'promising' practice. Case studies of the Murad Code, national survivor networks accompanied by the Dr Denis Mukwege Foundation, SEMA Ukraine, and the Survivors Leadership Initiative are followed by a brief presentation of these eight initiatives: advocacy by the National Organization of Wartime Rape Victims on Nepal's Transitional Justice Bill, the Brave Movement, the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission, the Global Survivors Fund, Men of Hope Refugee Association which became Men of Hope USA, Tearfund's 'A Shared Journey' training manual, the Rainbo Initiative Survivor Solidarity Group, and Women of Honour. The last two are emerging initiatives.

Discussion

The wealth of literature on survivor-centred initiatives encountered during the research contrasts sharply with the paucity of material on survivor-led accountability initiatives, particularly in humanitarian, development, and peace support contexts. This research argues that a survivor-led approach carries greater transformative potential but requires survivor-centredness to realise this potential. As Dr Hussein (TGG-ALM) cautioned, *'In order to support a survivor-led space, you need a survivor-centred approach, or otherwise you could be putting that movement at risk'*.

A. Survivor-centred versus survivor-led

'The narrative around being survivor-centred should continue moving from "let's add them", "let's include them in the conversation because they are important" to "oh, these conversations cannot and must not happen without survivors being in the room".' - Mukwege Foundation representative

The report presents survivor-led accountability efforts as an extension of survivor-centred GBV work and suggests that the former have both greater conceptual clarity and transformative possibilities than the latter. Research suggests that survivor-centred and survivor-led initiatives should be regarded as falling along a continuum with the following stages: survivor-blind, -aware, -informed, -centred, and -led. Although survivor-led approaches are the most transformative, at times, survivors need support or 'accompaniment' in order to begin to heal and to gain skills and resources to lead.

- B. Voice, agency, and inclusion** *'Nothing about us, without us - I ascribe to this ethic 100%. Not for survivors, but with survivors. It is so important that survivor voices are heard. Survivors tend not to be consulted, but no one knows their pain better than they do.'* - Tatiana Mukanire, SEMA member from the DRC (Dr Denis Mukwege Foundation and SEMA Network 2022, 45)

Redistributing power in order to truly hear survivors' voices and strengthen their agency begins with recognition of their status as experts based on their experience. Agreeing with survivors and others who argue that survivors are still not being heard, the report draws on the examples to demonstrate how survivor-led initiatives compensate survivors, facilitate their access to funding, and help them develop the skills required to effect change. However, the examples also depict a complex relationship between activism and healing. Furthermore inclusion was found to present additional challenges.

C. Overcoming challenges to survivor leadership

'Disclosing personal experience of violence is an individual choice that has the potential to bring healing, though it may not always be therapeutic. When my story was held with empathy, it brought healing. When I felt dismissed, it led to me shutting down.' (Nevatia 2024, 8)

While context-specific challenges surfaced during the research, common challenges reported across contexts and regions include trauma, stigma, limited psychosocial support or stigma attached to seeking psychosocial support, challenges securing funding, insecurity, lack of technical skills required to influence policy and practice, and a desire to maintain secrecy. A key finding is that one way in which survivors have moved towards overcoming these challenges is through healing. Various sources mention healing through activism, psychosocial support, or research. Referencing anthropological debates, the report encourages additional reflection on the implications and effects of the use of psychiatric categories in non-Western contexts. Collective healing also featured prominently in the findings, which indicate that peer support and/or movement building have the potential to help survivors overcome some of the barriers they face to leadership.

D. Success/Impact of survivor-led initiatives

SEMA has been a school for me where I have learned from everyone how sexual violence is experienced in other countries, as well as how to demand responsibility from states and society for not having attended in time to the damage caused to the bodies of the victims, also to make the states aware of sexual violence. Thanks to SEMA, we have been able to make sexual violence visible, which has been an issue where no one wants to hear or listen.- Ángela María Escobar Vásquez, SEMA member & National Coordinator of Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales in Colombia (Dr Denis Mukwege Foundation 2023, 4)

Most of the initiatives described may be too nascent to have been formally evaluated. However, advocacy initiatives by survivors have resulted in the tabling of a Bill in the Nepalese Parliament to recognise the right to reparation and relief for survivors of CRSV; securing a commitment from G7 leaders to fight child sexual abuse and exploitation, both on and offline; and the establishment of the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission. Furthermore, survivors reported success in the establishment of support groups and registration of their associations. These findings and ICGBV's recognition that GBV accountability does not have an endpoint suggest the need to rethink conventional understandings of success.

Conclusion

The report contends that survivor-led initiatives are both more transformative than and best realised in tandem with survivor-centred approaches. Given the failure to fully recognise survivors' expertise and the multiple challenges they face leading initiatives, NGOs and other related actors should take on the key, albeit temporary, role accompanying survivors in the progression from survivor-centred to survivor-led initiatives and should be guided by survivors in evaluating survivor-led initiatives.

Recommendations

Overarching recommendation:

In recognition of the strength of drawing on survivor expertise to foster a more effective and transformative response to GBV, states, policymakers, practitioners, donors, and researchers must actively fund, offer in-kind support to, provide necessary technical and organisation support to, facilitate survivor access to holistic care, and/or prioritise egalitarian engagement with survivor-led GBV accountability initiatives—as relevant to their mandate.

See Section IX for specific recommendations to states, policy makers, practitioners, donors, and researchers.



'For me, the reason I've been such a big advocate, especially for this program...is because it's been everything I didn't have as a survivor when I was in this space, so unfortunately...looking back, I was exploited. I wasn't taken care of. I don't think those people meant it at the time. They didn't know any better, so I think that's why.' – Dr Leyla Hussein, Global Advocacy Director, *The Girl Generation – Support to the Africa-led Movement to end FGM/C*



As reported by survivors: 'We want to establish a network because no one else is listening to us or our needs. We think that people don't care about what we think, and we want to change our lives ourselves. We don't want to be reliant on humanitarian actors or be used by them or reliant on international aid. It's really demeaning and quite patronising to us.' - Mukwege Foundation representative



'We need to intentionally prioritize a culture of care, compassion, and solidarity [...] in our organizations, especially among those of us involved in this work.' (Nevatia 2024, 11)

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**Irish Consortium
on Gender Based
Violence**



The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV) is an alliance of Irish humanitarian and development organisations, Irish Aid and the Irish Defence Forces. The Consortium was formed to address the high levels of sexual violence that was being perpetrated against women and girls in Darfur, Sudan, in 2005. Together we work to increase knowledge and understanding of gender-based violence, amplifying the role, participation and contributions of grass roots and women's rights organisations. We strive to ensure high quality programming and policy responses across the humanitarian and development contexts in which we work and to build leadership to support our shared vision of a world free from gender-based violence.

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