MURAD CODE PROJECT

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# IN OUR OWN WORDS



Survivor Perspectives for Those Gathering and Using Information About Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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# INTRODUCTION

This Survivor Perspectives Resource provides an invaluable opportunity to hear directly from survivors[1] about how the gathering and use of information about systematic and conflict-related sexual violence (SCRSV) impacts survivors' lives and how the approach to it can be made safer and more effective. As such, this should be a foundational resource for all those who investigate, document, report on, research or otherwise seek or use such information, and for managers, policy-makers and funders. This resource forms part of the Murad Code project (www.muradcode.com). It was developed to complement the *Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information About Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence* (the "Murad Code").[2] The insights and requests shared by the survivors who contributed to this resource have urgent implications for those involved in such processes and who want to work effectively, safely, ethically and in a survivor-centred manner.

[1] "Survivors" instead of "victims" is used in this resource, except where individuals have asked for "victims" to be used. See footnote 1 of the Murad Code.
[2] The Code can be found in various languages at www.muradcode.com/murad-code.

# FOREWORD BY NADIA MURAD

Systematic and conflict-related sexual violence (SCRSV) has been a tactic of war and oppression throughout history. Today we continually bear witness to the dehumanisation of women, children, and men through sexual violence - a crime that knows no geographic boundaries and destroys individuals, families and communities. SCRSV is meant to create as much emotional damage as humanly possible. The importance of understanding the brutality and frequency of these heinous acts of violence cannot be overstated, and **only by listening to survivors' stories and perspectives** can we comprehend the imperative to shift the world's collective conscience to stop such acts of violence.

I am honoured to write the foreword to this Survivor Perspectives Resource, an important document created by survivors and addressed to everyone involved in gathering and using information about SCRSV. This resource is reflective of the experiences of a multitude of survivors from diverse backgrounds, different countries, and distinct conflicts. Many survivors who contributed to this important document cannot openly share their experiences because of security risks for them and their families. **Telling one's story takes unimaginable courage**, as it involves facing the fear of retribution, dealing with shame, and confronting the possibility of stigma. The Survivor Perspectives Resource was thoughtfully developed to provide practitioners with the opportunity to fully understand survivors' experiences as expressed in the stories they shared with a wide range of documenters. It is through this knowledge that one can fully appreciate the value of using the Murad Code, a global code of conduct for gathering and using information about SCRSV, which can be found at www.muradcode.com.

**We owe a great debt of gratitude to survivors** for their willingness to be bold and share the trauma of their circumstances, including, for some, when they shared their stories with journalists, investigators, and researchers. I know from my own experience that coming forward is not easy and I applaud all the survivors that participated in creating this important resource. It is my hope that readers feel compelled to take steps as a global community towards ending such appalling acts of violence and protecting those afflicted by these crimes. The cold truth is that the only reason SCRSV continues today, in modern society, is the world's failure to act. We must hold perpetrators accountable and end the legacy of impunity – only by seeking justice and punishing crimes will we be able to deter those who commit these heinous acts. This resource serves as a strong foundation for achieving these objectives and is crucial to promoting a survivor-centred approach in other key fields.

***"It is my hope that readers feel compelled to take steps as a global community towards ending such appalling acts of violence and protecting those afflicted by these crimes."***

# PERSPECTIVES OF SURVIVORS





# *Why do we speak to you?*

If we don't talk, people will not know what happened.

*- Soniya, Nepal*

It was really helpful to me. After the experience of documentation, I feel like if I die, I will die with comfort because my story got saved somewhere.

*- Syrian survivor*

I felt like it was my duty to speak up, but I didn't want my feelings of responsibility and patriotism to be used or manipulated.

*- Iryna Dovgan, survivor from Ukraine*

Others think it is our duty to respond, but it's not our duty.  When we share our story, it is a favour we are giving because we are sensitising this issue.

*- Mague, survivor from DRC*

Because of poverty we feel obligated to talk to you.  A survivor thinks the documenters are coming to bring a solution to their problems. She doesn't have another avenue to express her problems.

*- Desanges Kabuo, survivor from DRC*

I needed a space to let all my sadness and sorrows out.

*- Nepali survivor*

The experience of documentation was very important to me because it was one of my most important goals. Documentation served my goal by communicating the voice of detainees who are still in detention and arrest.

*- Syrian survivor*

I worry if I will destroy my peace if I do, but also wonder if I will feel guilty if I don't. I will testify as long as I can until he is guilty.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

I needed this disclosure to reduce the burden of my memory.

*- Syrian survivor*

# *What are the effects on us when we speak to you?*

When I tell my story more often than normal, it impacts me in a bad way. It disturbs my inner peace, in my heart. I go over it again in my head. Whenever I tell my story it brings back bad memories. I am deeply affected telling it too many times.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

Speaking the first time is the most difficult, then it gets easier. Every time I tell it, I think it should not be a problem, but there are emotions present and stress present every time.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

After sharing my experience, I was sweating. I was worried that it was recorded, what if they put it out on the radio? I was afraid that someone will know my story. It makes me restless and afraid. I am always in fear.

*- Nepali survivor*





Sometimes after an interview I feel at ease and proud for having spoken up if they are compassionate, but depends on the documenter. Sometimes an interview can shock you. If someone has no interest, then you regret why you spent all this time with them and shared your information. When you leave with that reaction, it impacts your psychological state.

*- Mague, survivor from DRC*

However, until now, I would not talk about some situations I have been through. I don't talk about it because it causes me oppression and makes me feel humiliated... Because [re-living them] makes me feel inferior, humiliated, and helpless.

*- Syrian survivor*

I find it hard to talk about what I went through in detention. Every statement brings back buried pain.

*- Syrian survivor*

# *What are our concerns before we engage with you?*

For you this is a day job, for me it's the most traumatic moment of my life. It will have an impact on how I move forward. Please think about that before you call survivors and check them off on your list... For you it's your job or routine, it won't feel routine or just another day for us.

*- Megan Nobert*

Before documenters come to see me, I feel fearful and have a bitter taste and my body stiffens.

*- Nofa Ghanem Jomaa, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

It is exhausting every time you need to repeat your story because you have to give statements to different institutions. Then you remember that you gave a detail in one statement and didn't repeat it in another. It is stressful.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

Other documenters do not take into account the psychological state of the person they are talking to. Sometimes you re-live the experience and have flashbacks. It's not our habit to see counsellors. After we told our story, we go back into our vulnerable state.

*- Mague, survivor from DRC*

I was afraid if I tell, I'd be killed or my husband would be killed.

*- Red Rose, Nepal*

It was on a weekly basis that people come to interview us. It is uncomfortable. No matter how many sessions we have with psychologists it all disappears. Our story is well documented. We feel if we tell our story, it is good, but then we feel bad after.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*



**BEFORE DOCUMENTERS COME TO SEE ME, I FEEL FEARFUL AND HAVE A BITTER TASTE AND MY BODY STIFFENS.**

***- Nofa Ghanem Jomaa, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq***

**I WAS ALWAYS SCARED ABOUT MY OWN STORY. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT A DOCUMENTER WOULD DO WITH IT.**

***- Soniya, Nepal***



# *What power and responsibility do you have as a documenter?*

There is profound power as a documenter. You do have the ability to make a survivor's perspective of their experience feel better or worse. You can leave a survivor feeling that they are worthwhile or that they are dirty. It's incredible power... You can bring us accountability and bring justice to our lives, or bring us more trauma.

*- Megan Nobert*

I had the experience of talking with a ... journalist who wanted to talk to me as a former detainee... The experience of talking to her destroyed me because she did not believe what I was saying... Mostly because she does not know the Syrian context. Then I decided to cut off any communication with any parties wishing me to disclose what happened to me.

*- Syrian survivor*

I was always scared about my own story. I didn't know what a documenter would do with it.

*- Soniya, Nepal*

Only 1% of survivors can stop a documenter and say they don't understand. Whenever a survivor is asked to speak to a documenter, they feel obligated to talk with them. From a survivor, it would be due to our inferiority complex. We are poor and don't give ourselves that value. That has an impact on information given to a documenter too. We are not able to give all information.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

# *Why is it important to focus on us as human beings, and not just for information?*

Documenters are attached to their stories, not to the people. Focus on the individual, not the story. We want people to know about the consequences, how we got past it, how we become a person again, how we move on, have life, learn to live with it, and turn this experience into something positive. That will help us change.

*- DRC survivor*

It's not a story for entertainment or to be capitalised on or made money from.

*- Soniya, Nepal*



Most of the experiences that ended with problems were due to lack of trust and exploitation. Most of the human rights organisations take advantage of detainees, they tell us they need to hear us, then they go away and never come back. They receive assistance and do not share it with us.

*- Syrian survivor*

For my first time telling documenters, they said they came to help us so we were open to tell them everything, instead they lied and profited from us. We decided not to talk again and lost trust with documenters. It is very difficult for a man to tell about our experience, to expose ourselves.

*- Munguakonkwa Kanega Adrien, survivor from DRC*

# *Why is confidentiality and privacy so necessary for us?*

Survivors no longer want to give out information because confidentiality has not been followed. We live in a society with insecurity, criminality, and many people choose to remain silent because they lived through terrible experiences.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

I prefer not to be interviewed in my own tent nor with my children around.

*- Nofa Ghanem Jomaa, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

Above all, respect us as human beings. We are a different hue of colours, gay, lesbian, trans – we are just human beings. For LGBTI people, confidentiality is paramount.

*- Alberto Luis Coneo, Colombian victim*

Don't refer my name to another person without asking me or telling me.

*- Nepali survivor*



If there is no confidentiality, then you feel traumatised. They will promise you it won't be shared, knowing that survivors don't take time to read newspapers or watch TV, but you come across one day a newspaper with your photograph and your information.

*- DRC survivor*

Survivor needs to know who will conduct the interview and who will be in the interview. A survivor does not want to have 10 people assisting in the story.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

There's no policies or regulations to ensure our safety. We may get abandoned by our family and society. It's my experience, not drama on the radio.

*- Soniya, Nepal*

It's important to have quiet space, no third persons, privacy, and no one coming in. I needed to feel safe.

*- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine*

# *Why is informed consent and control of our story so crucial?*

Before starting an interview, I want to know who they are and what they will do with my story. They should introduce themselves and why they are there and where they come from. They should show identification and tell me the objective of their interview. They should tell me how long it will take and type of questions they will ask so I can get ready psychologically.

*- Mwamini Kanega Aline, survivor from DRC*

Survivors need to know how the documenter will use our story and what their objective is. If they are publishing it, what will they publish? How do they ensure our privacy? What will happen to us or the impact on us after telling our story? What rights do we have?

*- Mina, Nepal*

After I talked to him, he said he would write an article about it. He didn't ask me if I minded. After I read it in the newspaper, I saw a completely distorted story. It took a year or more for me to be able to talk about my experience of sexual violence. I was ashamed and did not want to share it with anyone... Because of this bad experience, I didn't tell anyone for a long time.

*- Alisa Kovalenko, survivor from Ukraine*

It's important to be in control of my story. We need to make decisions and choices ourselves, but also know that others share our stories differently. Survivors need to know who they are talking to and why they should tell their story, and what happens to it. Even survivors in villages who don't have TV, they too must know fully and be informed. No survivor ever shares everything. Informed consent is important.

*- DRC survivor*

She must decide who to tell, but bear in mind that she should request a good comfortable place for herself; request her rights and be informed about which rights she has; and only when she is informed about her rights and the process, then can make a decision whether to go through it. And put her needs at the centre of everything.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

The use of language can be an issue. There are things written in the language we didn't know or in English by documenters and we do not know what they wrote. They didn't summarise or make sure what they wrote was correct.

*- Soniya, Nepal*

There are two categories: those who will contact you prior to meeting, ask if you agree to talk with you, and if you are ready to share your story and they prepare you appropriately before the conversation. The other category are the bad documenters. They come abruptly and just start talking to you without your consent. They come with questions and if you don't understand they don't care and just come to fill in their agenda.

*- Desanges Kabuo, survivor from DRC*

# *What helps us to open up and talk to you?*

Documenters need to create a good environment. They need to have the capacity to be sensitive; to ask questions properly; and be able to respond well. They need the capacity to do these interviews, otherwise, they re-traumatise us and add to our pain.

*- Mina, Nepal*

The documenter must be a good listener, not press or pressure. Do not be insistent so the person won't close down and feel exposed again.

*- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine*

When a documenter comes to interview a new survivor, they must be patient. The survivor still has trauma that is fresh and they might not be able to answer even over days.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

I would try to have the best possible approach: support her, show respect to her, encourage her and tell her she is not alone and there are many other women who also survived, and that she is not to be blamed for what happened.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

What motivates me to open up is the way you approach me, the way you answer my questions, or listen to me. If you listen to me and understand me, it lets me open up. It's not easy to open up and speak, so if we do, it's because it's in a climate that I can.

*- Rose*

Don't have any snobbishness, like you are from a higher place and superior to us.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

I was able to get a rock off my chest when I disclosed the violence I had experienced... I needed to trust someone, talk to them, and tell them what happened to me in full... I was very satisfied with the way I was dealt with... It helped me a lot, especially when I felt that someone cared about me and appreciated me.

*- Syrian survivor*

The documenter was compassionate and understood survivors. I spent the whole day there. He was friendly, he offered me food and drink. He supported me and offered psychological counselling throughout.

*- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine*

You feel relieved, healing, and feel better. There was a comprehensive team: a psychologist, social worker, and therapist who I spoke with. When I talked to them it felt like a weight was taken off my shoulders. They were very kind people. It was done in harmony, by the way they talk, their hospitality. Trust brings about trust.

*- Alberto Luis Coneo, Colombian victim*

The documenter should allow the survivor to take the lead, let her tell her story as she needs to tell it. She might say something that is not important to the documenter, but she needs to say it for herself because it's important to her. Documenters sometimes try to guide too much. They can help her, but not tell her what path to choose.

*- Alisa Kovalenko, survivor from Ukraine*

Documenters asked me what my husband knows first and I felt comfortable then to talk.

*- Nepali survivor*

I prefer to be alone with documenter in a room so I can be comfortable to talk.

*- Helua Ibrahim Hussein, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

They were very warm, friendly, and created a comfortable environment. They were very respectful of me. They called me sir or Mr. They interviewed me in a comfortable room where you can cry and talk over a coffee... I am out and was out during the interview. I felt like they embraced me.

*- Alberto Luis Coneo, Colombian victim*

When I know the organisation, I can open up. I know they value respect, confidentiality, and our dignity. When you know they value this, we can tell them. Every day we remember the violence, but we can't tell all on one day. Maybe only 60% the first day, then the next day maybe 80%.

*- Rose Muheko, DRC survivor in Uganda*

A safe space is important. You do not want anyone to listen or walk in. Explain who else will be there, if you need to bring someone else. Documenters need to see that they're speaking to a human being.

*- DRC survivor*



**THE DOCUMENTER MUST BE A GOOD LISTENER, NOT PRESS OR PRESSURE. DO NOT BE INSISTENT SO THE PERSON WON'T CLOSE DOWN AND FEEL EXPOSED AGAIN.**

***- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine***

# *What silences us?*

Some documenters who come have a superiority complex in face of the survivor. They ask questions with disdain and negligence. They come in a hurry and say that they only have 5'-10' to do this and start the interview looking at their watch. Yet you may have a lot to tell and then they get limited information from us.

*- Desanges Kabuo, survivor from DRC*

They ask us for evidence. It's hard to produce "evidence". What is it they want to know? It is hard for us to show "proof" of sexual violence. Being judged and asked for proof, that shuts me up.

*- Nepali survivor*

If I don't feel good about the interpreter, I won't share my story.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

The documenters are busy with their phone while you tell your story.

*- Mague, survivor from DRC*



It shuts me down when a documenter asks, "How were you raped?"

*- Munguakonkwa Kanega Adrien, survivor from DRC*

What shuts me down is when they push you and repeat the same questions again and again, like it's a test if you make a mistake.

*- Desanges Kabuo, survivor from DRC*

I talked ... about what happened to me and I watched his reaction, he was surprised and did not believe what he heard. As such, I started to get confused that people might not believe what happened to me. This formed a barrier and an obstacle to talking about the very cruel means of violence. Therefore, I sometimes had to talk about some simple topics so that others would not refute me.

*- Syrian survivor*

Documenters use jargon and complicated words that the survivor does not understand and they don't explain them.

*- Mwamini Kanega Aline, survivor from DRC*



# *How does your capacity and preparation impact us?*

Documenters should provide certain conditions for a statement to be taken: provide a private place where interview can be conducted; get background of person being interviewed; be prepared for different reactions and be knowledgeable about how to properly react to how I might react as a survivor. Prior, they should get background on me, and about the problem I am dealing with; and to ask me about where and when I want interview to be conducted.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

I'd tell a documenter to get prepared psychologically, have empathy to a survivor first. They might hear terrible things, that they might not imagine are possible.

*- Olena Lazarieva, survivor from Ukraine*

It's very important for the documenter to be well prepared and do some homework and know the background and facts of survivors and our circumstances.

*- Iryna Dovgan, survivor from Ukraine*

Documenters should have knowledge in what they are researching, sometimes we are the ones informing them.

*- Mague, survivor from DRC*

Documenters need sensitivity and good interview skills. Many survivors are re-traumatised... All documenters need to be properly trained.

*- DRC survivor*



**DOCUMENTERS SHOULD HAVE KNOWLEDGE IN WHAT THEY ARE RESEARCHING, SOMETIMES WE ARE THE ONES INFORMING THEM.**

***- Mague, survivor from DRC***

# *How does stigma, biases and misunderstandings about sexual violence affect us?*

I did not have the courage and ability to talk about the sexual violence. I was ashamed and stigmatised. Despite the impact it had, I did not want to talk about it to anyone.

*- Syrian survivor*

I was sent from office to office experiencing discrimination. You are sent from one place to another place. This is what happens to victims of sexual violence.

*- Esther Judith Ospina Alvarez, Colombian victim*

The way they came at me undid the psychological sessions that I had done. The way they asked questions: “Why didn’t you escape? Why did you get caught?” Like it was our fault.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

I was ready to share with security services, but one guy who looked at me like I was an enemy (like Stalin gulag), he asked me if I did it voluntarily so I decided I would never tell him. I lost my desire to tell.

*- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine*

Speaking up as a man brings consequences, like stigmatisation. One of the greatest issues is a silent enemy that we all carry with us as men. How will they see me if I speak up? It’s difficult for us to acknowledge that we experienced such a painful event.

*- Joel Toscano, Colombian expert victim*

If people hear you were raped, they treat you differently, like you are not worthy, or like it was my desire to be raped.

*- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine*



**IF PEOPLE HEAR YOU WERE RAPED, THEY TREAT YOU DIFFERENTLY, LIKE YOU ARE NOT WORTHY, OR LIKE IT WAS MY DESIRE TO BE RAPED.**

***- Natalka from Eastern Ukraine***

# How will more knowledge and understanding help us both?

You need to know we are refugees and have an identity. In our country we might be leaders, but here we are humiliated. You are doing it to inform the world, but documenters don't know or understand war. It's exhausting to teach others. They do not understand war, violence, and children born out of violence and children born without an identity.

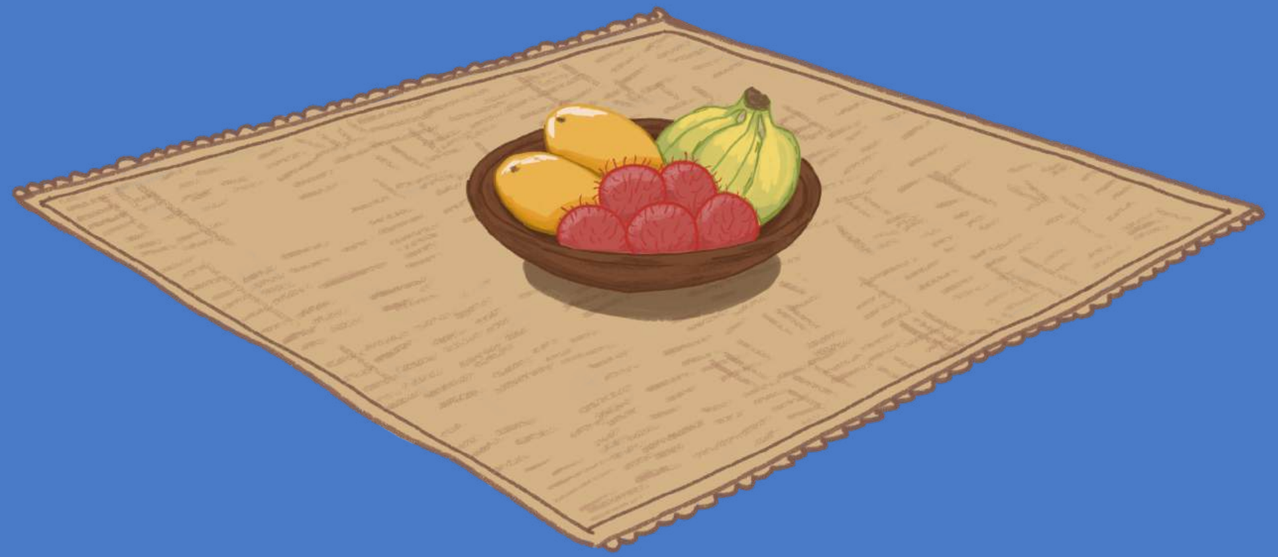
*- Rose Muheko, DRC survivor in Uganda*

For 15 months, I was not able to cry. At that time my emotions were frozen. One reason some people didn't believe me was because I was not crying.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

Most survivors do not tell about the sexual violence the first time they meet a documenter.

*- Iryna Dovgan, survivor from Ukraine*



It's not a priority to talk to documenters first. We need care first. We need to invest in services first, receive support, like medical, mental support first. Documenters need to make sure that they approach a person who is in the right mind to talk. Assess if they can speak and share or are they too vulnerable? Some people are just not ready. Do a risk assessment first.

*- DRC survivor*

Sexual violence is complex for indigenous people as an ethnic aspect. Indigenous people, especially women have historically been raped from the time of conquest-60 years of war. It is painful as a collective aspect. If a woman is raped, it affects the whole people. If a man is raped, all of us people feel it. It is like it happens to all the people. It fractures the harmony, brotherhood and sisterhood, and collective feeling of indigenous people.

*- María Pastora, Colombian victim*

# *How to treat us with respect and dignity?*

It's important to contact me again and tell me where my story ended up. Have a humane approach and just talk to me again.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

One sign of respect is when I first sit down, and am told that I have full freedom to say what I want or not say. That is one sign of respect I like documenters to have.

*- Nofa Ghanem Jomaa, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

They may be given money for transport, but will that stipend cover the trauma they experienced that day? I prefer not to be given transport money, but given respect instead. A survivor needs a right to stand and walk away if not respected.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

I have the right to be treated with empathy and dignity, if not I won't talk.

*- Iryna Dovgan, survivor from Ukraine*

Tell us where you come from. Ask permission before questioning us and before taking out your camera.

*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

When you experience sexual violence, you think you are no longer normal and we do not respect ourselves. Some of us might not be able to look at ourselves in the mirror. We think what others think about us is true. The best thing is to rebuild that confidence in ourselves... If we respect ourselves then it will force documenters to respect us. If we know we have rights, then we ask that our rights be respected.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*



**IT'S IMPORTANT TO CONTACT ME AGAIN AND TELL ME WHERE MY STORY ENDED UP. HAVE A HUMANE APPROACH AND JUST TALK TO ME AGAIN.**

***- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor***

# *How does lack of empathy and compassion harm us?*

Sometimes I felt humiliated because prosecutors just focused on doing their job to convict and did not take into account my needs, I just felt like a number to them so I lost hope that more perpetrators would be sentenced in the future in the courts. I'm not protected, just a number to them. They just did their job without taking into account our needs and wishes... Survivors were stigmatised at the [local] courts.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

The responses were patchy and at times bordered on cruel. I felt very alone and isolated. No-one cared about me enough to do even basic support... They questioned me and stared at me like I was being interrogated, like I had done something wrong.

*- Megan Nobert*



Attitude of documenter is most important thing, not just behaviour.

*- Mina, Nepal*

I saw documenters doing their job, but not offer support and compassion though. They were detached and not interested, working behind a computer screen. I felt like they thought, "it has nothing to do with me, I'm not affected, I live in [the] peaceful part of country."

*- Marina Chuikova, survivor from Ukraine*

I just thought that others would believe me and that they would show understanding. That is all I wanted.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

Survivors don't need people to have mercy on them, we need people to understand and show compassion. By showing compassion, you join our cause.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

# *How do you build trust with us?*

It's impossible to build trust during the first contact. It takes time. Provide a feeling of safety and security. Survivors need to be assured that they will not be misused or left alone; and unconditionally support them in the process.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

I need to build trust, and that takes time. The one who listens to us, it is a mere story, but for us it is what we have gone through. It is hard especially for unmarried women, we experience stigma, depression, abandonment from family and society.
*- Soniya, Nepal*

It's all about communication. If they speak nicely to me, conveying their message in appropriate manner. I wouldn't judge by appearance, but if only for their self-interest, jot down notes and then leave, that wouldn't help me build trust with them.
*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

First, create trust between documenter and survivor before starting interview. Start by asking general questions and easy questions so to make you feel free. Once you have a connection with the survivor then after you can ask other questions.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

I cannot tell everything the first time. I may need three or four times. I need to trust first and be given time.
*- Layla Shamo Khider, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

When we meet the documenter many times, then trust will come. But we can trust them the first time if we trust the person who introduced us. Then that can allow me to trust them.
*- Mwamini Kanega Aline, survivor from DRC*



I took time to say everything I had, and I felt being cared for. After I finished the interview, I told my mother that I was relieved because there was someone I did not know before, who came and listened to me with interest. It helped me to forget most of the events after I was assured that it was preserved in the documentation... I had no problem talking about everything that happened to me when I trusted the person who would talk to me.
*- Syrian survivor*

Trust is created when they learn how to respect that person... Trust is created when the other person understands us. Trust is created when survivors are given the choice of accepting or refusing questions.

*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

Don't give us huge expectations and not follow through.
*- Nepali survivor*

I usually ask who [the] interpreter is and their background... I might not want to tell everything in presence of stranger. I need to trust them.
*- Nofa Ghanem Jomaa, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

Sometimes the focal point makes promises and not the documenter. Documenters need to clarify issues with focal points so issues do not rise in the future. Documenters need to go through reliable organisations.
*- Tatymuk, survivor from DRC*

My experiences were bad. Organisations promised me but they did not fulfil any promises. They collected names and numbers for their benefit.
*- Syrian survivor*

# *How can you help to empower us?*

It is important that after the interview, I am informed about my rights, that I am not left alone with my thoughts, and that they tell me where I can get support and assistance.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

At the end of any documentation, a survivor should not feel additionally traumatised. Protection and assistance are necessary. She should feel that her dignity had been reinstated and she is worthy of respect.

*- Marina Chuikova, survivor from Ukraine*

We always like a response after we tell our story. Some kind of action so we can be proud of what we've said and told.

*- Helua Ibrahim Hussein, Yazidi survivor from Sinjar, Iraq*

Empower us by giving us choices.

*- Soniya, Nepal*

I would tell her not to blame herself because it's not her fault. It is the perpetrator's fault. Don't judge herself. Perpetrators should be ashamed of their actions, not women who survived. When a woman tells her story, and the public will know what he did, then he will be ashamed.

*- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor*

The victims feel more comfortable when other victims talk with us. The victims, when we document, we try to give a better approach to other victims. Because we had the same experience, and lived an empowering process, we have very good emotional tools to attend other survivors.

*- María Pastora, Colombian victim*

For us, justice is to have a livelihood and our health back and to live a dignified life. We are more empowered these days, though still stigmatised. Truth must be established and no impunity for perpetrators.

*- Asha, Nepal*



**IT IS IMPORTANT THAT AFTER THE INTERVIEW, I AM INFORMED ABOUT MY RIGHTS, THAT I AM NOT LEFT ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS, AND THAT THEY TELL ME WHERE I CAN GET SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE.**

***- Bosnia and Herzegovina survivor***

# BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY



# *Background*

The Survivor Perspectives Resource provides an important snapshot of how some survivors have experienced interactions with those investigating, reporting on, documenting or otherwise gathering and using information about SCRSV, including the media and human rights and criminal investigators. Developed to complement the Murad Code and addressed to those who gather and use such information, and to law-makers, policy-makers, managers and funders, it reflects the perspectives of survivors on key themes and challenges related to such information-gathering processes.

Naturally, this resource does not speak for all survivors. Every survivor is unique, with their own specific identity, characteristics, capacities, resilience, forms of discrimination that they face, relationships with and connections to others, family and community support, and socio-economic and political situation. The Murad Code project team and partner organisations approached the resource's development not as a comprehensive social or academic research project, but as a basic yet useful effort to safely and ethically capture a range of survivors' perspectives on how they have experienced such information-gathering and use processes. The survivors who helped with its development come from nine countries and diverse backgrounds, as detailed in the next section. Of course, for budgetary, Covid-related and other reasons, many more survivors, whose perspectives may differ from those reflected here, could not be consulted.

Despite its limitations, this resource offers an opportunity for those who gather and use such information to learn from survivors about how such work impacts their lives, how to earn and sustain survivors' trust and how the work can be done effectively. The recurring themes and messages that emerged from the consultations with survivors reveal common experiences and important patterns, highlighting the urgent need to improve practices to better work with and support survivors.

# *Methodology*

The main content of this resource was largely shaped by 164 survivors from around the globe who shared their experiences of having their SCRSV-related information gathered or used with:

- the Murad Code project team of the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI)[3] and Murad Code project partner organisations, namely, Medica Zenica, the Mukwege Foundation/SEMA (the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence), Nadia's Initiative, Refugee Law Project, The Story Kitchen and HIMRIGHTS; and
- in a separate project, Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR).

Fifty-eight of these 164 survivors were consulted by the lead Murad Code project consultant and IICI associate on this publication ("Lead Consultant"), a criminal and human rights investigator, between December 2020 and March 2022. Quotations from 37 of the 58 survivors consulted by the Lead Consultant were selected by the Murad Code project team for inclusion in the draft resource because they, for example, encapsulated recurring themes, reflected on information-gathering, documentation, and its use from different angles, and represented a diverse range of perspectives, experiences and profiles.

Following a review of the geographical diversity of survivors engaged and whose quotations had been selected for inclusion in the draft resource, the project team and LDHR resolved to also consider the perspectives of a group of 106 survivors from the Middle East. All Syrians, they took part in a separate LDHR research project between October 2021 and March 2022, which included discussing their experience of recounting what had happened to them and sharing information with others.[4] Quotations of nine of these survivors were selected for inclusion in a similar way to the other survivors quoted in the draft resource.

Fifty of the 58 survivors consulted by the Lead Consultant reviewed the draft resource in group or individual follow-up meetings, where they were asked whether the collection of quotes correctly represented their perspectives. Seven survivors could no longer be reached or were unable to attend the meetings and the eighth withdrew their consent to remain involved with the project due to changes in their personal circumstances. This led to the removal from the draft resource of quotations from five survivors. The 32 survivors who are quoted in this final resource were asked to give or withdraw their consent to the inclusion and publication of their quotations, check the accuracy of their quotations, and specify if and how they wished to be identified. The nine Syrian survivors whose quotations have been included were approached individually for the same purposes by the same team member that they spoke to for LDHR's research project.

Further details of the process to develop the draft and finalise the resource are as follows:

**Development of draft resource: consultation process with 58 survivors, led by the Lead Consultant** Partner organisations organised and facilitated small-group consultations for the Lead Consultant with 55 of the mentioned 58 survivors.[5] There were 11 meetings: 1 each in

[3] www.iici.global.

[4] This research was conducted as part of a larger Arts and Humanities Research Council and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office-funded research project 'Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Invisibility on Conflict-Related Male Sex Violence in Syria'. See further down for additional details on this project.

[5] The 55 survivors were selected after consultations between IICI and the partner organisations, taking into consideration a range of factors.

Colombia, Iraq and Ukraine, and 2 each in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B & H), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nepal and Uganda.[6]

Three of the 58 survivors participated in separate one-to-one meetings with the Lead Consultant.[7]

The consultations were strictly voluntary.[8] It was explained to survivors that no one was obliged to speak about their experiences, there would be no discussion or questions about the prior violence any survivors had experienced, and only their experience in reporting to information gatherers would be relevant. Everyone could speak as little or as much as they wanted, and in the group consultations some survivors also spoke separately to the Lead Consultant during breaks. Survivors were asked open-ended questions about their experiences.[9]

**The LDHR research project involving 106 survivors**

One hundred and six Syrian men took part in the LDHR research project to better understand violence inflicted upon men in detention, and its ongoing impact. The research also included barriers to disclosure and their experiences of recounting what had happened to them and sharing information with others.[10] They were asked open-ended questions about their experiences of sharing information about what happened to them.[11]

The demographics of the 106 Syrian survivors who participated in the LDHR research project are:

- 106 are men.
- All are from Syria, 105 of the men identified as Arab and 1 as Kurdish.
- They come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and have a range of educational backgrounds, from those who have received no formal education to those who have received a university education.
- 75 are former or current refugees or internally displaced people.
- All were adults at the time of their engagement on the project.
- At least 9 were children when SCRSV was committed against them.
- All 106 had disclosed sexual violence during an expert forensic examination, and some of them had also spoken with journalists, NGOs and others.

Upon consultation between LDHR and IICI, the LDHR research team selected survivor quotations from that earlier research project for provisional inclusion by the Murad Code project team in the draft resource.

**Process to consult survivors on the finalisation of the resource and related demographic information**

Once the draft resource was ready for review, IICI worked with the Lead Consultant and partner organisations to re-engage the survivors, in order to:

[6] Medica Zenica helped in relation to the survivors from B & H; the Mukwege Foundation/SEMA, with survivors from Colombia, DRC and Ukraine; Nadia's Initiative, with Yazidi survivors from northern Iraq; Refugee Law Project, with survivors from Burundi and DRC; and The Story Kitchen and HIMRIGHTS, with survivors from Nepal. The survivors assembled in person. Each consultation was mostly done over about two days. The Lead Consultant consulted with the survivors remotely, via videocalls, conversing in English with an interpreter. Partner organisations and their associates, including psychosocial support practitioners, facilitated the survivors' in-person gatherings, and were present in person to provide support as needed with survivors during and between the videocalls. In some instances, staff of partner organisations also joined the meetings virtually. In most instances, partner organisations selected the necessary translators and interpreters.
[7] They met over videocalls.
[8] The Lead Consultant also consulted with other survivor networks and experts for additional contextual knowledge in preparation for the consultations with survivors.
[9] The standard questions asked were: Tell us about your experience when you told your story/account to a documenter; How did you feel before speaking to someone?; What were your concerns?; Why did you speak to a documenter?; What helped you open up and speak?; What shut you down or silenced you?; What would you want another survivor to know before they told their story to a documenter?; What advice would you give them?; What would you want to tell documenters?; What should they know before they speak to a survivor?; How did you feel after the interview?; What would help empower or support a survivor?

[10] The survivors were selected to participate in the research on the basis of their gender, the previous participation in a forensic expert examination performed by LDHR doctors for criminal justice purposes, and their disclosure of violence which included SCRSV.
[11] Questions included: Please describe your first disclosure to another person; To whom did you disclose, and when?; What were your concerns?; What was the reaction?; What was the impact on you from that?; Please tell us about subsequent disclosures and how you feel about those; What were the most difficult aspects to talk about and why?

- share information about how IICI and the Lead Consultant had approached the development of the draft resource, including how and why certain, but not other, quotations were selected for inclusion
- present the near-complete draft resource for review and discussion
- share information about the intended use and publication of the final resource, to enable the survivors to make an informed decision about whether they wanted to be included, or withdraw or change any references to them in the final resource.

For the 37 survivors with quotations originally selected for inclusion in the resource, the additional goal was to share information about the intended use and publication of the final resource, including the possible risks that being associated with and identified in the resource may entail, to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they consented to their quotations being included and, if so, how they wanted their quotations to be attributed.

The meetings to re-engage the 55 survivors who were originally consulted in small groups were organised and led by partner organisations and took place in person between February and July 2025.[12] Regarding the seven survivors who did not participate in the follow-up meetings, as they did not provide consent to remain involved with the project their demographic information and quotations have been removed from the resource. The 48 that consented to remain involved signed written consent forms, which included information about how they would like to be attributed if they were quoted and, in some cases, revisions to their quotations. IICI and the Lead Consultant remotely reached out to three survivors who were originally consulted individually. Contact could not be re-established with one of the three; the related demographic information and quotations have been removed from this resource. The same review and consent process as with the small groups was followed with the remaining two survivors, both of whom consented in writing to remaining involved in the project.

The demographics of the 51 survivors who participated in small-group consultations and who ultimately consented to be included in this resource are:

- 43 are women and 8 are men.
- 1 identified as LGBTQI+.
- They come from 7 countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Colombia, DRC, Iraq, Nepal and Ukraine.
- They come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.
- They come from a range of educational backgrounds, spanning those who have received no formal education to those who have received a university education.
- 22 are former or current refugees or internally displaced people.
- 17 are members of marginalised ethnic groups.
- 1 is a member of an indigenous group.
- All were adults at the time of their engagement by IICI and the project partner organisations.
- At least 3 were children when SCRSV was committed against them.
- Their stories were documented by local, national and international practitioners for a range of reasons, including to provide official statements for criminal and non-criminal official processes, to serve as witnesses in local, national and international criminal cases, and to contribute to media and human-rights NGO reports. They reported being interviewed by journalists, police, other investigators, human rights defenders,

[12] The few survivors who were unable to physically attend either joined the meeting remotely, or later separately met remotely with the partner organisation. To facilitate the review and informed consent process, a confidential copy of the draft resource and a detailed information sheet and informed consent form were translated from English into French, Spanish, Bosnian, Arabic, Swahili, Ukrainian and Nepali. The meetings were held in the languages spoken by the survivors in the group, with English interpretation provided for staff from partner organisations where necessary.

researchers and NGOs, among others.

- 8 testified/were witnesses multiple times in formal proceedings.
- 1 was a witness at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).
- 1 was a witness at court in Croatia.
- 8 testified at state and cantonal/district courts.
- 2 gave their official statements for non-criminal and other formal official/formal proceedings.
- Many told their story more than once to different information-gatherers.

Regarding the Syrian survivors, LDHR approached the nine research participants to see if they wish to be engaged on this resource. Following a detailed discussion of the Murad Code project and the draft resource (which provisionally included their quotations), the survivors each decided to give consent.[13] The demographics of the nine Syrian survivors who consented to having their quotations included are:

- All are men, with a mean age of 38.5 years at the time of the research (range 29-50 years old).
- 1 was under 18 years old at the time of the violence against him, another was 18 years old at the time.
- All 9 were displaced either internally or to other countries following the violence against them.

The 32 survivors quoted in the resource specified how they would like to be attributed. Some chose to remain completely anonymous or use a nickname; others chose to use their full name. Some identify as a “victim” and others as a “survivor”. Some chose to include their nationality or current location; others chose not to. All attributions were included as specified by the survivor.

[13] IICI worked with LDHR to develop a detailed information sheet providing background information on the Murad Code project, the resource, and how their quotations would be used if they decided to provide consent for them to be included. The survivors were contacted over the phone by the researcher who had previously interviewed them for LDHR’s project. After discussing the project information and any questions the survivors had, the LDHR researcher talked them through a verbal informed consent process and recorded their responses regarding whether they consented to their quotations being included.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The conception and development of this Survivor Perspectives Resource was an intensive process. IICI is very grateful to everyone who has helped to infuse the process with so much purpose and meaning:

- all the survivors, including survivors who have not been quoted, who have withdrawn from the process, and who unfortunately could not be recontacted for the final consultations;
- Nadia Murad for her foreword;
- the Lead Consultant;
- the partner organisations - Medica Zenica, the Mukwege Foundation/SEMA, Nadia's Initiative, Refugee Law Project, The Story Kitchen and HIMRIGHTS – and their colleagues;
- numerous unnamed individuals, including translators, interpreters, psycho-social support persons, reviewers of draft versions of the resource, and the designer of the final resource; and
- Murad Code project colleagues.

IICI also is thankful to the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative of the UK government (PSVI), who largely funded the initial phases of the development of this resource (until early 2022), and to the government of Canada, through Global Affairs Canada (GAC), who has funded the final phases of the resource's development since 2023.



# THE MURAD CODE PROJECT

The Murad Code project is a global, consultative initiative involving partners from across the globe, including survivors and other individuals, civil society organisations, governments, inter-governmental and other international organisations, and funders. It aims to support the survivor-centred and effective gathering and use of information about SCRSV. The Murad Code is at the heart of the project.

The project was conceived and is being spearheaded by the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI) (www.iici.global). The other formal co-founders of the project are Nadia's Initiative and PSVI. GAC is providing funding and other partnership support to the project in 2023-2026.

See the Murad Code project website (www.muradcode.com) for the Murad Code (available in various languages) and more information about the Murad Code project.

MURAD CODE PROJECT

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