CONNECTING THE DOTS

Migration, Gender Justice & EU Solidarity

Dear Reader,

Welcome. This Handbook is more than a guide, it's an invitation. An invitation to slow down, to listen deeply, and to show up with courage and care for those whose lives have been affected by forced movement and sexual and gender-based violence. Within these pages, you'll find practical tools, hard truths, and hopeful pathways. But more than anything, you'll find voices... of lived experience, of people who have survived unimaginable harm yet continue to resist, rebuild, and reclaim their dignity every day.

Members of our community, people with lived experience of sexual and gender-based violence in the context of migration, have contributed their voices to this Handbook. You will find their words throughout, highlighted in quotation marks and speech bubbles, offering insight, truth, and reflection grounded in real experience.

If you are reading this, it means you're part of that effort too. Whether you're a frontline worker, an advocate, a policymaker, or someone navigating your own healing, thank you for being here. The work is urgent, the stakes are high, and perfection is not the goal. Humanity is.

Let this Handbook be your companion as you move through complexity with humility, clarity, and above all, solidarity.

With respect,
TAMA

BRIDGING BORDERS
Funded by the European Union

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This handbook is dedicated to all survivors.

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Definition: Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

Violence committed against a person because of his or her sex or gender. It is forcing another person to do something against his or her will through violence, coercion, threats, deception, cultural expectations, or economic means. Although the majority of victims and survivors of SGBV are girls and women, boys and men can also be harmed by SGBV.

"WE ALL MIGRATED, FROM OUR MOTHER'S WOMB INTO THIS WORLD. WHY ARE ONLY SOME OF US CALLED "MIGRANTS"?"

1

LANGUAGE MATTERS: WORDS THAT HEAL, WORDS THAT HARM

CORE PRINCIPLE: THE WORDS WE USE SHAPE THE REALITY AROUND US. LANGUAGE IS NEVER NEUTRAL.

The words we choose when working with people who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) whilst navigating migration carry immense weight. Language can offer dignity, hope, and agency... or it can silence, shame, and exclude. This chapter explores the transformative role of language in SGBV work, offering practical guidance on respectful, accurate, and empowering communication.

Drawing on lived experience, linguistic research, and cross-cultural insights, this guidance supports frontline practitioners and service providers in developing healing forms of communication that truly centre the people they serve.

1.1 The Power of Language in SGBV Work

Honouring Dignity and Agency

Language can either reinforce trauma or support recovery. People who have experienced SGBV whilst navigating migration often face silencing, stereotyping, and stigma. Using words that centre dignity, agency, and inherent strength is both an ethical imperative and an act of care.

Key principles:

Centre the person, not the experience. Use person-first language that acknowledges someone's full humanity. Say "a woman who has experienced violence" rather than "an abused woman." This subtle shift acknowledges that whilst trauma may be part of someone's story, it does not define their identity.

Avoid assumptions about response to trauma. People respond to trauma in wonderfully diverse ways. Some may appear resilient, others may seem fragile, and many will display both qualities at different times. Avoid labels like "vulnerable" or "brave" unless the person has chosen these terms themselves. Each person's story, and their way of telling it, is unique.

Recognise expertise. The person who has lived through an experience holds the deepest knowledge about their own situation. Our language should reflect this expertise rather than positioning professionals as the sole holders of knowledge.

From Deficit-Based to Strength-Based Language

Deficit-based language focuses on what is perceived as "lacking" or "broken." It can inadvertently frame people as helpless or position them as passive recipients of services. Instead, strength-based language acknowledges harm whilst also affirming resilience, resistance, and capacity for growth.

Examples of language shifts:

Instead of this...	Consider this...
Vulnerable person	A Person experiencing particular risks
Victim of SGBV	Person who has experienced SGBV
Person with limited English	Person developing English skills
Uneducated person	Person with different educational experiences
Failed asylum seeker	Person whose asylum application was unsuccessful

Strength-based communication doesn't ignore pain or minimise experiences, it honours complexity and respects self-determination.

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

"HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO LIVE HERE BEFORE I STOP BEING CALLED A REFUGEE?

CALL ME AFRICAN. CALL ME BLACK.

BUT DON'T KEEP CALLING ME A 'REFUGEE' FOREVER."

THE TERMS "VICTIM" AND "SURVIVOR": CONTEXT MATTERS

Whilst "survivor" is generally empowering, "victim" may be appropriate in certain contexts, particularly legal or protective settings such as police reporting or court proceedings.

Key guidance:

- **Follow the person's lead.** Some may not identify as survivors and may prefer "victim" or other terms entirely. Others may use different terms at different times.
- **Consider the context.** In legal or safeguarding work, "victim" may signal the need for protection and justice. In support settings, "survivor" often resonates more positively and emphasises agency.
- **Remain flexible.** Use language that feels right for the individual and the moment, even if this changes over time.

1.2 Movement-Specific Language Considerations

"People Seeking Safety" and Alternative Framings

Terms like "refugee" and "asylum seeker" are often misused or weaponised in public discourse. They may suggest a fixed identity or legal status when, in reality, people's journeys are ongoing, complex, and layered with multiple identities and experiences.

Preferred terms:

- People seeking safety
- People seeking protection
- People experiencing displacement
- People navigating migration systems
- People affected by forced movement
- People with lived experience of migration

These terms acknowledge movement as an experience rather than a defining characteristic, recognising that people are so much more than their legal status or circumstances.

Avoiding Language That "Others"

Language such as "illegal," "foreign national," or "failed asylum seeker" can strip away individuality and reduce people to legal categories or value judgements. These terms often carry implicit moral judgements that have no place in supportive environments.

Alternative approaches:

- Instead of "illegal immigrant," say "person without current documentation" or "undocumented person"
- Rather than framing migration as inherently problematic (e.g., "migration crisis"), focus on systemic challenges or protection needs
- Avoid language that suggests people are burdens, threats, or problems to be solved

Cultural Nuances in Describing SGBV

Understanding how different communities conceptualise and discuss SGBV is crucial for meaningful communication. In some communities, direct translations for terms like "rape," "coercion," or "consent" may not exist. Others may use metaphors, euphemisms, or indirect language to refer to sexual violence.

Cultural or religious contexts may significantly influence how SGBV is understood, disclosed, or responded to. Concepts of shame, honour, and silence carry different weights across communities and individuals.

Recommended approach: Enter these conversations with humility, genuine curiosity, and deep care. Ask how someone prefers to describe their experience rather than imposing clinical or legal terminology.

1.3 Practical Communication Guidelines

Working with Interpreters in SGBV Contexts

Interpreters are essential partners in survivor support, yet poorly managed interpretation can cause confusion, mistrust, or harm.

Essential guidelines:

- **Brief interpreters beforehand** on trauma-informed language, confidentiality requirements, and the emotional nature of the work
- **Offer choice** regarding interpreter gender whenever possible, and respect preferences even if they seem unusual
- **Monitor reactions** from both the interpreter and the person receiving support, and create space for debriefing if needed
- **Use short, clear sentences** to support accurate translation and avoid overwhelming complex concepts
- **Never use children or family members** as interpreters in SGBV contexts, regardless of their language skills or willingness

Clear Communication for Multilingual Audiences

Clear English isn't about oversimplifying, it's about communicating with respect and accessibility in mind.

Practical tips:

- Replace jargon and acronyms with everyday language (say "the United Nations" instead of "UN")
- Use short, active sentences that are easier to follow
- Explain complex processes using real examples, visual aids, or step-by-step breakdowns
- Repeat important information using different formats (spoken, written, visual)
- Speak at a measured pace, allowing time for processing

Non-Verbal Communication Across Cultures

Body language carries as much weight as words and varies significantly across cultures.

Cultural considerations:

- **Eye contact** may signal respect in some cultures whilst being considered confrontational or inappropriate in others
- **Physical proximity and touch** (such as a reassuring hand on someone's arm) may be comforting or deeply uncomfortable depending on cultural background and personal trauma history
- **Silence** can communicate shame, deep reflection, respect, or simply the need for processing time

Practitioners, or anyone writing reports, public statements or materials about SGBV and migration, should remain attuned to individual responses and regularly check understanding without making assumptions based on cultural background alone.

Reflection Points for Practice

- How does my everyday language affirm or undermine the agency of the people I work with?
- Have I used terms that might inadvertently "other" or disempower someone without realising it?
- How can I advocate for trauma-informed language within my organisation or team?
- What assumptions do I make about people based on their legal status or circumstances?

What words do you think are helpful or respectful when people talk about sexual violence or migration?

I think victim, it's not a good word. Every time we use this word victim, it feels like we are disempowering or defining something.

Words lke 'survivor' or 'person affected by violence' are empowering because they don't reduce someone to their trauma.

Saying 'person seeking protection' or 'forced migrantion' acknowledges both the structural causes and the humanity of the person.

Speaking kindly and clearly shows care.

If we don't use their faces or we change names, I think it will be better.

Words like 'influx,' 'illegal,' or 'uncontrollable' dehumanise and securitise.

A Final Thought for Ch.1

Language is never just about words; it shapes what and who we see. As we engage with people who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence in migration contexts, our language should reflect the complexity of each person's experience. By resisting assumptions and choosing words that are inclusive, nuanced, and open-ended, we create space for every survivor's story to be heard in its full depth; honouring their deignity, resilience and unique journey.

The journey towards more inclusive, trauma-informed language is ongoing. What matters most is the commitment to keep learning, listening, and adjusting our approach based on the feedback and needs of the people we serve.

My Pen

Given a voice to speak my truth, I realised,I have been drowning in my own thoughts all along.
Just like a lost child in a dark tunnel, I was lost in my own thoughts.
In the middle of my drowning and in my darkest moment, you lifted me up by giving me a voice I never knew I had, a voice to tell my story, a chance to write, to rewrite and to complete my story.
You hold me tight. Hug me and never let go.
Little by little you draw me out gently, calmly and kindly, you draw me out.
Patiently you draw me out.
Hopefully you draw me out.
You draw me out of my miserable thoughts.
You gave me seasons of refreshing, like a cool and gentle breeze in hot sunny day.
YES you draw me out.
Seasons I never thought I could experience.
Seasons I never even thought existed.
Yes, seasons of refreshing
Seasons of good thought
Seasons of good things to come
YES seasons of refreshing.
You came into my life like the full moon in the darkest night, shining light to my darkest thoughts. Giving me a hope for the future.
With you, I pen my thoughts.
Converting all negativities into positivities and
All impossiblities in possibilities.

Precious Orogun

"YOU CAN'T SUGARCOAT SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

IT IS WHAT IT IS."

Photo Credit: Dino Torlakovic

2

TRAUMA-INFORMED FOUNDATIONS

CORE PRINCIPLE: "TRAUMA IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU, BUT WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE YOU." – DR. GABOR MATÉ

This chapter offers a practical and reflective guide for practitioners, volunteers, and teams working with people affected by sexual and gender-based violence in contexts of migration and detention. It introduces the five core principles of trauma-informed practice and shows how they can be applied in everyday work, from direct support to organisational planning. Drawing on real-world examples and common dilemmas, it also explores the particular challenges of working in spaces shaped by detention, displacement, and systemic injustice, while offering suggestions for recognising and addressing secondary trauma among staff and volunteers. Through concrete ideas and reflection questions, the chapter invites readers to move beyond theory, encouraging them to embed trauma-informed care into daily language, procedures, and advocacy efforts; so that dignity, choice, and safety become central to every interaction.

In contexts shaped by displacement, violence, and loss, trauma is not a rare or isolated experience, it is often the backdrop against which people are trying to rebuild their lives. For people navigating movement across borders who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), trauma may be layered, ongoing, and shaped by systemic forces as much as personal events.

A trauma-informed approach isn't a therapeutic intervention or a magic wand, it's a commitment to ensuring that every aspect of our practice (language, environment, procedures, and relationships) prioritises safety, respect, and genuine choice.

2.1 Understanding Trauma-Informed Practice

The Five Core Principles

Trauma-informed practice rests on five interconnected principles that work together like the ingredients in a good recipe, you need all of them for the approach to really work:

Safety: Creating both physical and emotional safety for people seeking support and for practitioners. This means more than just a secure building, it's about fostering an environment where people feel genuinely safe to exist as they are. For example, this can include providing private rooms for sensitive conversations; having staff introduce themselves by name and explain their role.

Trustworthiness: Being transparent about how decisions are made and maintaining consistent, predictable interactions. If you say you'll do something, you do it. If you can't do something, you explain why. For Instance, consider sharing a 'what to expect' leaflet or welcome letter explaining your process.

Choice: Supporting autonomy and giving people meaningful control over what happens to them. This goes beyond asking "tea or coffee?" to ensuring people have real agency in decisions that affect their lives. For example, when possible, let people choose appointment times, interpreters, or whether a support person is present."

Collaboration: Working with rather than for people, recognising their expertise about their own lives. The person sitting across from you knows things about their situation that you simply cannot know from the outside. This can include using participatory methods like co-designing support plans or service feedback workshops.

Empowerment: Focusing on strengths and capabilities rather than deficits or what's "wrong." This doesn't mean pretending everything is fine, it means acknowledging both harm and resilience. For example, use strength-based language in forms and conversations (e.g., 'What helps you cope?' rather than 'What's your problem?'

These principles aren't a tick-box exercise but a fundamental shift in how we approach our work, with curiosity, humility, and genuine care.

Reflection question: Which of these principles feels most natural to you? Which challenges you most?

Understanding Complex Trauma in Movement Contexts

Complex trauma develops from prolonged or repeated exposure to traumatic events, particularly when a person feels powerless, trapped, or unable to change their situation. For many people who have experienced SGBV whilst navigating international movement, trauma isn't a single event but an accumulation across time and place.

This trauma may stem from:

- Exposure to war, persecution, or violence in countries of origin
- SGBV during journeys seeking safety, including trafficking, exploitation, and sexual violence
- Detention, isolation, or forced separation in destination countries
- Navigating hostile or unfamiliar systems, often under constant threat of removal or rejection

In these contexts, trust becomes a precious commodity that must be earned through consistent, respectful, and person-led engagement. You can't simply expect it, you have to prove you deserve it.

2.2 Recognising Secondary Trauma in Practitioners

Those working closely with people who have experienced trauma may find themselves absorbing some of that psychological and emotional impact. This secondary trauma (also called vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue) is an occupational reality, not a personal failing.

Warning signs may include:

- Emotional numbness or withdrawal from work or personal relationships
- Sleep difficulties or problems concentrating
- A growing sense of helplessness or hopelessness about the work
- Difficulty maintaining professional boundaries or over-identification with the people you support
- Physical symptoms like headaches, digestive issues, or chronic fatigue

Trauma-informed practice applies inward as much as outward, we must care for ourselves and each other with the same intentionality we bring to caring for those we serve.

Suggestions for practices within your work place for staff and volunteers who may experience secondary trauma or burnout:

- Encouraging peer support circles or reflective supervision to share experiences in a safe space
- Adding dedicated wellbeing check-ins to regular team meetings to normalise discussions about stress and resilience
- Developing a simple "self-care plan" template that staff and volunteers can update regularly to reflect their evolving needs and coping strategies.

Key Reports for Evidence-Based Advocacy

This handbook aims to ground practice in evidence and research. To support this, it suggests including a call-out box titled "Key reports to consult for evidence-based advocacy," which could list recent publications, NGO reports, or academic studies on trauma, migration, and psychosocial wellbeing. This helps ensure that staff and volunteers have quick access to credible resources when planning interventions or engaging in advocacy, making their work both more informed and impactful.

The truth we must acknowledge: Trauma in these contexts isn't simply interpersonal, it's systemic. When institutions enable or ignore SGBV, people experience betrayal not only from individuals but from entire states and systems that claim to uphold human rights.

Intersectional Experiences of Violence

Violence and trauma don't affect everyone equally. Identity, background, and circumstances intersect to create different vulnerabilities:

Black African women and girls, particularly from West and Central Africa, are disproportionately targeted for sexual exploitation in Libyan detention centres, a fact that reflects both gender-based violence and anti-Black racism.

LGBTQI+ individuals often face compounded violence from guards and fellow detainees alike, with no safe reporting mechanisms or protective measures.

Unaccompanied young people, especially adolescent girls, often simply "disappear" into informal networks of forced labour or sexual exploitation.

Most detention systems provide no meaningful avenues for redress. People who attempt to report abuse are often blamed, disbelieved, or face further punishment.

The Ongoing Nature of Trauma

The trauma of detention rarely ends at the facility gates. People often carry the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts long after their release, particularly when "release" means deportation, homelessness, or another cycle of detention.

What compounds this trauma is the profound sense of abandonment many people feel. For those who understand that the very institutions abusing them receive international funding, including from the European Union, the trauma becomes intertwined with a devastating sense of betrayal by the international community.

This reality demands that trauma-informed care includes political awareness. We cannot effectively support people if we ignore or remain silent about the structural systems that contribute to their trauma.

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

Are there any words or labels you think people or organisations should stop using? Why?

Using trauma-informed language that avoids blaming. For example, "Can you share what happened if you feel safe to do so?

"Illegal immigrant"... suggests a person's very existence is unlawful, that's never the case and irregularity is systemic.

Not calling someone a trafficking victim. It's true, but calling someone a person with lived experience of trafficking respects their entire identity.

Labels like 'beneficiary' reduce people to passive recipients

Terms like 'victim'... flatten their experience into powerlessness.

Avoiding using third-world. Use the country names

2.3 Creating Trauma-Informed Environments

Physical and Emotional Safety

Safety extends far beyond the absence of violence, it requires the active presence of care, welcome, and respect. Spaces could display welcoming signs in multiple languages, or even offer culturally familiar refreshments in waiting areas.

Consider these elements:

Physical environment: Is the space clean, private, accessible, and culturally appropriate? Does it feel welcoming rather than clinical or institutional?

Emotional space: Are people treated with genuine respect? Are their emotional responses validated rather than pathologised or dismissed?

Relational safety: Do people feel heard, seen, and free to express themselves without judgement or having to perform gratitude?

People must feel safe enough to participate meaningfully in decisions about their own lives.

Transparent Processes and Consistent Boundaries

Unpredictability can be deeply re-traumatising, particularly for people who have experienced powerlessness in other systems. Consistent boundaries, clear timelines, and honest communication help build trust.

Good practice includes:

- Explaining processes before they happen, including potential outcomes
- Avoiding false promises or vague reassurances that everything will be "fine"
- Being clear about what is and isn't possible within your role, and explaining why
- Following through on commitments, however small they may seem
- Acknowledging mistakes openly when they occur

Recognising and Responding to Triggers

Triggers are reminders of past trauma that can cause intense emotional or physical reactions. They're not character flaws or oversensitivity; they're normal responses to abnormal experiences.

Triggers may be:

- Sensory: certain smells, sounds, lighting, or textures
- Relational: being interrupted, feeling ignored, or experiencing power imbalances
- Situational: waiting rooms, uniformed staff, or formal procedures

Supportive responses include:

- Asking what helps people feel safe rather than assuming you know
- Offering meaningful choices wherever possible (where to sit, who is present, timing of appointments)
- Checking in regularly about comfort and understanding without being intrusive
- Accepting that some days will be harder than others
- Create a quiet room or low-stimulation area for people to use if overwhelmed

2.4 When Care Meets Accountability: The Political Dimension of Trauma-Informed Work

Why Policy Advocacy Matters in Trauma-Informed Practice

Sexual and gender-based violence doesn't occur in isolation, it's often embedded within broader systems of control, exclusion, and dehumanisation. As we've explored, this is particularly evident in contexts like Libyan and Tunisian detention centres, where SGBV is not only frequent but actively facilitated by policies of deterrence and containment, often supported by external state funding.

As practitioners working from a trauma-informed, culturally responsive framework, our responsibility extends beyond individual care. It includes advocating for systemic change and ensuring our practice doesn't inadvertently uphold or normalise environments that perpetuate trauma.

The uncomfortable truth: Silence in the face of structural violence isn't neutrality, it's complicity.

What's at Stake

- Continued EU funding for detention infrastructure despite repeated human rights violations
- Lack of safe pathways for movement, pushing people into abusive systems or exploitation networks
- Punitive frameworks that prioritise deterrence over dignity, reinforcing cycles of trauma and vulnerability
- International policies that enable and fund the very systems causing the trauma we're trying to heal

What Practitioners and Organisations Can Do

1. Name the Systemic Harm Use accurate, accountable language in reports, conversations, and advocacy:

- Refer to state-enabled or funded environments of abuse when discussing detention-related SGBV
- Include testimonies and lived experiences in organisational outputs, with proper consent and safeguards
- Avoid euphemistic language like "irregular migration management" when describing violent containment

2. Engage in Collective Action

- Join coalitions challenging externalised border control (such as #StopFundingAbuse campaigns)
- Collaborate with legal organisations challenging arbitrary detention through litigation and lobbying
- Support people with lived experience to safely contribute to advocacy efforts
- Partner with groups led by people with lived experience

3. Use Evidence Strategically

- Integrate research from UN bodies, Amnesty, MSF, and other credible sources in your work
- Advocate with donors and governments to fund community-led, rights-based alternatives to detention
- Challenge funding streams that enable harm whilst appearing to address it

4. Demand Accountability

- Call for independent monitoring of detention centres receiving international funding
- Advocate for transparency in funding mechanisms related to movement control
- Support legal challenges to policies that enable systematic abuse

Reflection Points for Practice

- How does your service make people feel the moment they walk through the door?
- What assumptions do you hold about trauma and recovery that might need examining?
- How do you care for yourself whilst caring for others?
- How does your organisation's silence or framing on systemic issues shape public understanding?
- What would it mean to stand in active solidarity with people harmed by the systems your work intersects with?

A Final Thought for Ch.2

Advocacy isn't separate from care, it's care extended into the world, care that recognises that individual healing and systemic change are inextricably linked. When we work to heal trauma whilst the systems causing that trauma continue unabated, we risk becoming part of a cycle that manages the symptoms whilst ignoring the disease.

True trauma-informed practice challenges us to be both healers and advocates, both supporters and disruptors of systems that cause harm. It's complex, uncomfortable, and necessary work... but then again, the most important work usually is.

Photo Credit: Dino Torlakovic

"THEY NEED SOMEONE ALSO TO TALK TO, NOT ONLY TO JUST SAY, OK, I'M YOUR CASE WORKER."

3

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, BEYOND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

CORE PRINCIPLE: CULTURE IS THE LENS THROUGH WHICH WE SEE THE WORLD.

In the context of SGBV and people navigating international movement, culture isn't decorative background music, it's central to how harm is experienced, understood, disclosed, and addressed. Culture influences identity, survival strategies, help-seeking behaviours, and pathways to healing.

This chapter explores how practitioners can move beyond "cultural competence" as a static tick-box exercise and instead embrace cultural responsiveness as a dynamic, reflective, and genuinely relational practice.

Because real cultural responsiveness isn't a one-time achievement; it's an ongoing process of learning, listening, and adapting.

. 3.1 Understanding Cultural Frameworks

Culture Shapes Meaning

Sexual and gender-based violence doesn't carry the same meanings, consequences, or vocabulary across cultural contexts. The aim isn't to justify or excuse harm; rather, it's to recognise that the path to healing must make sense within someone's own cultural framework, not just ours.For some people, SGBV may be framed as a violation of personal dignity. For others, it may be experienced as bringing shame upon family or community. Cultural norms around gender, sexuality, honour, privacy, and when to speak or stay silent deeply influence whether SGBV is named, reported, or kept hidden.

This means practitioners must approach every interaction with genuine humility and curiosity, actively resisting assumptions. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with this person?" we ask, "What do safety, dignity, and justice mean in their world?"

Reflection question: How might your own cultural background shape your understanding of gender and violence? What feels "normal" to you that might not be universal?

Religious and Spiritual Dimensions

For many people navigating international movement, faith isn't peripheral, it's central to survival, meaning making, and integrating traumatic experiences. The relationship between faith and healing is complex and deeply personal.

Whilst some people may have experienced SGBV at the hands of religious leaders or in religious settings, others turn to spiritual practices, prayer, or sacred texts for strength and understanding. Some find community and support through faith, whilst others may struggle with feeling abandoned by their God or questioning beliefs they once held dear.

A culturally responsive approach:

- Acknowledges both the potential harms and the profound comfort that religious traditions may offer
- Creates space for spiritual expression without imposing it or assuming everyone wants it
- Recognises the extraordinary diversity within faith traditions - Islam isn't monolithic, nor is Christianity, Judaism, or indigenous spirituality
- Respects that some people may have complicated relationships with faith that change over time

Community and Family Structures

In many cultural settings, individual identity is woven into the fabric of family and community relationships. This can be both a source of strength and a source of pressure. People who have experienced SGBV may fear ostracism, loss of marriage prospects, economic abandonment, or even retaliatory violence if they disclose what happened.

The Western notion of individual "autonomy" may not fully align with everyone's cultural context and should be approached thoughtfully. For some, healing may only be possible if family honour is preserved and relationships are maintained. For others, safety might require distance or separation from family or community ties. Neither path is inherently right or wrong; both can be valid and deeply personal responses to very complex situations. Understanding what we might call the "relational self" is critical. Cultural responsiveness means helping people navigate these dynamics on their terms, not imposing our values about what independence or healing "should" look like.

Most of them, they only focus on the legal process and they are not focusing on emotional or community needs.

Working with mediators or community representatives is not just a matter of translation, it's about shifting power, building trust, and creating relational approaches to safety and support.

Reluctance, quietness, or resistance... might be because they have good reason to be cautious.

They ignore the different intersections. Such as being a woman, a migrant and, for example, LGBTQ+, might cause different challenges to a cis-woman.

Not speaking English doesn't mean I'm illiterate.

When people from services talk with people from different cultures, what do they often get wrong?

3.2 Navigating Cultural Tensions

When Culture Conflicts with Safeguarding

Sometimes cultural practices directly contradict safeguarding or human rights principles. Practices like child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM), or expectations that people who have experienced sexual violence must marry their abuser to preserve family honour.

These moments are ethically and emotionally complex, and there's no simple script for navigating them. However, practitioners can:

Respond without vilifying entire cultures or communities. The goal is to challenge harmful practices, not condemn cultural identities wholesale.

Keep person safety and genuine consent at the centre. This means the person affected gets to define what safety looks like for them, even if it's different from what we might choose.

Frame discussions around shared values like protection, dignity, care, and love for children. Most cultures share these values, even if they express them differently.

Remember that confrontation rarely changes minds. Questions, curiosity, and relationship-building are usually more effective than lectures about rights.

These conversations require skill, patience, and often multiple attempts. But it is possible to challenge harmful practices without condemning entire cultures. In fact, it's essential.

Supporting People Without Erasing Identity

Avoiding cultural erasure is as important as challenging cultural harm. People should never be made to feel they must choose between safety and cultural belonging - that's not healing, it's just a different kind of violence.

A responsive approach helps people:

- Make informed choices that honour both their safety and their identity
- Access culturally relevant resources (prayer spaces, women-only environments, familiar foods)
- Connect with professionals who understand their backgrounds or share similar experiences
- Find ways to maintain positive cultural connections whilst addressing harm

Practical note: Employing people with lived experience of international movement and/or SGBV, as well as maintaining culturally diverse teams, is one very practical way to support this. But remember, diversity without inclusion is just tokenism with better statistics.

Engaging with Community and Religious Leaders

Community and religious leaders often hold deep influence, which can work for good or ill. Whilst some may perpetuate harmful norms, others can become powerful allies in prevention and healing. The trick is identifying who's who and approaching engagement thoughtfully.

To engage effectively:

Identify leaders who are genuinely open to dialogue and safeguarding. Look for those who ask questions rather than just defending positions, and who show concern for vulnerable community members.

Build relationships rooted in mutual respect and trust. This often starts by learning about their culture and being open to participating appropriately in cultural practices, showing up, not just when you need something.

Offer education and support in non-confrontational ways. Try framing workshops around care, justice, or compassion rather than "training" people about what they're doing wrong. Consider learning exchanges where knowledge flows both ways.

Involve leaders in co-creating culturally appropriate interventions. Ask for their guidance and feedback. "Round" discussions, where situations are explored in a circle format can work particularly well in many cultural contexts.

"CULTURE IS TREATED LIKE A FIXED EXPLANATION FOR SOMEONE'S BEHAVIOUR, RATHER THAN SOMETHING DEEPLY PERSONAL AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT.

MANY SERVICES OPERATE WITH A KIND OF INSTITUTIONAL UNIVERSALISM, EXPECTING PEOPLE TO ENGAGE IN THE SAME WAY, FOLLOW THE SAME ADMINISTRATIVE LOGIC, OR TRUST THE SYSTEM BY DEFAULT."

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

3.3 Culturally Responsive Service Design

Adapting Interventions from the Ground Up

Cultural responsiveness should be thoughtfully integrated into every layer of service design from the outset, rather than added later as an afterthought.

This includes practical considerations like:

Forms and materials that reflect diverse realities and languages. Remember that some people may not read, write, or use computers confidently. Offer materials in various languages and formats: written, audio, visual. Try and have access to in-person support where available, or outsource to where it is available. Online translation services like "Tarjimly"1 can be invaluable allies when navigating different languages.

Environments that respect modesty, dietary needs, religious practices, and other cultural expressions. This might mean having a dedicated prayer room equipped with everything needed for different religious practices, or respecting prayer times and religious holidays when scheduling appointments.

Staffing options such as same-gender practitioners, interpreters trained in confidentiality and trauma awareness, and cultural mediators who can explain services in culturally familiar ways.

Timing and scheduling that accounts for cultural and religious rhythms, childcare needs, and work patterns that may differ from the majority culture.

Building Bridges, Not Barriers

Meaningful cultural inclusion goes beyond token gestures. Simply having "one person of colour" on a team or marking generic cultural holidays doesn't automatically create truly inclusive services. Instead, genuine inclusion involves:**Ongoing, embedded, and reflexive.** Cultural responsiveness isn't a project you complete, it's a way of working that requires constant attention and adjustment.

Informed by genuine partnerships with diaspora communities, survivor-led groups, and grassroots organisations. This means building real collaborations with these groups, reaching out when needed, and ensuring proper compensation for their time and expertise.

Grounded in reciprocity. The goal isn't to "serve" communities from a position of superiority, it's to work with people as equals. What can you offer beyond services? How can you support community priorities that matter to them?

The Role of Cultural Mediators and Community Liaisons

Cultural mediators do far more than translate words, they interpret meaning, helping services avoid harmful assumptions and build genuine rapport. They bridge not just linguistic gaps but cultural and trust gaps too.

When used ethically and skilfully, cultural mediators can:

- Help people feel genuinely understood and believed rather than just processed
- Advise practitioners on cultural framing and nuances that might otherwise be missed
- Prevent re-traumatisation caused by cultural misunderstandings or insensitivity
- Model culturally appropriate ways of discussing difficult topics

Essential reminder: Always brief cultural mediators beforehand and debrief afterwards. They're exposed to trauma through their work and must be supported just as much as anyone else on the team. Their wellbeing isn't secondary to their usefulness.

Moving Beyond Assumptions About "Helping"

One of the biggest barriers to cultural responsiveness is our unexamined assumptions about what "helping" looks like. In many European service models, help is individualistic, focused on independence, and delivered by professionals to passive recipients.

Other cultural frameworks might emphasise:

- Collective healing that involves family and community
- Spiritual or ritual approaches to addressing harm
- Elder involvement in problem-solving
- Community accountability rather than individual therapy
- Holistic approaches that address practical, emotional, and spiritual needs simultaneously

None of these approaches is inherently better or worse, they're just different. The question isn't which is "right," but which works for the person sitting in front of you.

Reflection Points for Practice

- What assumptions do I hold about "helping"? How might these be shaped by my own cultural lens?
- When I work with people from backgrounds different from mine, what do I notice about my internal responses? Curiosity? Discomfort? Judgement?
- How does my organisation demonstrate cultural responsiveness beyond surface-level diversity?

A Final Thought for Ch. 3

Cultural responsiveness is about staying open, humble, and committed to equity. It's about recognising that when we work with people navigating international movement, culture is the medium through which harm is endured, help is sought, and healing becomes possible.

The moment we think we've "mastered" cultural competence is probably the moment we've stopped being culturally responsive. Real responsiveness requires ongoing humility, willingness to make mistakes and learn from them, and the understanding that the people we work with are the true experts on their own cultural experiences.

As practitioners, we don't need to be cultural experts on every community we serve. But we do need to be experts at listening, learning, and adapting our practice based on what we discover. That's not just cultural responsiveness, it's basic human decency extended into professional practice.

And perhaps most importantly, we need to remember that behind every cultural consideration is a human being trying to make sense of their experience and find a path forward that honours both their safety and their identity. Our job is to walk alongside them on that path, not to redirect them onto ours.

"YOU CAN EXPLAIN IT A THOUSAND WAYS, BUT YOU ONLY START TO UNDERSTAND BY LIVING IT."

4

REAL-WORLD SCENARIOS: THEORY IN PRACTICE

CORE PRINCIPLE: PRACTICE DEEPENS UNDERSTANDING; THE GOAL ISN'T PERFECTION BUT CONTINUOUS REFLECTION AND GROWTH

The gap between theoretical understanding and practical application in SGBV work can feel vast, particularly within migration contexts where legal, cultural, and personal complexities interweave. This chapter bridges that gap by examining real-world scenarios that professionals encounter, whilst maintaining ethical boundaries and trauma-informed approaches.

Working with people who have experienced SGBV in migration contexts requires us to navigate uncertainty with competence and compassion. Rather than seeking perfect solutions to imperfect situations, we focus on making informed, ethical decisions that prioritise safety, choice, and dignity. Each situation teaches us something new, and every interaction is an opportunity to refine our understanding and improve our practice.

4.1 Case Study Methodologies

Using Scenarios to Build Understanding Without Sensationalising

Case studies serve as powerful learning tools, allowing practitioners to explore complex situations in a structured, reflective manner. However, when working with SGBV scenarios, we must balance educational value with ethical responsibility and respect for survivors' experiences.

Constructing Ethical Scenarios

When working with case studies in SGBV work, ensure they are:

Composite-based: Rather than using actual cases, create scenarios that combine elements from multiple situations, ensuring no individual can be identified whilst maintaining realistic complexity.

Culturally informed: Scenarios should reflect authentic cultural contexts without relying on stereotypes or assumptions. This requires ongoing consultation with community members and cultural liaisons.

Trauma-informed in presentation: The way we present scenarios matters. Avoid graphic details that serve no educational purpose, and focus on the decision-making processes, systemic challenges, and support needs rather than explicit descriptions of violence.

Solution-oriented: Whilst acknowledging challenges, scenarios should demonstrate pathways forward and highlight the agency and resilience of survivors.

Intersectional: Real-world SGBV cases rarely exist in isolation. Scenarios should reflect how gender, migration status, disability, age, sexuality, and other factors intersect to create unique challenges and needs.

Ethical Considerations in Case Study Development

Consent and Representation

When developing training materials, consider how survivor voices are represented. Whilst direct quotes from survivors can be powerful, they must be used with explicit, informed consent and with consideration for potential re-traumatisation. Alternative approaches include:

- Survivor-led narrative development where individuals shape their own stories for educational purposes
- Community consultation to ensure scenarios accurately reflect lived experiences
- Professional blending that captures key themes without individual details

Avoiding Harmful Stereotypes

Migration and SGBV intersect with numerous stereotypes that can harm both survivors and communities. Ethical scenario development requires:

- Challenging assumptions about who experiences SGBV and in what contexts
- Representing the diversity of survival strategies and responses
- Acknowledging structural and post-colonial factors that contribute to vulnerability
- Avoiding cultural explanations that ignore systemic inequalities

Professional Boundaries

Case studies should model appropriate professional boundaries, including:

- Recognising the limits of professional competence
- Demonstrating when and how to seek supervision
- Showing appropriate referral processes
- Maintaining confidentiality even in training contexts

Learning from Complexity, Not Seeking Simple Solutions

SGBV in the context of migration exists within complex systems where legal, social, cultural, and individual factors interact in unpredictable ways. Effective case study methodology embraces this complexity rather than seeking to simplify it.

Developing Comfort with Ambiguity

Many situations in SGBV within the context of migration don't have clear-cut solutions. Case studies should help practitioners develop:

- Tolerance for uncertainty and incomplete information
- Skills in risk assessment and safety planning with limited resources
- Ability to support survivors whilst advocating for systemic change
- Comfort with making imperfect decisions based on available information

Scenario-based learning should highlight:

- How immigration policies impact survivor safety and choices
- The role of community responses in supporting or hindering recovery
- Intersections between different service systems
- Opportunities for systemic advocacy and change

"INFORMATION IS MORE TRUSTED WHEN IT COMES FROM PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE."

What would help make information easier to understand, like legal steps, housing, or health care?

Using visual aids or flow-charts instead of complicated pages of text and numbers.

We'll go step by step in your pace' in that moment can restore a sense of control.

Not everyone is educated, not everyone knows how to read and write.

Holding information sessions with safe, trusted people in the community.

People might forget what they've been told or feel ashamed to ask again.

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

4.2 Common Scenarios in Migration SGBV Work

Scenario 1: Disclosure During Immigration Interviews

Scenario Context:
Aisha, a 28-year-old woman from Somalia residing in Germany, is attending her asylum interview. She has disclosed experiences of FGM and sexual violence but becomes distressed when asked for specific details. Her interpreter is from the same ethnic community, raising concerns about confidentiality and potential judgement.

Key Considerations:

- Trauma responses may affect memory and narrative coherence
- Cultural factors influencing disclosure patterns
- Interpreter dynamics and community connections
- Legal requirements versus trauma-informed approaches
- Secondary trauma for professionals involved
- Reflect on systemic pressures such as tight asylum timelines or inconsistent legal interpretations, which may compound distress.

Pre-Interview Preparation

- **Building rapport and safety:** Schedule a pre-interview meeting allowing Aisha to familiarise herself with the interview environment, interviewer, and process. This reduces anxiety and establishes initial trust. Explain the purpose, structure, and her rights clearly, using accessible language. Consider using culturally adapted written or visual materials to explain procedures if literacy or language nuances are a concern.

- **Interpreter briefing:** Conduct a separate briefing with the interpreter about trauma-informed approaches, emphasising confidentiality obligations and professional boundaries. Address potential community connections explicitly, document their professional commitment to confidentiality, and explore whether an interpreter from a different community might be more appropriate. Ask Aisha if she feels comfortable with the interpeter choice and document her preference.

- **Trauma-informed questioning preparation:** Develop a questioning approach that acknowledges trauma's impact on memory. Prepare open-ended questions that allow narrative flow rather than demanding chronological precision. Plan breaks and have support resources readily available.

During the Interview

- **Environmental considerations:** Ensure the room layout promotes feelings of safety - avoid positioning that feels confrontational, ensure easy exit access, and maintain comfortable temperature and lighting.

- **Flexible questioning techniques:** Use grounding techniques if Aisha becomes distressed ("Can you tell me what you're feeling right now?" or "Would it help to take a break?"). Allow non-linear storytelling and circle back to details when she feels more settled. Validate distress openly (It's okay if it's hard to talk about this now') rather than pushing through.

- **Documentation approach:** Record information as it emerges rather than forcing chronological recounting. Note when trauma responses affect recall and document this professionally to support credibility assessments. Use neutral, non-judgemental language in notes to reduce risk of bias in asylum credibility assessment.

Post-Interview Support

- **Immediate aftercare:** Provide space for decompression with a support worker. Offer practical support like refreshments and transportation arrangements. Schedule follow-up contact within 48 hours. Ask if she wants written information about next steps or contact details for support, recognising memory gaps after distress

- **Ongoing support linkage:** Connect with specialist trauma services familiar with FGM and sexual violence. Ensure cultural appropriateness of therapeutic approaches and female practitioners where preferred.

Scenario 2: Working with People with Uncertain Legal Status

Scenario Context:
Maria, originally from El Salvador, has been in the Malta for three years on a visitor visa that expired 18 months ago. She experienced domestic violence from her British partner but fears reporting to police because of her immigration status. She has a 4-year-old British citizen daughter.

Key Considerations:

- Immigration status as a barrier to seeking support
- Intersection of domestic violence and immigration law
- Children's rights and welfare considerations
- Service accessibility for people with irregular status
- Reporting obligations and limits of confidentiality

Practical Implementation:

Safety Planning with Immigration Considerations

- ***Immediate safety assessment:*** *Evaluate current safety whilst acknowledging how irregular status affects options. Develop safety plans that don't rely solely on police intervention - include safe accommodation options, financial safety measures, and communication strategies that protect immigration status.*

- ***Immigration advice coordination:*** *Establish relationships with specialist immigration solicitors experienced in domestic violence cases. Understand pathways like the Domestic Violence Rule for partners of British citizens and how this applies to Maria's situation.*

- ***Child welfare considerations:*** *Work within child protection frameworks whilst recognising that family separation may not serve the child's best interests if it results in deportation and unnecessary family separation. Coordinate carefully with children's services, emphasising the mother's protective capacity and the risks posed by the perpetrator rather than immigration status.*

Service Access Strategies

- **No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) navigation**: Connect with specialist NRPF services and understand emergency support available through Section 17 (Children Act) or Section 95 (Immigration and Asylum Act). Document destitution carefully to support applications.

- **Healthcare access**: Ensure understanding of immediate and necessary treatment rights regardless of status. Connect with specialist health services familiar with survivors' needs and immigration concerns.

- **Community resource mapping**: Identify faith communities, cultural organisations, and informal support networks that can provide practical assistance without triggering reporting concerns.

Legal Strategy Development

- **Evidence gathering**: Support careful documentation of abuse history, prioritising safety. Understand how domestic violence evidence supports immigration applications and coordinate with legal representatives.

- **Reporting considerations**: Explore reporting options that might support both safety and immigration status (such as Third-Party Reporting through specialist organisations) whilst respecting Maria's autonomy in decision-making.

Scenario 3: Addressing SGBV Within Communities

Scenario Context:
A community organisation in Italy serving people seeking refuge from Afghanistan reports concerns about controlling behaviours and restrictions on women's movement within their community. Several women have disclosed concerns privately but express fear about community consequences if they seek outside help.

Key Considerations:

- Community responses to SGBV disclosure
- Balancing individual and collective approaches
- Cultural competence versus cultural relativism
- Working with community leaders and influencers
- Addressing structural factors that enable abuse

Practical Implementation:

Community Engagement Strategy

- **Stakeholder mapping:** Identify formal and informal community leaders, women's groups, religious authorities, and youth leaders. Understand power dynamics and influence patterns within the community before engaging.
- **Cultural consultation:** Work with community cultural advisors who understand both traditional practices and legal frameworks. Avoid positioning these as inherently oppositional whilst maintaining clear safety standards.
- **Trusted messengers:** Develop relationships with respected community members who can champion change from within. This might include religious leaders who can speak to theological positions on women's rights or established women who can mentor younger community members.

Service Delivery Adaptations

- ***Outreach approaches:*** *Develop subtle engagement methods - health checks, language classes, or children's activities that allow private conversations to develop naturally rather than direct SGBV service advertising which might create suspicion or danger.*

- ***Safe communication channels:*** *Establish discrete reporting and help-seeking mechanisms. This might include text-based services, women-only spaces at specific times, or partnerships with trusted organisations already working within the community.*

- ***Parallel support systems:*** *Develop both individual safety planning and community education approaches simultaneously. Individual work focuses on immediate safety whilst community work addresses longer-term cultural shifts.*

Structural Intervention

- ***Economic empowerment:*** *Address financial dependencies that may enable control. Develop skills training, employment support, and financial literacy programmes that increase women's autonomy without directly challenging cultural norms. If this is not within capacity, outreach to organisations and programmes which offer this.*

- ***Youth engagement:*** *Work with young people who may be more open to discussions about healthy relationships and can influence peer groups. Use educational approaches that acknowledge cultural identity whilst promoting safety.*

Balancing Individual and Collective Needs

- ***Confidentiality protocols:*** *Develop clear agreements about information sharing within community work while maintaining individual confidentiality. Ensure all staff understand these boundaries clearly.*

- ***Safety planning complexity:*** *Recognise that individual safety plans must account for community consequences. Include strategies for maintaining cultural connections whilst accessing safety resources.*

Scenario 4: Supporting People with Multiple, Intersecting Needs

Scenario Context:
James, a 35-year-old gay man from Nigeria, experienced sexual violence during his journey to Malta. He has disclosed HIV-positive status, has limited English proficiency, and is experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety. His asylum claim was initially refused, and he is appealing the decision.

Key Considerations:

- Intersectional impacts of sexuality, health status, and migration
- Multiple trauma experiences and their cumulative effects
- Health needs requiring specialist support
- Legal stress and its impact on mental health
- Accessing appropriate community support
- Need for professional interpreters with training in LGBTQ+ and trauma-informed work. Avoiding community-based interpreters (to protect confidentiality and reduce shame/fear).
- Emphasise Risk assessment first: is he ready, could it overwhelm him, are these spaces affirming for racialised people?

Practical Implementation: Coordinated Care Approach

- **Lead worker identification:** Assign a key worker familiar with LGBTQ+ issues and asylum processes to coordinate across services. This reduces the burden on James to repeat his story and navigate multiple systems whilst ensuring consistent, informed support.

- **Regular multi-agency meetings:** Establish case conferences involving legal representatives, HIV specialists, mental health services, and LGBTQ+ organisations. Ensure James maintains decision-making power within these discussions, offer pre-meetings to prepare James: explain who will be present, what will be discussed

Addressing Intersectional Trauma

- Culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions: Connect with therapists experienced in working with LGBTQ+ people, understanding how sexual orientation, HIV status, and migration trauma intersect. Consider narrative therapy approaches that allow James to reframe his experiences within his cultural context.

- **Peer support facilitation:** Connect with LGBTQ+ refugee/asylum seeker peer support groups where James can meet others with similar experiences. Ensure HIV-positive peer networks are also available if desired.

- **Trauma-informed HIV care:** Work with HIV services that understand trauma's impact on treatment adherence and health-seeking behaviour. Ensure medical appointments don't retraumatise through insensitive questioning or assumptions.

Legal Support Integration

- **Asylum claim strengthening:** Coordinate between therapeutic support and legal representatives to ensure trauma evidence supports the asylum claim without compromising therapeutic relationships. Understand how mental health impacts may affect legal interviews and advocate for appropriate adjustments.

- **Appeal process support:** Provide emotional and practical support throughout the appeal process. Understand how legal uncertainty affects mental health and plan therapeutic interventions accordingly. Plan for slower paced legal interviews, breaks, and simplified language.

Community Integration and Identity Affirmation

- **LGBTQ+ community connections:** Facilitate careful introduction to Maltese LGBTQ+ communities, recognising that cultural differences may exist whilst affirming sexual identity. Support navigation of different community expectations and norms.

- **Cultural identity preservation:** Help James identify aspects of Nigerian culture he wishes to maintain whilst living openly as a gay man. Connect with other LGBTQ+ Africans who have navigated similar identity negotiations.

- **Skills and independence building:** Provide practical support with language development, employment preparation, and daily living skills whilst his legal status remains uncertain. Focus on building confidence and self-efficacy. If this support is not available within your capacity, outreach to other organisations.

Ongoing Monitoring and Adaption

- **Regular review processes:** Establish monthly reviews of the support plan, recognising that needs may change as legal processes develop and healing occurs. Maintain flexibility in service provision.

- **Crisis planning:** Develop clear protocols for managing potential crisis points - asylum refusal, health deterioration, or mental health crises; with all services understanding their roles and James's preferences for support.

"LET US USE CLEAR SIMPLE LANGUAGE THAT EVERYONE CAN UNDERSTAND."

Photo Credit: Dino Torlakovic

Cross-Cutting Implementation Principles

Trauma-Informed Practice Fundamentals

- **Safety first**: Physical and psychological safety must be established before other work can begin
- **Choice and control**: People retain decision-making power about their support and interventions
- **Trustworthiness**: Transparent communication about limitations, requirements, and processes
- **Collaboration**: Working with rather than doing to people
- **Cultural humility**: Recognising the limits of professional knowledge and the expertise people bring about their own experiences

Cultural Awareness Without Cultural Relativism 2

- **Individual assessment**: Avoid assumptions about cultural practices whilst understanding their significance to individuals
- **Rights-based framework**: Maintain clear boundaries around safety and human rights whilst respecting cultural identity
- **Community engagement**: Work with communities to identify internal resources and change agents rather than imposing external solutions
- **Intersectional awareness**: Understand how multiple identities and oppressions interact to create unique experiences

These approaches require ongoing training, supervision, and organisational commitment to trauma-informed, culturally responsive practice. They also demand adequate resources and realistic caseloads that allow for the relationship-building and coordination that effective support requires. When resources or capacity is limited, collaborate and outreach to other organisations where possible. Remember, collaboration over competition - we are stronger when working together.

4.3 Decision-Making Frameworks

Ethical Decision-Making in Complex Situations

Working in migration SGBV contexts requires regular decision-making under uncertainty, with limited information, and competing priorities. A structured approach to ethical decision-making helps ensure consistent, defensible choices that prioritise wellbeing.

The ETHICS Decision-Making framework

E – Evaluate
Gather all available information about the situation, including cultural context, trauma history, and immediate risk factors — while recognising limitations and gaps in what you know.

T – Think through options
Consider possible actions by weighing immediate safety, long-term wellbeing, cultural implications, and systemic factors such as legal obligations or organisational policy.

H – Honour choice and agency
Respect the person's right to decide what feels safe and appropriate, acknowledging they are the expert on their own life and cultural identity.

I – Identify resources, risks, and supports
Map formal services (e.g., legal aid, mental health, medical) and informal supports (e.g., trusted community members) while assessing potential risks, including those linked to cultural dynamics.

C – Consult
Seek guidance from supervisors, cultural mediators, or other specialists to challenge personal biases, explore cultural considerations, and strengthen ethical reasoning.

S – Support implementation
Act on the chosen approach, while remaining flexible as circumstances, new information, or the person's preferences evolve.

Applying the Framework

Each decision point requires consideration of:

- Immediate safety concerns
- Expressed preferences and goals
- Cultural and linguistic factors
- Legal and policy constraints
- Available resources and support systems
- Potential unintended consequences

Balancing Competing Needs and Interests

SGBV within the context of migration often involves balancing multiple, sometimes competing interests:

- **Autonomy vs. Safety Concerns:** Respecting choice whilst addressing safety concerns requires nuanced approaches that avoid paternalistic decision-making while acknowledging genuine risks.
- **Individual vs. Community Needs:** Addressing individual cases within community contexts requires sensitivity to collective dynamics without compromising individual rights.
- **Confidentiality vs. Safeguarding:** Understanding when confidentiality limits apply and how to navigate competing obligations requires clear policies and regular supervision.
- **Immediate vs. Long-term Considerations:** Balancing immediate crisis response with longer-term recovery and empowerment goals requires ongoing assessment and flexibility.

Practical Tools Within Organisations

Monthly Case Review Sessions: Regular team meetings using anonymised scenarios to:

- Practice decision-making frameworks
- Explore cultural competency challenges
- Discuss resource limitations and creative solutions
- Share learning from difficult cases
- Build team confidence and competence

Role-Play Exercises: Structured role-plays focusing on:

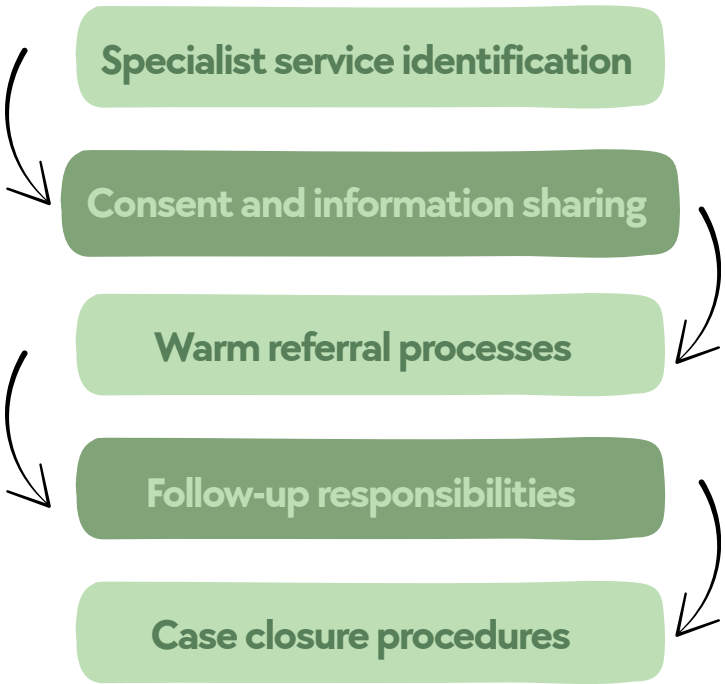
- Sensitive disclosure conversations
- Interpreter-mediated sessions
- Multi-agency meetings
- Challenging community dynamics
- Difficult supervision discussions

Reflective Practice Groups: Small group sessions examining:

- Personal responses to challenging cases
- Cultural assumptions and biases
- Professional boundary management
- Vicarious trauma and self-care
- Advocacy and empowerment approaches
- Clear supervision structures
- Encourage staff debriefing after complex meetings/interviews

Safety Planning Flowchart: Step-by-step guide for assessing and responding to safety concerns, including:

Referral Flowchart: Clear process for determining when and how to refer, including:



Multi-Agency Working Flowchart: Guidance for coordinating across services, including:

Every situation is an opportunity to learn, grow, and improve our practice. The goal is not perfection but continuous improvement in service of safety, choice, and empowerment.

A Final Thought for Ch.4

Real-world work with people affected by sexual and gender-based violence in migration contexts will never fit neatly into protocols or flowcharts. It is tender, complex, and often full of grey zones. But every scenario, no matter how uncertain, offers a chance to practise care and solidarity with integrity. What matters most is not having all the answers, but showing up with humility, curiosity, and a willingness to keep learning. When we centre dignity, listen with intention, and reflect honestly on our own power and practice, we don't just respond...we build trust, accountability and support healing in the very spaces where harm once occurred. The goal isn't perfection. It's to keep choosing humanity, even when the path is hard.

"RESPECTING SOMEONE'S CULTURE IS NOT JUST ABOUT KNOWING THEIR HOLIDAYS, IT'S ABOUT UNDERSTANDING HOW CULTURE AND SAFETY ARE INTERTWINED."

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

5

LIVED EXPERIENCE: CENTRING SURVIVOR VOICES

CORE PRINCIPLE: WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER THAN DIVIDED

Centring the voices and leadership of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) transforms both the systems meant to support them and the communities they belong to. People with lived experience of both forced migration and SGBV possess nuanced, embodied wisdom about harm, healing, and what genuine safety looks like in practice. When this wisdom is meaningfully woven into programmes, policy, and advocacy, services become more equitable, culturally responsive, and ultimately more effective.

5.1 The Transformative Value of Lived Experience

Why Survivor Leadership Is Essential, Not Optional

Survivors are not passive recipients awaiting intervention, they are active agents of change who have already survived the unimaginable. Their leadership in SGBV work creates services that better reflect the complexity of lived realities, cultural nuances, and genuine community needs. This leadership also supports collective healing by challenging stigma, isolation, and the harmful narratives that society often imposes.

For people who have experienced forced migration, this leadership becomes particularly crucial. Traditional power structures often silence these voices in favour of institutional agendas, policy conveniences, or dominant cultural perspectives that may not reflect survivors' actual experiences or needs.

Beyond Consultation: Creating Authentic Partnership

Tokenistic consultation, where survivors are asked for their thoughts after fundamental decisions have already been made, can mirror the same patterns of disempowerment experienced during trauma.

Authentic partnership requires:

At the design stage:

- Involving survivors from the very beginning of programme conceptualisation
- Recognising that survivors may have different communication preferences and styles
- Creating multiple pathways for engagement (written, spoken, visual, anonymous, or through trusted intermediaries)

In evaluation and learning:

- Ensuring survivors are involved in defining what success looks like
- Creating space for honest feedback about what isn't working
- Supporting survivors to lead peer learning and knowledge-sharing

Trauma-informed, rights-based engagement means:

Structural changes:

- Actively working to reduce barriers such as language access, childcare, transportation, and legal protection
- Sharing actual decision-making authority, not just consultation opportunities
- Providing capacity-building opportunities that survivors themselves identify as useful
- Creating pathways for survivors to influence organisational policies, not just individual programmes
- Paying survivors for their work, time and contributions

Cultural responsiveness:

- Recognising that concepts of leadership, participation, and voice may differ across cultures
- Understanding that some survivors may prefer collective rather than individual engagement
- Acknowledging that trauma responses and healing practices vary significantly across cultural contexts

Power imbalances between survivors and professionals become particularly pronounced in contexts involving forced migration, where legal uncertainty, cultural hierarchies, economic dependency, and language barriers can compound existing vulnerabilities.

5.2 Creating Genuine Space for Survivor Leadership

Developing Meaningful Survivor Advisory Structures

Survivor advisory groups can be transformative when designed with authentic care and commitment to power-sharing:

Inclusive recruitment:

- Use trauma-informed approaches that prioritise safety and choice
- Ensure representation across diverse experiences including age, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, legal status, and length of time since trauma
- Partner with community organisations that already have trust relationships
- Recognise that some of the most marginalised survivors may be hardest to reach through traditional channels

Comprehensive support systems:

- Provide emotional and practical safety measures, including access to counselling
- Offer preparatory support to help survivors understand their role and feel confident
- Ensure clear, jargon-free communication about expectations, time commitments, and boundaries
- Build in flexibility to accommodate different life circumstances and trauma responses

Genuine power-sharing:

- Give advisory groups real influence over budgets, strategic directions, and programming decisions
- Create transparent processes for how their advice is considered and implemented
- Establish clear protocols for when recommendations cannot be followed and why
- Regularly review and adjust the advisory structure based on survivor feedback

Survivor involvement isn't an add-on to make programmes look better, it's fundamental to creating services that actually work.

What does it look like when someone respects your culture and also makes you feel safe?

Professiona ls who ask, not assume.

To someone who doesn't respect me as an individual, I won't express everything.

Listening without judging, allowing me to share my story, understanding my tradition and making me feel welcome.

Ask "Is there anything I should know to support you better?"

When I meet someone who is open-hearted, I feel free to express myself.


Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

Ethical Storytelling and Narrative Ownership

Stories possess immense power to create understanding, challenge assumptions, and drive change. However, when shared without proper consent, context, or safety measures, storytelling can become exploitative or retraumatising.

Trauma-informed narrative practices include:

Consent as an ongoing process:

- Establishing informed consent that survivors can withdraw at any time
- Providing clear information about how, where, and with whom stories will be shared
- Creating opportunities for survivors to edit, retract, or anonymise their stories
- Checking in regularly about comfort levels, especially if circumstances change

Framing with agency and strength:

- Moving beyond narratives of rescue or victimhood to highlight resilience and leadership
- Avoiding sensationalism or voyeuristic details that don't serve the survivor's purpose
- Supporting survivors to tell their stories in their own words and cultural contexts
- Recognising that some stories may be better shared within community rather than publicly

Protecting dignity and safety:

- Considering potential risks to the storyteller and their family or community
- Avoiding details that could compromise legal proceedings or safety
- Being particularly cautious with stories involving people who have experienced forced migration, given potential immigration implications

Fair Recognition and Compensation

Survivor contributions represent valuable labour that deserves appropriate recognition and compensation. This is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity for sustainable engagement:

Financial compensation:

- Provide fair payment for time, expertise, and emotional labour
- Consider ongoing commitments or employment rather than just one-off payments
- Ensure payment methods are accessible and don't create additional barriers
- Be transparent about budget limitations while still valuing contributions appropriately
- Provide support in filling out invoices or setting up bank accounts when necessary

Practical support:

- Cover expenses such as transportation, childcare, or technology access
- Provide support for any additional needs related to disability or health conditions
- Offer flexible arrangements that accommodate different circumstances
- Consider in-kind support such as training, references, or networking opportunities

Recognition and professional development:

- Acknowledge contributions publicly when desired and safe to do so
- Support survivors to build skills, networks, or qualifications if they're interested
- Create pathways for ongoing leadership development
- Connect survivors with other opportunities that match their interests and goals

5.3 Challenging and Transforming Traditional Service Models

Moving Beyond Harmful Narratives

A dominant narrative in many SGBV and migration services positions survivors as helpless victims requiring rescue by benevolent professionals. This framing can reinforce dependency, paternalism, European saviourism and further disempowerment, while obscuring survivors' existing strengths, knowledge, and community connections.

Trauma-informed, culturally responsive frameworks emphasise:

- Self-determination over imposed solutions
- Solidarity over charity models
- Co-creation over top-down service delivery
- Community strengths over deficit-based approaches
- Cultural wisdom over one-size-fits-all interventions

Supporting Survivor-Led Initiatives and Community Organising

People with lived experience are already organising, creating mutual aid networks, and developing innovative responses to community needs. These grassroots initiatives often operate without adequate funding, recognition, or institutional support, yet they frequently demonstrate the most culturally responsive and effective approaches to healing and justice.

Photo Credit: Dino Torlakovic

Genuine partnership with survivor-led initiatives means:

- Building relationships that respect community autonomy and leadership
- Avoiding the temptation to over-professionalise or institutionalise grassroots approaches
- Sharing resources (including finances) and platforms without attempting to co-opt or control
- Recognising that formal organisations may not always be the most effective or appropriate structure
- Understanding that some of the most important work happens informally within communities

Transforming Funding and Resource Distribution

Current funding structures often fail to reach those most affected by SGBV and forced migration. Transformative approaches require:

Flexible and accessible funding:

- Reducing bureaucratic barriers that exclude grassroots groups
- Providing core funding rather than restricting resources to specific projects
- Accepting different approaches to accountability that may be more culturally appropriate
- Supporting capacity building that communities themselves identify as needed

Long-term commitment:

- Moving beyond short-term project cycles to sustainable, multi-year investments
- Recognising that healing and system change take time
- Supporting leadership development and succession planning within communities
- Building relationships based on trust rather than just contractual obligations

Addressing systemic inequities:

- Confronting racism, colonialism, and other forms of discrimination within funding structures
- Examining whose voices are valued in funding decisions
- Creating space for non-Western approaches to programme design and evaluation
- Supporting initiatives led by people who reflect the communities being served

Reflection Questions

For individual practitioners:

- How do I currently include lived experience in my work, and is this involvement meaningful or tokenistic?
- What assumptions do I hold about survivors' capacities, and how might these impact my practice?
- How do I respond when survivors' perspectives challenge my professional knowledge or organisational approaches?

For organisations:

- Where do power imbalances exist in our current structures, and how might we be unintentionally perpetuating them?
- How do our recruitment, staffing, and leadership development practices reflect our commitment to survivor leadership?
- What would it look like to genuinely share decision-making authority with survivors?

For the broader sector:

- How do our funding and partnership approaches either support or undermine survivor-led initiatives?
- What dominant narratives about SGBV and forced migration need to be challenged or reframed?
- How can we better support grassroots organising while respecting community autonomy?

A Final Thought for Ch.5

Centring lived experience is not a symbolic gesture, it's a pathway to more responsive, ethical, and effective support. When survivors are consulted; their skills and experiences platformed and they are meaningfully included, services become more attuned to people's real needs. And policy becomes grounded in the wisdom of those it affects most. But this requires more than listening, it calls for partnership, shared decision-making and a commitment to shifting power. It means creating space for different forms of knowledge, recognising emotional labour, and ensuring that lived experience contributions are valued, protected, and properly supported.

This is not always easy work. It asks organisations and systems to slow down, reflect, and adapt. But when we move from consultation to collaboration, from representation to leadership, we don't just improve services, we begin to transform the structures that shape them. And that is where lasting change begins.

"GENUINE COLLABORATION WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE LIVED EXPERIENCE BEGINS WITH HONESTY AND HUMILITY.

ASK NOT JUST WHAT STORIES CAN WE COLLECT?, BUT HOW CAN WE SHIFT POWER?"

6

SYSTEMS THINKING: CONNECTING THE DOTS

CORE PRINCIPLE: INDIVIDUAL HEALING HAPPENS WITHIN COMMUNITY SYSTEMS

"Imagine trying to solve a complex puzzle whilst half the pieces are scattered across different rooms, some locked away, others mislabelled. That's what addressing sexual and gender-based violence looks like when systems fail to connect, and why we must do better."

SGBV often doesn't happen in isolation. Neither can integrating healing from it. People who have crossed borders, whether by choice or through necessity, navigate multiple, overlapping systems daily: immigration, healthcare, housing, education, employment, policing. Each interaction shapes whether someone can access safety, justice, and the space to heal.

Systems thinking recognises that the most transformative change happens not through "fixing" individuals, but through mending the broken connections between the structures that should support them. This chapter explores how we weave these systemic threads together to create genuinely protective responses to SGBV.

6.1 Understanding Interconnected Systems

For people who have journeyed across borders, SGBV often becomes entangled with systemic failures, disconnections, and discrimination. Picture this: someone cannot access healthcare without identification documents, which are delayed due to immigration processes, which are themselves complicated by previous detention. Meanwhile, unstable housing may interrupt healing or create new vulnerabilities.

These aren't separate problems requiring separate solutions, they're interconnected challenges demanding interconnected responses.

Core Systems in People's Lives:

- **Immigration & Legal Frameworks**: Shape access to documentation, rights, and freedom of movement
- **Healthcare Services**: Gateways to medical, mental health, and reproductive support, often fragmented or culturally disconnected
- **Housing & Accommodation**: Safe housing underpins everything else, yet many remain trapped in unsafe arrangements
- **Employment & Education**: Pathways to independence and dignity, frequently blocked by bureaucracy or discrimination

How can organisations work with people who have lived experience in a way that feels fair and respectful, not just for show?

Pay them for their time and knowledge.

Including people with lived experience in real decision making processes.
Being transparent about how their input is used. Such as reports.

Respect also means being open to critique and feedback, allowing people to challenge the organisation without fear.

If I tell you my problems, follow up what happened next.

Should always remember that they are human not materials.

When Systems Fail and When They Flourish

Systems create barriers when:

- Languages other than English aren't properly supported
- Legal uncertainty creates constant anxiety
- Past experiences with authorities make people hesitant to seek help
- Services ignore cultural contexts and needs
- Funding structures pit organisations against each other rather than encouraging collaboration

Systems create opportunities when:

- People with lived experience help design services
- Information flows ethically between organisations that need to coordinate
- Care is holistic rather than fragmented
- Advocacy bridges the gap between policy and practice

Advocacy as System Connector

Advocacy can be the thread that connects disparate systems. Through collaborative initiatives, such as TAMA's 'Connecting the Dots' national campaign, survivor voices aren't just heard, they shaped public discourse. By engaging directly with policymakers whilst collaborating with universities and police services, this campaign highlights how different elements - public awareness, professional development, and survivor leadership - can weave together to create meaningful change.

When perspectives remain isolated in their own silos, understanding stays incomplete. When connected thoughtfully, a fuller picture emerges, and with it, the possibility for meaningful transformation.

6.2 Multi-Agency Collaboration

Addressing SGBV in the context of border-crossing requires genuine partnership across sectors. No single organisation can meet all the interconnected needs that arise. However, collaborative working must be intentional, coordinated, and consistently guided by the voices and experiences of the people most affected.

Building Authentic Partnerships

- Invest in relationships before crises: Trust isn't built overnight, especially when working across different professional cultures
- Establish shared principles: Trauma-informed practice, people-centred approaches, cultural responsiveness aren't just buzzwords, they're non-negotiables
- Define roles clearly: Avoid duplication whilst ensuring no one falls through gaps in provision
- Centre lived experience: Not as an afterthought or token consultation, but as integral to design and delivery

6.3 Advocating for Systemic Transformation

Real change requires moving beyond individual support to structural transformation. Systems thinking challenges us not only to work more effectively within existing systems, but to reimagine what those systems could become.

From Case Work to Systems Change

Each person's experience often illuminates cracks in the broader system. These insights must inform:

- Policy development and reform
- Service redesign and innovation
- Legislative change
- Accountability mechanisms that actually work

Strategic Advocacy and Campaign Development

Effective approaches include:

- Coalition building: Create alliances across legal, housing, health, and immigration sectors
- Evidence-informed messaging: Combine quantitative data with qualitative insights, including anonymised survivor experiences
- Accessible communication: Provide materials in multiple languages, use plain English, and reach diverse audiences through varied channels
- Strategic timing: Link campaigns to policy reviews, electoral cycles, or international awareness campaigns

Sustaining Change Through Relationship

Lasting transformation happens through sustained relationships, not short-term projects. Building for the long-term means:

- Investing in mutual trust and reciprocity
- Supporting movements led by people with lived experience
- Embedding learning in institutions (universities, professional training, policy development)
- Tracking impact and learning from both successes and setbacks

Reflection Points:

- What systems do people in your community navigate simultaneously, and where do these systems connect or conflict?
- Where are the friction points that create additional harm or delay support?
- How might your organisation strengthen partnerships across sectors?
- Whose voices and experiences are missing from current systems discussions and how might they be meaningfully included?
- What would it look like if systems were designed by the people who use them rather than the professionals who work in them?

"PEOPLE SHOULDN'T BE ASKED TO RELIVE TRAUMA JUST TO MEET PARTICIPATION QUOTAS."

Photo Credit: Lisa Attard

A Final Thought for Ch. 6

Addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the context of migration cannot be done in isolation. People's lives are shaped by overlapping systems - immigration, housing, healthcare, policing, education and more. When these systems fail to connect, they can create more harm than support.

Systems thinking asks us to step back, see the full picture, and recognise that rebuilding doesn't happen in a vacuum; it happens when services work together, guided by the voices of those most affected.

This means moving beyond siloed responses and towards genuine collaboration, grounded in trust, transparency, and a shared commitment to dignity and justice. It also means challenging the systems themselves: the policies that exclude, the funding structures that divide, and the assumptions that invisibly shape how support is offered...or withheld.

When we begin to centre lived experience in service design, advocacy, and policy, we not only close the gaps between systems, we create new pathways altogether. And in doing so, we lay the groundwork for a future where care is not just coordinated, but compassionate. Not just efficient, but equitable.

Tomorrow

Looking back, you realised, it wasn't so bad after all.
You went through hell, YES you did
You experienced pains, lots of pains, like a cut of a knife. YES you did
Bleeding heart like a running tap, you have seen and faced uncertainties, YES uncertainties, bigger and greater than this.
YES the ones stronger than this and you came out from them all, stronger and better.
And this time, you can, and will succeed.
Yes you will.
Will tomorrow ever come? You kept asking.
You've asked these questions before. YES you have.
Trust me, tomorrow always comes.
But you have to fight hard for it
Wait patiently for it
Hope for it and never give up.
But this time, fight harder because if you don't, only then, will you never see the tomorrow you so much longed for.

Precious Orogun

This handbook was created by TAMA

Part of the ‘Bridging Borders’ project funded by the EU

For more Information: www.tama.ngo