

CASE STUDY

Gender-based violence risk mitigation institutionalization: Ensuring safer and more ethical approaches to communications work on GBV

This case study – focused on how humanitarian organizations can deliver safer and more ethical communications work around gender-based violence (GBV) – is part of a broader, global project led by UNICEF that aims to capture learning, innovative approaches and practical resources on how GBV risk mitigation has been institutionalized within humanitarian response. While other elements of the package highlight how non-programmatic entry points of humanitarian response can be leveraged to increase the predictability and sustainability of GBV risk mitigation across other sector programming, this case study illustrates the importance of applying the GBV risk mitigation approach to a non-programmatic area of work: communications. Based on a literature review and key informant interviews, the study identifies good practices and challenges in applying GBV risk mitigation in communications as perceived by specialists in the two areas. It concludes by highlighting some opportunities for further advancing this important work. The project was led by UNICEF with generous support from the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance and in collaboration with an inter-agency advisory group

1. Background

Since the launch of the revised [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action](#) in 2015, integration of GBV risk mitigation into programming and coordination has gained significant traction across multiple sectors and levels of humanitarian response. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition that to ensure sustainability of these advancements, GBV risk mitigation must also be firmly anchored in the institutional elements that underpin programming.

GBV risk mitigation institutionalization focuses on shifting institutional systems, structures and processes ('institutional DNA') to ensure GBV-related risks are proactively identified and addressed in a predictable, self-sustaining manner. What this means in practice is that **humanitarian response is delivered in a way that is safer for and more accountable to women and girls – across every sector, in every emergency, throughout each phase of preparation, response and recovery.**

Through institutionalization, GBV risk mitigation becomes part of the organization or humanitarian sector's standard ways of working and accountability frameworks. It gets triggered automatically and predictably – rather than being dependent on individual personalities or a particular set of contextual factors – meaning GBV specialists can focus less of their time advocating for GBV risk mitigation and instead focus on its implementation (through technical support, capacity-building and adapting tools to fit the context).

2. Introduction

In addition to leveraging institutional entry points – such as human resources, strategic planning processes, monitoring and evaluation, among others – to make GBV risk mitigation a more sustainable feature across programming, another critical angle of institutionalization involves humanitarian organizations seizing opportunities to apply the GBV risk mitigation approach to other, non-programmatic, areas of work. This paper describes how GBV risk mitigation principles and practices are currently being applied to humanitarian communications work and where there are untapped opportunities to do even better.

Box 1

Communications

In this paper, communications work has been defined as the work carried out by a humanitarian institution to develop and convey messaging about its work to an external audience, the goal often being to bring attention and resources to a particular issue or to the work of the organization itself, as well as non-fund-raising work of traditional communications teams, including community-facing information provision and two-way communication on social media. Within this scope, communications related to GBV includes:

- Press releases, op-eds, reports, and web and social media content about GBV, addressing the experiences of survivors, their journey of healing and recovery, sharing stories about women and girls and their risk of GBV, or about GBV services and programming.
- Working with media outlets that want to cover stories related to GBV.
- High-profile visits of donors, government representatives or heads of institutions to GBV programmes, including speaking with GBV survivors and meeting with GBV service providers.
- Community-facing information messaging.

GBV risk mitigation in communications, for this study, has been conceptualized at a very minimum as ‘do no harm’, ensuring that communications work does not put women and girls at further risk. However, when leveraged to its fullest potential, applying a GBV risk mitigation approach can help ensure communications work is carried out in a way that **respects the choices of women and girls, keeps their safety at the forefront and elevates their voices**. It elevates the accountability to women and girls – including those who have experienced GBV – creating opportunities for them to share their stories, in whatever way feels most comfortable for them, while respecting and protecting their safety, agency and dignity in the process.

Working closely with UNICEF staff, information for this document was gathered by Tsunagu, an external consulting team with GBV expertise. The process included a review of related literature and key informant interviews. The literature review synthesizes guidance that exists in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings on covering stories related to GBV and GBV survivors as well as facilitating the engagement of the media, donors, or other influential actors with GBV programming. Twelve key informant interviews were carried out with communications and GBV practitioners who have experience working in humanitarian settings.

3. Why gender-based violence risk mitigation in communications is important

When carried out with a GBV risk mitigation lens, communications work can have tremendous benefits for programming and for women and girls, including:

- Increasing awareness on GBV which could result in mobilizing more resources for GBV programming and/or making GBV risk mitigation a more consistent feature of other sectors' programming.
- Empowering women and girls by bringing their voices more effectively to humanitarian actors, donors and the public.
- Bringing accurate information to women and girls about their rights and available services, helping to facilitate their access to humanitarian assistance and reduce their exposure to exploitation.
- Providing a safe and supportive platform for survivors who want to share their stories.

Box 2

The potential cost of failing to address gender-based violence risks in communications work

While communications hold significant potential to mobilize attention and action on gender-based violence, there can also be risks to both individual survivors as well as to humanitarian organizations' reputation and relationships with local communities. These risks, which increase if communications work does not apply a GBV risk mitigation approach, include:

- Retaliation against survivors, families, communities and/or service providers. Publicizing stories of gender-based violence can lead to retaliation against survivors and those supporting them, resulting in significant additional harm.
- Harming individuals' well-being and dignity. The well-being of survivors and their families might be compromised, particularly if they have disrespectful interactions with media focal points or feel that their story was not told in a way that upheld their dignity. This can further undermine their agency and voice and cause emotional harm by reproducing the loss of power they experienced with gender-based violence.
- Perpetuating stigma and singular narratives. Sensationalist or insensitive coverage can perpetuate stigma and discrimination against survivors or fail to show other aspects of a survivor's story, such as their resilience, power, or hopes. Such depictions can lead to singular narratives that fail to capture the full humanity of survivors.

(...)

- Undermining advocacy efforts. Inaccurate portrayals can undermine advocacy efforts by focusing attention on simplistic or ineffective solutions or actions that are not aligned with survivors' or service providers' needs or wants.
- Disempowering women and girls. A lack of consultation with women and girls about what stories they want to tell or what messages they want to communicate can leave them feeling disempowered, diminishing the likelihood that they will want to continue speaking to the media.
- Erosion of trust with communities. If communities are dissatisfied or angry with the way they have been portrayed in communications materials, trust in humanitarian organizations can erode. This can affect the delivery of humanitarian assistance more broadly, compromise access (particularly to vulnerable populations), and undermine the credibility of the humanitarian community.
- Negative media coverage and repercussions. Missteps in communications on GBV can lead to negative media coverage, damaging the organization's image and leading to public backlash. In some cases, ethical breaches can result in an organization facing legal and/or financial repercussions.

4. Good practices in applying gender-based violence risk mitigation to communications work

From the review of the literature and key informant interviews, several good practices emerged that are relevant to GBV risk mitigation in communications work. These good practices have been articulated in guidance specifically from humanitarian organizations as well as guidance and approaches from the field of media and communications more broadly. A promising practice shared by one organization is also highlighted (section 4.3).

4.1 Relevant guidance in the humanitarian field

Over the past decade and particularly in recent years, several humanitarian organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Women, Care International and others) have published guidance on ethical approaches to communications work, including considerations related to GBV. Other organizations have also developed their own internal standards.

Box 3

Examples of relevant inter-agency guidance

[Applying a Do No Harm Approach to High-Level Missions on Gender-Based Violence \(including CRSV\)](#)

This guidance note, developed by the [Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies](#), provides tips and recommendations for applying the ‘do no harm’ principle to high-level visits on GBV conducted by United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), donor countries, media and other influential stakeholders in humanitarian contexts. It highlights the risks and sensitivities of conducting visits where the power differentials between the delegation and the affected community are acute and offers guidance for ensuring basic ethical and safety principles are upheld.

[The Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies](#)

This resource presents 16 minimum standards for the prevention of and response to GBV in emergencies. Standard 14 – Collection and Use of Survivor Data – includes a specific guidance note on reporting and communications on GBV.

Among the guidance analyzed as part of the literature review, one commonly emphasized point was that protection concerns should take precedence over all motivators for communications content. Specifically, this means taking proactive measures to prioritize the safety of individuals who contribute to and/or are featured in the communications materials.

Some guidance reviewed recommends following storytelling best practice when exploring GBV-related themes in communications^{1,2}. Examples include finding positive angles to stories, such as focusing on community advocates and initiatives working to address GBV in their communities. Guidance also advises against sensationalizing violence and portraying survivors solely as victims. Some guidelines also offer both ethical and practical considerations for protecting survivors when they are photographed and filmed.³

Informed consent processes are a particularly important part of ethical communications work. The literature emphasizes the importance of respecting the dignity and agency of people whose stories or images will be used for organizational purposes. It recommends that informed consent should be a participatory process where subjects of stories and images are able to exercise their right to refuse at any time. For example, UNHCR’s Ethical Communications Guidelines include the following:



We recognise informed consent to be the keystone in ethical communications. Consent is not a form, it is a process for participants to exercise their choices, and an ongoing dialogue before, during and after content is created and shared, which takes into account the potential power imbalances between the content gatherer and the contributor.⁴

Other recent guidance reviewed on informed consent echoes the foundational principle that the process must be dynamic and interactive. Other common standards for informed consent echoed across the reviewed guidance, including:

- Clearly explain the purpose of the interview (or photography or filming) and how it will be used, including by specifying how far the resulting content may reach and whom it may reach and how that may change over time.
- Make sure the subject understands the full range of risks they could face by sharing their story.
- Ensure the subject knows they can withdraw consent at any time, including during the interview, and explain how they can do so.
- Use plain language and gender-responsive terminology and communicate in a language the person feels comfortable using.
- Document informed consent, whether on a written form or in a recorded audio or video file.

Others go further: guidance from Bond, a non-governmental organization, called ‘Putting the People in the Pictures First’,⁵ for example, provides detailed advice on informed consent that covers:

- How to introduce your organization and individuals to those being photographed, filmed or interviewed.
- Explaining why you would like to photograph/film/interview them.
- Clearly communicating contributors’ right to refuse to participate and explaining there will be no negative consequences in doing so.
- Explaining how an image/story will be used and what the resulting communication will look like.
- Talking about who is likely to see it.
- Explaining contributors’ right to conceal identity.
- How long the agency will keep images/stories.
- Contributors’ right to withdraw consent.

4.2 Ethical storytelling

‘Ethical storytelling’ can be an important resource for a) protecting survivors, their communities and the service providers involved in supporting them and b) respectfully stories and images linked to sensitive topics like GBV.

Ethical storytelling is an approach that focuses on shifting the power dynamics between organization and subject and of telling stories in a way that upholds the subject’s right to dignity, respect and decision-making. Ethical storytelling is based

on many of the same basic principles as the survivor-centred approach, which is a foundational element of GBV prevention and response work.

For example, organizations like Story and Spirit⁶ and Dignified Storytelling⁷ are bringing together non-profit practitioners and storytellers to ask: How do we tell stories in a way that respects human dignity? How do humanitarian and development organizations tell stories in a way that does not perpetuate or exploit power dynamics between the organization and the people they serve? The founder of Story and Spirit explains:

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Conventional organizational storytelling – the type that has been the hallmark of fundraising campaigns and not-for-profit communication for decades – is rooted in extractive practices. Ethical storytelling is a set of tools and practices, and a mindset that can help us divest from exploitative ways of being and relationships with the communities and people we purport to serve while fostering more equitable, inclusive and human relationships.⁸

Features of ethical storytelling include:

- **Deep consent.**⁹ Ethical storytelling means making sure that everybody involved has a shared understanding of the purpose of the story, where and how it is going to be used, and for how long. Permission should be provided before, during and after the story is shared.
- **Re-thinking the framing of the story.** Rather than telling a story that defines the person based on the worst things that have happened to them, they tell a more balanced narrative that includes positive elements of the person's story.
- **Re-thinking the purpose of the story.** The purpose is to build connection between story and readers, rather than to generate sympathy, pity or shock.
- **Consider other options.** Storytellers can share specific moments of a person's story but perhaps telling it through the service providers' eyes.

The organization Dignified Storytelling also outlines ten principles¹⁰ to guide ethical and dignified storytelling (box 4) that were developed through consultations with storytellers and communications experts as well as literature from the ethical storytelling field.

Principle 1: It's not my story. Dignified storytelling amplifies contributors' voices and experiences, honouring their wishes about what story is told and how it is told.

Principle 2: Do no harm. Dignified storytelling applies a 'do no harm' ethic to all actions. Dignified storytelling maintains that the best interest and safety of the contributor(s) and their communities must always be placed above any other consideration in storytelling.

Principle 3: We are all multi-dimensional. Dignified storytelling embraces complexity and nuance. It actively seeks opportunities to change one-sided stories about poverty and pity – in part through representing people and communities as more than just their problems.

Principle 4: Consent is more than paperwork. Consent from contributors must be freely given, fully informed, and obtained prior to any story gathering. Informed consent is more than just a formality or filling in forms; it is an essential and core ethic of dignified storytelling.

Principle 5: I am biased (repeat). Dignified storytelling recognises that biases, stereotypes, social stigmas, and power differences exist, whether we are aware of them or not.

Principle 6: I do my homework. Dignified storytelling pursues a deep understanding of historical and cultural issues to guide the storytelling process. This is the first step towards mitigating the risks of oversimplification, sensationalism and stereotyping.

Principle 7: I am empathetic. Dignified storytelling prioritizes thoughtful reflection on the short and longer-term implications behind each story choice. Dignified storytelling is mindful of the implications the stories might have on individuals, the wider community, and the environment.

Principle 8: I protect others' data like it is my own. Dignified storytelling respects and strictly follows existing national or regional laws and regulations on storing and publishing stories.

Principle 9: Truth over headlines. Dignified storytelling seeks to offer an honest and accurate portrayal of individuals and communities.

Principle 10: A story can change the world. Dignified storytelling empowers contributors and cultivates empathy. Dignified storytelling inspires action through the power of storytelling. It looks for the bright light in all people from a place of connection, partnership and respect.

4.3 Promising practice: International Medical Corps' guidance on GBV communications

One example of good practice comes from the International Medical Corps (IMC), an INGO in humanitarian settings with well-established GBV programming. Communications and GBV specialists from the organization came together in 2023 to develop their own internal guidance for creating and sharing communications content on GBV.

The initiative began with a communications staff member who received a story from one of their field offices about a GBV survivor and had many questions about how the story was gathered and the ethics of sharing it. After the communications staff consulted the GBV technical team on this story, the two groups concluded that they would both benefit from greater collaboration and clearer processes and procedures for communications on GBV content. They allocated resources to hire a consultant with a GBV background to lead the initiative. In addition to carrying out a literature review, the consultant brought the two teams together in a workshop to generate the content to create GBV communications guidelines. The teams began by sharing their respective views on the risks and rewards of communications content on GBV. The GBV team also shared in-depth background on a survivor-centered approach and how that informs everything GBV programmes do and how this approach should extend to communications about GBV.

The outcome of the initiative is a guide that outlines essential actions to create ethical communications about IMC's GBV needs and programming. It includes the following: foundational values and processes that underpin the organization's approach to communications on GBV; how the teams work together to develop communications and advocacy content on GBV needs and programming; what the organization considers to be safe, ethical and dignified representation of GBV needs and programming – in other words, alternatives to telling survivor stories; and, in exceptional circumstances when survivors may be engaged for content, what the requirements are for doing so.

Some noteworthy features of IMC's guidance include:

- It was developed jointly by GBV and IMC communications staff from both headquarters and country offices, operating from a place of respect, curiosity and desire to collaborate towards shared goals.
- The organization's position is articulated from the outset. The introduction of the document states, "our priority is ensuring survivor safety over creating a story or any content" and that "engaging with survivors is not required to produce effective communications and advocacy content. There are many alternatives to creating GBV content without putting survivors' safety and security at risk." (IMC, 2024).
- It clearly delineates roles and responsibilities, decision points and decision-making authority.
- Risk assessment is central to decision-making on content creation. Risk assessment includes: (a) an operational/programme risk assessment about the risk/benefit calculation of profiling GBV needs, IMC's GBV

programming or both; and (b) individual risk assessment, which relates to an individual's risk/benefit calculation, which is part of the informed consent process when considering involvement in content creation. It outlines that GBV specialists can support at-risk individuals and programme beneficiaries to assess individual-level risks. GBV specialists must support individual risk assessments when communications staff or journalists are considering direct engagement with survivors of GBV. The guidance is accompanied by tools for carrying out the operational and individual risk assessments.

- It establishes that engaging survivors for the creation of content should be done only in exceptional circumstances (noting that this applies exclusively to adult survivors and that child survivors of GBV should never be engaged for any communications-related activity).
- It outlines an in-depth process for informed consent that is intended to manage the power dynamics between the organization and the subject and takes a survivor-centred approach.
- It outlines requirements that must be met before there can be a request from communications to engage directly with a survivor for content creation purposes:
- No pre-identified risks are posed to the safety and security of in-country teams, including frontline staff and partner organizations (as determined by risk assessment).
- Response services to support GBV survivors are available at the site.
- There are GBV specialist staff present within the programme/operation.
- The GBV team determines that profiling a survivor's story would not compromise GBV programming.
- The GBV team has enough time and resources to safely discuss options with survivors who have received services, remain in contact and have demonstrated an interest in speaking publicly about their experiences.
- Individual risk assessments must be conducted before survivors engage with communications staff, journalists or other content creators, and such assessments should not divert staff from delivering critical services or emergency response activities.

If the above conditions are met, the following additional requirements must be observed when connecting individual survivors with external media or profiling individual survivors for communications purposes:

- A GBV specialist conducts an individual risk assessment with the survivor and the survivor weighs the risks and benefits of telling her story and is confident about her decision to share her story.
- GBV staff discuss the use of photographs and pseudonyms with the survivor. In almost all cases, no one should use recognizable images in

connection with survivors' stories, and writers/editors should use and note pseudonyms in communications products.

- The survivor understands her rights and offers clear consent to both the GBV specialist and communications representative.
- GBV staff informs the survivor of available support services and provides means to contact GBV staff.

The guidelines were finalized in early 2023 and the organization plans to roll them out across the organization so that staff and leadership across teams are aware of the guidance.

5. The complexities of applying a gender-based violence risk mitigation approach to communications activities

5.1 Challenges with informed consent

Both communications and GBV key informants expressed that while informed consent is a critical element to GBV risk mitigation there are several challenges with its implementation. One communications specialist shared: "Consent policies are so important, but we have to make sure it is truly informed consent. When we publish something online, we have to be very clear about where it will be published and who may see it. They have to know how to contact us if they do change their minds. And we need to know how to be able to actually do this on a practical level."

Challenges include:

- Sometimes standard media consent processes fail to consider and account for power dynamics in the consent process. Central to a survivor's experience of GBV is an abuse of power and a violation of their integrity. When informed consent is approached as a box to check rather than as a respectful dialogue, it not only puts the survivor and others at risk of harm, but can also further exacerbate the disempowerment and exploitation a survivor has already experienced.
- Individuals who provide consent may change their minds once a story or photo is published. Several communications key informants identified this as a challenge because institutions often do not have processes in place that allow people to revoke consent, both because there may be no way for the person to contact the organization and because organizations do not have, or do not allocate, the resources to 'scrubbing' the person's story or photo from their media content, or because the content has been shared in print format or in an online context where reuse is out of the organization's control.
- Communications professionals who draw on databases of photos and 'evergreen' stories¹² about individual survivors often do not provide

sufficient information about the consent process used during content development. As a result, it may not be possible to evaluate whether a consent process was conducted and the extent to which that consent permits a photo or video content to be re-used and repurposed.

- Language and cultural barriers can make getting truly informed consent difficult. The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence’s ethical storytelling guidelines feature an informed consent checklist that begins, “Have you been speaking with the survivor in a language they feel comfortable using?”¹³ However, communications teams without experience in translation may not be equipped to ensure that their translators understand the informed consent process and the power dynamics that need to be addressed. Even when informed consent processes themselves are carried out without language barriers, there may be cultural barriers that current guidance does not fully address. Cultures vary in how people think about and talk about GBV, how they behave when they are uncomfortable, and how they understand risks based on their experience.¹⁴ Without deep cultural knowledge, specialists cannot always accurately sense when their subjects are uncomfortable, as some guidelines ask them to do – a problem that affects both the informed consent process and the interview, photography or filming.

5.2 Different perspectives on potential risks and benefits

While there was agreement among key informants that GBV risk mitigation in communications is important, there was divergence regarding the point at which the benefits ultimately outweigh the risks. For their part, communications specialists tend to place a higher value on sharing personal narratives as a means to reach organizational goals. As one interviewee put it, in a statement that several other communications specialists echoed: “Sharing people’s stories is the most powerful way to drive advocacy. First-person narratives have so much power to change people’s minds and hearts.”¹⁵ Furthermore, telling stories about women’s and girls’ experiences of violence is often seen as critical to achieving communications objectives such as mobilizing resources to the organization.

For some communications specialists, this emphasis on individual stories extends to high-level visits with survivors, which, if done appropriately, they see as likely to make an important impact on mobilizing resources or raising awareness on GBV issues. One communications expert discussed the importance of facilitating access to GBV survivors for a high-level visit of leadership in her organization to a country office. She indicated that the high-level person ‘needed’ to be able to hear survivor stories to be able to empathize and authentically convey to an external audience the horrors of their experiences, how they have been impacted and the significant needs they have.¹⁶ The underlying logic was that the high-level visitor could not perform their fundraising and representation work effectively without hearing the stories of survivors firsthand. Some communications specialists said they need to be realistic about what motivates media coverage and individual donors, pointing to pressure to tell sensational stories to achieve impact.

The GBV practitioners interviewed, on the other hand, emphasized the benefits associated with telling stories about women and girls from a different perspective

that are often underappreciated. For example, stories that are about the service providers and frontline staff who are helping women and girls have the potential to communicate the magnitude of the problem that women and girls face in a community and the work that these staff undertake. Stories about women and girls that focus on their journey of empowerment, rather than – or in addition to – their experiences of trauma and violence, also offer personal stories that are positive and have the potential to inspire other women and girls, asserted GBV practitioners.

5.3 Gap between guidelines and implementation

While currently available guidelines are useful as statements of intention and setting minimum standards, they may lack the practical ‘how-to’ guidance to ensure best practices can be implemented in real situations. In the case of guidelines that are relevant to GBV risk mitigation in communications there are several gaps between guidelines and their implementation.

- Among existing guidelines for storytelling about GBV, most have been prepared by GBV professionals, with little communications input, limiting their practicality and relevance for communications specialists. Only a few communications specialists who participated in key informant interviews said they had helped develop guidelines for storytelling about GBV. In addition, these guidelines have not necessarily been targeted at specific communications professionals with training and discussions, but rather have just been shared publicly. In the future, a collaborative approach – involving GBV and communications specialists – could strengthen the relevance and uptake of guidance.
- Lack of systematic roll-out and training. Communications specialists who are particularly invested in GBV risk mitigation express concern that their colleagues are often not informed of relevant guidance for GBV risk mitigation in their work. One interviewee said that while she had been able to learn about risk mitigation from years of collaborating with GBV specialists, there was no standardized onboarding or well-socialized organizational standard that would help her newer colleagues, many of whom “don’t understand what they don’t know” and when they might be creating additional risks. Communications practitioners who do know how to spot issues of consent and exploitation in storytelling view media content in shared databases as suspicious. These more risk-informed communications staff have no institutionalized way of ensuring their colleagues uphold ethical standards as they have no rigorously enforced guidelines or policies on which to rely.
- Applying a GBV risk mitigation approach to communications work is often personality dependent. Both communications and GBV interviewees identified that their successful collaborations were largely due to the efforts of specific people who are respectful of each other’s work and expertise. In other words, for GBV specialists, collaborations with particular communications colleagues who were aware that producing media content about GBV – especially if survivors are directly involved – comes with significant risks and they knew they didn’t have the expertise to navigate them alone. For one communications specialist interviewed, seeking support from a GBV specialist was a ‘relief’. These

same individuals, however, also shared negative experiences in which neither GBV nor communications specialists felt that their respective areas of expertise were respected in interactions with each other.

Box 5

Example of positive collaboration in community-facing communications

Community-facing communications – activities that aim to enhance information sharing and communications with communities – represent unique challenges and opportunities for institutionalizing GBV risk mitigation. Unlike fundraising communications activities, community-facing, and particularly two-way, communications work is often the site of close collaboration between communications and programmatic specialists to achieve shared goals. As such, it represents an opportunity for interdepartmental relationship-building, collaboration and integration of GBV risk mitigation principles.

An example of this type a successful collaboration between communication and GBV specialists surfaced through a project responding to the European refugee crisis, in the form of a Facebook-based protection project for INGOs in Europe working with people on the move. The project involved direct messaging between migrants and community engagement specialists in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and French. While the platform was not designed specifically for GBV survivors and reporting, the team quickly saw that this platform was being used by people experiencing GBV to seek information and support.

Early in the project the communications team working on the project began receiving messages from women experiencing intimate partner violence and other forms of GBV. The communications key informant immediately sought guidance from GBV specialists at national and headquarters levels to inform how they should handle these types of requests safely. The communications project team and the GBV specialists developed a joint protocol for handling messages on the platform seeking help for GBV. The protocol included communications guidance on online risks and safety, cultural guidance from the community engagement specialists, and the GBV specialists' valuable insights into engaging with survivors.

6. Lack of community engagement in decision-making in communications

An overall gap cited in the literature and by key informants is a lack of engaging women and girls directly in the creation of communications content. The Grand Bargain's 'participation revolution'¹⁷ has yet to permeate external communications strategy in the sector, though there is ample room for exploring ways to tell stories collaboratively or to uplift narratives originating on community channels. Participatory approaches to creating communications content is a promising practice that is more common in the field of ethical storytelling and could be a key part to GBV risk mitigation in communications.

7. Learning for future consideration

The findings from the literature review and key informant interviews point to important learning for the humanitarian sector to consider for strengthening its integration of GBV risk mitigation into communications on GBV content.

- **Proactively create opportunities for ongoing collaboration and trust-building between GBV and communications teams.** Collaboration between GBV and communications teams is essential to ensuring safe and ethical communications work around GBV in emergencies. Defining some shared goals and strategies for reaching those goals can be an important first step toward building trust and deepening mutual respect. This could include conducting joint missions, hosting learning sessions/workshops (such as the International Medical Corps example described above) to delve into each other's areas of work, or collaborating on a specific communications initiative related to GBV. Laying this foundation of trust can help to facilitate collaborations on higher-level policies, guidelines and guidance.
- **Frame safe and ethical practice on communications related to GBV as an essential organizational accountability standard.** Mitigating the risks related to GBV-related content in communications or high-level visits must be seen as a core organizational responsibility, part of an overarching commitment to protect affected populations from harm. The risks related to communications work on GBV are in many ways similar to those of programming and should be subject to the same organizational standards that ensure the safety of and accountability to affected populations.
- **Develop specific policies and procedures on GBV risk mitigation in communications and incorporate them into staff onboarding and capacity-building requirements.** Having a documented approach to GBV risk mitigation in communications can support predictability, consistency and accountability in the way GBV themes are addressed in communications work. Procedures should be developed jointly with GBV and communications specialists, drawing from good practice and engaging women and girls and GBV service providers. There is room for informed consent guidance that empowers local actors to take part

in the process and mitigate the effects of these barriers and imbalances. Making procedures very specific and being clear about red lines, risk assessment, decision points and decision-making authority can also help provide clarity to staff working on content creation or facilitating high-profile visits. It is important to socialize these procedures through onboarding and ongoing training opportunities so that staff are aware of them and know how to practically apply them in their work.

- **Deepen participatory approaches to the creation of GBV-related content in humanitarian settings, including through ethical storytelling.** Participatory approaches can be of critical value in strengthening GBV risk mitigation in communications because of the way they target some of the power inequalities that drive risk. Consultations with women and girls can be useful in identifying what women and girls want to communicate and how those stories, needs and priorities can be told in a way that promotes their safety, well-being and dignity.

One participatory approach that could be particularly promising in the creation of GBV-related content is ethical storytelling. Ethical storytelling's focus on shifting the power dynamics between organization and subject, and of telling stories in a way that upholds the subject's right to dignity, respect and decision-making, is aligned to a survivor-centred approach. The ethical storytelling field has a wealth of resources, including guidance documents and training materials. Interviews with the key informants and the literature review suggest that ethical storytelling practices are not necessarily new to humanitarian communications. However, the extent to which staff are trained on them and are expected to use such practices is unclear. Being explicit about the clear connections between these practices and GBV risk mitigation can help ensure that the responsibilities of humanitarian organizations to 'do no harm' are operationalized through their communications work as well. Furthermore, incorporating practices and tools from this field can help communications work be delivered in a way that is safer, respects everyone involved and minimizes potential unintended harmful consequences.

Endnotes

- 1 The 10 ‘Dignified Storytelling Principles’ (2024) are available at: <https://dignified-storytelling.com/the-principles/#:~:text=Dignified%20storytelling%20upholds%20human%20dignity,be%20treated%20well%20and%20respectfully>
- 2 See ‘Story and Spirit’, resources and tools at: www.storyandspirit.org/ethicalstorytelling
- 3 See, for example, Bond, ‘Putting the People in the Pictures First’, 2019. Bond is a network of organizations in the United Kingdom working in international development. They have developed relevant guidelines available at: www.bond.org.uk/resources/putting-the-people-in-the-pictures-first/
- 4 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ‘Ethical Communications Guidelines’ (ND) available at: www.unhcr.org/media/ethical-communications-guidelines
- 5 Bond, ‘Putting the People in the Pictures First’, 2019, available at: www.bond.org.uk/resources/putting-the-people-in-the-pictures-first/
- 6 ‘Story and Spirit’, www.storyandspirit.org/ethicalstorytelling
- 7 ‘Dignified Storytelling Principles’, 2024, <https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/the-principles/#:~:text=Dignified%20storytelling%20upholds%20human%20dignity,be%20treated%20well%20and%20respectfully>.
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