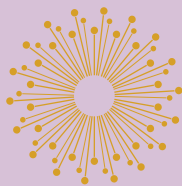




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**Navigating the field of violence
prevention as a survivor of
Intimate Partner Violence**

A reflexive account by Tvisha Nevatia



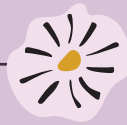
SVRI sexual
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 Raising Voices



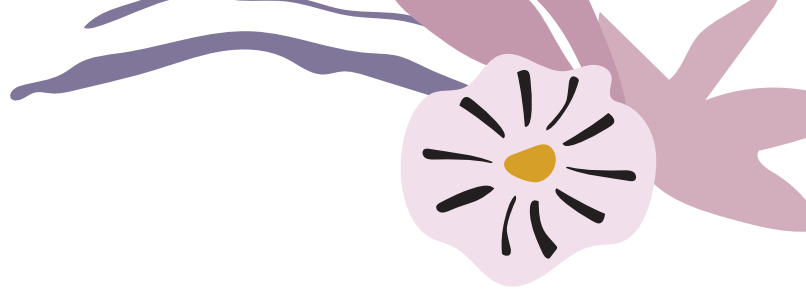
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As you embark on this journey with me, please be aware that my story involves experiences of violence and its impact on my life.

Your well-being is important, so please take care of yourself while reading.



I Background

I was fifteen when I entered a romantic relationship with my classmate in high school, which soon after turned abusive and violent. It started gradually and then, intensified and escalated quickly. I felt shackled, utterly confused, lost and isolated from friends and family for a significant period of my late adolescence and early adulthood. It took me a full six years to get out of that relationship. A decade later, I am still on my healing journey, while still coping with the long-term impacts of the violence I experienced.

Undeniably, my own experience of violence has drawn me to the work I do. I research violence against women and children and support the uptake of this learning in violence prevention programming. Engaging in this work has been a deliberate choice, enabled by many privileges. Other victim-survivors of violence may choose to engage in such work, and many might not. We are all not the same, and needless to say, there are various factors that influence such decisions.

While my work is emotionally demanding, it has also been rewarding to apply myself and my research skills towards creating a world where violence against women and children is never acceptable. **My work adds meaning and purpose to my life.** I have heard similar experiences among victim-survivors engaging in this work.

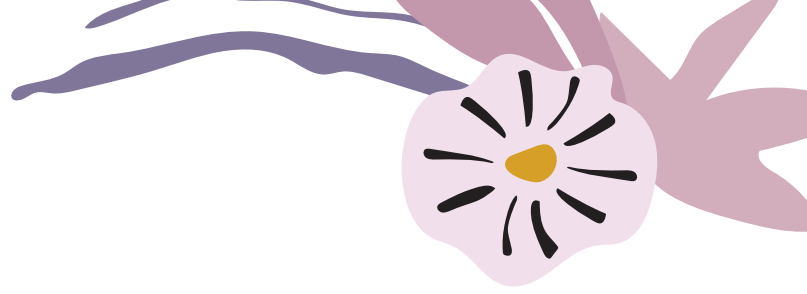
I have many identities in professional settings, each identity built on the back of many different stories and experiences. I am an Indian woman, a daughter, a partner, a feminist, an activist, a professional researcher, and the list goes on. I am also a survivor¹ of intimate partner violence. I have engaged in gender and violence research for almost a decade and, yet this is the first time I am openly talking about my survivor identity, an identity which has been the driving force in many of my personal and professional choices. Even though many times I have wanted to be more open about my experience, I haven't felt comfortable to do so, and it's taken a lot of emotional labor and therapeutic work to get to this point of owning this experience and to share it in the hope that it may be of value to others who may have or are going through a similar experience. In the many things that I share below, perhaps the single most powerful thing is to know that you are not alone, and that it is the silence that makes this experience so consequential for so many.

Having spent time understanding my experience, I am now finding language to express myself and articulate the impacts the violence has had on me. My life today has expanded with healing, love and a strong support system. Even though talking about this subject makes me feel vulnerable, it has also become important and possible for me to acknowledge my experience and shed light on it.

Being a survivor in the field of violence prevention is not discussed adequately and it needs our attention. I am sharing my personal and professional journey of being a survivor, with the intention to grow space, support, and safety for others to talk about their unique experiences and journeys, if they would like to. This could be because sharing my story has brought me healing, and I have heard others say the same. Analyzing my own journey also raises several broader questions for how our field acknowledges and supports victim-survivors. By sharing this piece, I hope to highlight these issues for further reflection and action.



¹ I personally identify with "survivor" rather than "victim". It gives me strength and recognizes my agency during the relationship and after it. The term "victim" feels passive to me, even though that's how I felt many times during the relationship, and there is no denying that I was a victim. I also acknowledge that language can be interpreted differently, and others will make their own choices on how they want to be identified, and what language most resonates with them and their unique experiences. For this reason, I use the term 'victim-survivor' when referring to others who have experienced violence.



II My personal journey of identifying as a survivor of intimate partner violence

Before I talk about my experience as a professional, I will share my personal journey with the survivor identity to provide context and bring depth to this exploration. Especially in our field of violence prevention, boundaries between personal and professional are blurred at times and both aspects contribute to the activism that sustains us.

I grew up in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India – a region known to fare poorly on indicators of gender equality. As a young girl, I was academically inclined. I also was soft-spoken, obedient, and considered a good girl. At home, I was provided with a safe and supportive environment and was encouraged to prioritize my education. I went to a well-known school in my city, reputed for academic excellence. Nevertheless, a mesh of progressive and regressive gender norms formed the social fabric both at school and in the community that surrounded me.

In high school classes (age fifteen to eighteen), dating was looked down upon by parents and teachers around me. It was unheard of for adults to talk to teenagers about romantic relationships. At the same time schools were rife with peer pressure to have a girlfriend/boyfriend. The only source of knowledge I had on dating came from my peers and Bollywood movies which often glorified love stories that romanticized men's control over women.

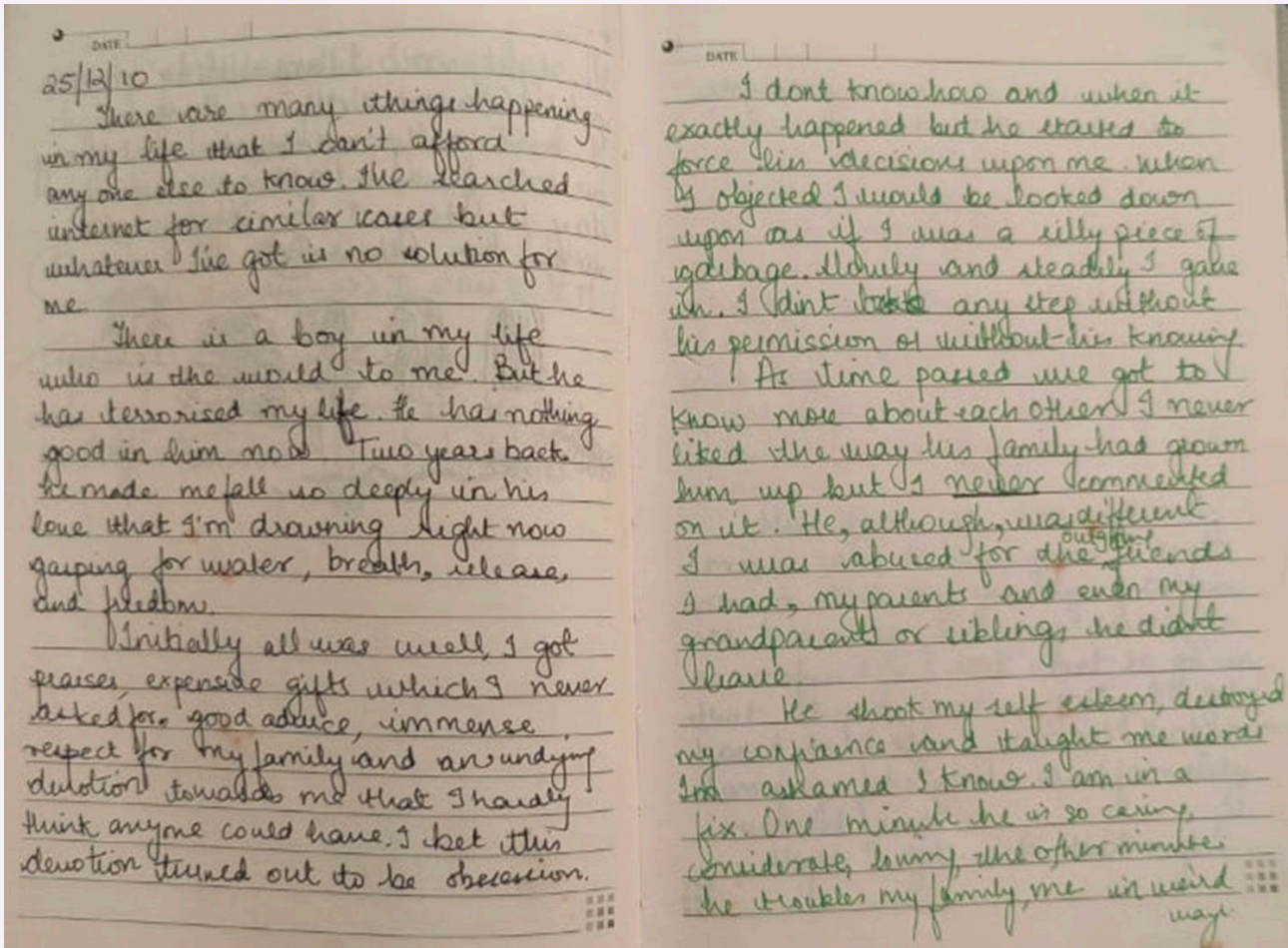
I started dating a boy in my class, also fifteen years old, and my life turned upside down within the span of a year. A relationship that started with excessive romantic gestures, soon took the form of extreme controlling behaviors through use of cuss words, humiliating remarks about my character, and subsequently acts of physical violence and sexual coercion. Given the normative context around me, I felt intense shame. This shame trapped me further in the relationship, as I coped with feelings of guilt by telling myself he was the one and only love of my life. Slowly, all my actions became a response to survive the violence. His ongoing abuse eroded my identity, my confidence and will to live. I was robbed of the little confidence I was starting to develop as a teenager.

***“There are many things happening in my life that I can't afford anyone else to know”
- Journal entry from high school days.***

I had just turned eighteen when I started penning my thoughts and feelings about what I was experiencing. I was in the final year of high school and already been in this relationship for more than two years. Having no one to talk to, I turned to this journal. Reading all the entries reminds me of the heart-breaking despair I was feeling, and makes me appreciate my younger self even more, for doing everything in my capacity to make sense of my experience and survive that exceptionally difficult period of my life.



(Handwritten text typed out in appendix)

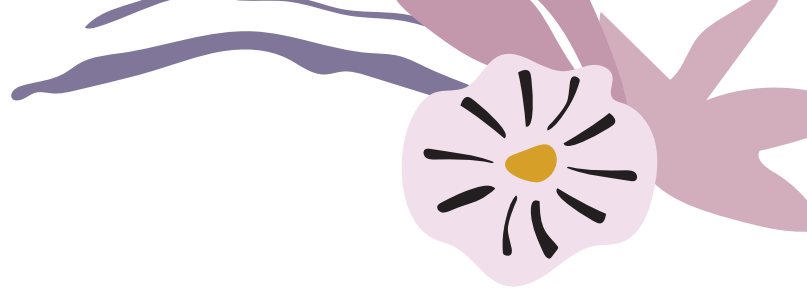


A page from my high school journal, realizing I am being wronged.

My grades fell and I wondered in my journal “What for (do) I study? To be abused?” I became silent and stopped smiling as if life had been sucked out of me. I was forced to turn my back on my friends and family, who were left confused and concerned. I lost my self-respect and an important part of my adolescence. I lived in fear and felt helpless. I didn’t know how to seek help and who to go to. For a long time, even well-intentioned adults around me, who knew something was amiss, didn’t have the language or skills to support me in a meaningful way. I lost hope and started harboring suicidal thoughts as I imagined the rest of my life with him, having conversations with God in my journal.

Experiencing violence from someone who said he loved me, and at that young age, was extremely confusing. In high school, I recall feeling like my relationship was different. It seemed more intense, more consequential compared to some others who were dating too. I sensed that there were other relationships around me that had some of the similar struggles as mine, but there was no language or solidarity to come together. I kept blaming myself not knowing where else to direct my anger and pain. I did not share what I was going through with anyone.

While I suffered, I preferred suffering alone. I was more aware of my dignity because I was stripped of it often. I also hid my pain because I had decided that people would not understand. I wanted others to see only the rosy picture of the relationship, and that was the reason why I was still trying to make it work.

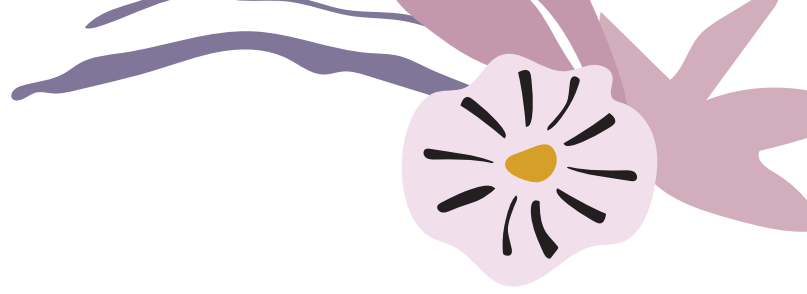


I made a very tough choice of leaving my hometown for university after I completed high school at eighteen years of age. Initially, I resisted the idea of moving, as my boyfriend forbade me to even think of it, but my parents persisted that I must go. In a first, my parents sat me down and questioned me about what I was doing with my life. Unable to answer their questions, the voice in me that something was wrong in my relationship became a bit louder. I mustered all the courage I could and decided to move to Delhi, unsure of the kind of retaliation I'll face from him. Knowing that my boyfriend did not permit me to talk to other boys or men, I enrolled myself in a women's college deliberately to keep myself safe from constant harassment from him. My grades thankfully (and barely so) met the cut-off for a liberal arts program. That's how I joined the esteemed Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi University, not realizing I was signing up to join a feminist institution. At that time, I didn't know what feminism meant and the significance it would have on my life. The liberal arts education, feminist ideas, and environment as a women-only place came together to become a safe space for me. It was here that I began my journey of unpacking the harms that had been done to me, while staying at a relatively safe physical distance from my abusive partner (although my long-distance romantic relationship continued until the third year of university).

I started seeing myself as a survivor the very first time I came across the words "survivor" and "intimate partner violence." It was in a psychology course called "life crisis" in university. By then, I had been in a violent relationship for four years. **This new language and knowledge around violence was extremely powerful in naming and understanding my experience and ultimately making the decision to leave the relationship.** In this course, I encountered theories of intimate partner violence. The one which resonated with me was the cycle of violence (Walker, 1979), which modelled abuse to take place in three cyclical phases. The tension- building phase, which is marked by conflict and fear, followed by the crisis phase characterized by explosion of violence, leading to the honeymoon phase, when the abuser apologizes profusely while justifying their behavior. My experience fit neatly within this theory and having this grounding helped clarify the confusing and at times conflicting emotions I felt. I started seeing my partner differently, as a perpetrator of violence rather than my "loving boyfriend with anger issues". All this while, I had felt trapped, and now I started understanding what the trap was and how it worked. I also recall our psychology teacher encouraging us to date many boys before choosing a life-partner. It may have been said in a light-hearted way, but it challenged regressive norms around sexuality that I had internalized.

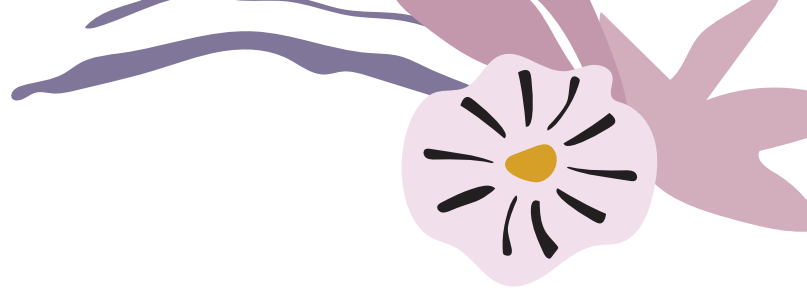
It took me time to realize I was not alone in my experience. Coming across the statistic that almost 1 in 3 women experience intimate partner violence globally made me step back and question the assumptions I had been making all along. I became aware that this type of violence is much more common and systemic than I had ever thought. I felt angry and started acknowledging the different systems of shame that exist to sustain stigma for women and girls around discussing partner violence. I heard the term "victim-blaming" and started following related campaigns led by activists promoting gender equality. Women and girls are blamed one way or the other, and those who inflict or enable the violence are rarely held accountable. Digesting this was not easy. So far, I had assumed I was at fault for having ended up in the relationship and for not being able to leave. This self-blame didn't seem to add up anymore. How can such a big problem hide in plain sight (at the personal cost of those experiencing violence)? It has taken a lot of time and reflection to mend the relationship with my younger self and this act of self-acknowledgement has been a milestone in my healing path. Just like me, many others are likely suffering alone and are unsure whether (and how) to reach out for help. The data betrays the silence surrounding the issue among my friends, family, and others around me. Understanding the scale of violence was eye-opening and empowering.

At some point, I came across the adaptation of the ecological model (Heise, 1998) for intimate partner violence that conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted outcome influenced by personal,



relational, institutional and sociocultural factors. It was helpful to understand the systemic and patriarchal roots of violence against women and girls. **It helped me place the blame where it deserves to sit. Yes, I did blame my abuser, but I also started acknowledging the context and systems that enables this violence to flourish.** Like me, he was a minor too. How could he inflict so much suffering upon me? Why did he do it? I still don't know. What I have learnt is that violence doesn't just happen at an individual level, it is rooted in a whole system which enables it. The responsibility lies on the society that portrays and encourages girls to be demure, quiet, and obedient, while boys are expected to be devoid of emotions and get away with harmful behaviors in the garb of "boys will be boys". I blame the media for having me believe that dangerous stalking and controlling behaviors by boys/men are expressions of romance; that love (especially which involves any sexual acts) are commitments that are only morally acceptable with one person; and that intimate partner violence is a private matter between a couple. My partner came from a politically powerful family, and that made things much worse by inflating his own sense of entitlement and abuse of power. I blame such power dynamics that our political system creates and upholds, choosing to use the power to create terror rather than serving the public. I blame the education system for not being able to foresee that this could happen and prepare young people to address it. I cut off completely from everyone close to me, and this was allowed to happen. As an adult citizen of the world, I also give myself the responsibility to keep my eyes and ears open to signs of violence around me and not be a silent bystander.

Leaving the violent relationship was the hardest thing I have ever done. I was so deeply invested in my abusive partner that I believed him to be diseased. A disease that could be cured with love, care, and indulgence to unreasonable demands. To persist and stay was seen as an act of true love and fidelity. As I spent time away from him in university in a socially supportive environment, the honeymoon stage of the violent relationship started fading, my love dimming, and what was left was terror and attachment. Initially, I stayed for the sake of love. Later I stayed because I didn't consider leaving to be a real choice I had, that could be done safely. I stayed because the risks associated with leaving were too high, risks I wasn't willing to take at that time. By staying, I was optimizing for my survival and the safety of myself and my loved ones. **For me, surviving is not only about leaving the relationship, though it may be the most consequential part of it. It is also about the daily resilience and courage it takes to do everything in one's capacity to cope with the ongoing experience of violence.** I could only leave when I started truly believing in my ability to face the consequences of leaving the relationship. It was a big risk, and only I could determine when I was ready to take that risk. I was enabled by support from my female friends and my psychology teacher. For all women and girls experiencing intimate partner violence, circumstances are different, and it is only us who can assess when we are ready to leave. Violence is complex and surviving it is even more so.



III Professional experience of working in violence prevention as a survivor

I was drawn to research and eventually activism and programming to prevent violence. When I started working on violence, I framed my interest (even to myself) as an intellectual pursuit concerning more with theories of violence. While I also felt I understood and could explore this topic with an informed perspective because of my own lived experience, I never said that out loud to anyone due to fear of how I'll be perceived.

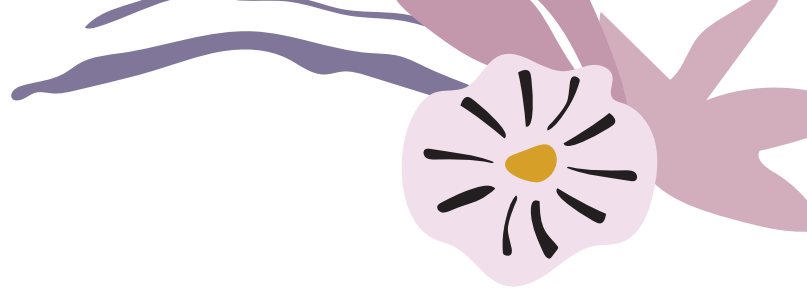
For my Masters' dissertation, I researched Indian women's experience of intimate partner violence, even though the subject I was studying (economics) is considered distant from this topic. After post-graduation, I got a job contributing to research projects on gender equality in India. Eventually, I found a project at [Innovations for Poverty Action Uganda](#) which gave me the opportunity to explicitly focus on intimate partner violence against women. I took it up and moved to Uganda. Being a continent away from my abuser also helped me feel safe, as my now ex-boyfriend continued his attempts to reach and harass me throughout this time. Especially, as I kept engaging with the topic of my own experience, the urge to share my story with others kept growing.

In my early twenties, when I was freshly out of the abusive relationship and in a world far away from my abuser, I sometimes would share my story with new friends I had made, people who didn't know me during the time I was in the relationship. I would feel hurt when well-intentioned friends weren't able to hold my story with sensitivity. For example, I felt blamed when a friend would say to me that if they had been me, they would never have tolerated what I did. **Ultimately, I stopped talking about my experience with new people I met and found an outlet in therapy, which also helped me build internal safety around others' reactions to my experience.** I learnt not to expect people to respond in a certain way. At the same time, I wondered how we could create more support and less stigma for those who want to share about experiences of violence.

Disclosing personal experience of violence is an individual choice that has the potential to bring healing, though it may not always be therapeutic. When my story was held with empathy, it brought healing. When I felt dismissed, it led to me shutting down. The decision to share became closely linked with how safe the environment is and feels.

When I moved to Uganda and started researching intimate partner violence, I started working with a team of Principal Investigators who had many years of experience in the field of violence research. This team was extremely kind to me and created a more open and friendly working environment than I had experienced previously. They spoke about violence sensitively and I started feeling safe and thinking that I could open up to them. While that seed was sown in my mind, it took a lot more time and trust-building before I could share my experience with them.

In that project, when we would collect data on experiences of violence from women, it felt so close to home. We asked women if they have experienced specific acts of emotional, physical and sexual violence. When I started engaging with these questions, I remember printing them out and ticking what my own responses would be- and trying to figure out where my experience sat- to what extent was it emotional, physical and sexual? How many times did it happen? How severe was it? I felt a strong sense of empathy and connection with the many women who faced these questions and made choices on whether they want to disclose some of their hardest experiences in front of strangers. Putting myself in the position of these women, I wondered how I would have



reacted or felt if someone asked me these questions while I was still in the relationship. This feeling of solidarity and empathy broke down language and cultural barriers, helping me realize that victim-survivors of intimate partner violence are connected by their shared experience. It has only strengthened my resolve and commitment to the work I do.

In 2019, I got the opportunity to attend the [Sexual Violence Research Initiative \(SVRI\)](#) Forum in South Africa and present our research findings. I was excited, but I didn't anticipate the impact the conference would have on me. I discovered the violence prevention global community. I was taken by the realization that there are so many others involved in this work! So many people care! **I wondered how many others were doing this work because of their personal experience with violence.**

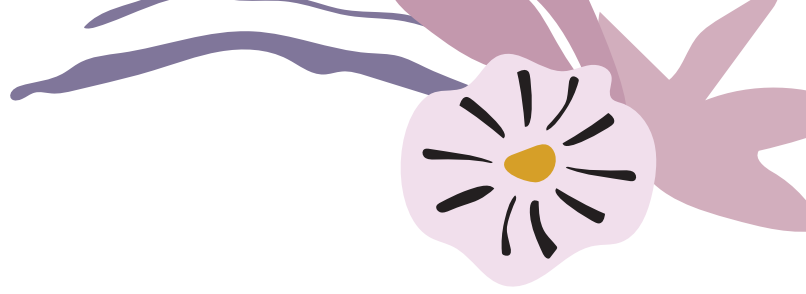
In the opening plenary, a survivor of violence shared her experience of violence from an ex-partner. I felt moved by her courage. I felt angry and fearful realizing that for many of us, even when the relationship is over, the risk of violence continues. The conference plenary hall was full of more than eight hundred people who had come together to exchange learning on violence against women and children. It was powerful. I felt like I was part of a movement. So far, I had primarily been working with academics whose main priority and contribution were in the area of research and academia. This conference brought together people from different professions- policymakers, practitioners, activists, researchers- each using their diverse skills and interests in playing their part. **It was like puzzle pieces coming together to present a coherent image of the movement. We need us all.**

I had attended the Forum on a young professional bursary, and I was invited in the closing plenary to share my experience of being a part of the SVRI Forum young professionals' programme. That week I was so pleasantly taken aback by the kindness of people, by the power of this feminist movement, by people being open to talking about violence in an informed and ethical way, that I wrote up my speech where I would announce that I am a survivor. As I practiced my speech in front of an SVRI colleague in a heartwarming designed brave room, I was in tears. It was overwhelming to have one person listen to me. I wasn't ready to share that with eight hundred strangers. She hugged me and told me it's ok and I don't have to share if I am not ready.

I returned to Uganda with all these new ideas and experiences. After two months (and more than a year of working on this project), I shared with the research team in an email that my motivation to work on this project is rooted in my own experience of violence. It felt like an emotional release. The words they sent in response were overwhelmingly supportive, acknowledging that many of us working in this field have been personally affected in one way or the other. **I felt seen in a way I hadn't been before.**

Thanks to such experiences, I found confidence and motivation to continue working in the field of violence prevention. In initial years of my work and education, I wanted to know why women and girls (including myself) tolerated intimate partner violence and what was the root cause of this violence. Coming to terms with high prevalence and social justification of violence was hard, yet it helped understand that we need adequate programmatic focus on prevention of intimate partner violence and shifting norms on its acceptance.

Understanding my inclination to work at the intersection of research and practice, I joined an activist and feminist organization, [Raising Voices](#), also based in Uganda, whose tremendous body of work over the last two decades on violence prevention had me in awe. The culture of this organization, where I still work currently, is quite unique in its activism, discussions on self and collective care, and recurring acknowledgement that violence prevention work is emotionally demanding. Moreover,



working here has helped me nurture my feminist lens in research and learning (Raising Voices, [2023](#)) and strengthen a sense of accountability to why I'm doing this work. Here, I spend a significant amount of my time supporting learning around programming and thinking about how to apply my conceptual understanding of the ecological model to prevention. This work has allowed space to be more personal and closer to community realities. It has contributed to feeling more activism around violence prevention, nourishing my initial motivation for being drawn to the field.

Over the course of my professional work on violence, my intentions and questions have evolved, though they continue to be driven by my personal experience. An emerging focus of my research includes shedding light on particular vulnerabilities and experiences among adolescent girls who experience intimate partner violence, especially in Global South contexts where dating in adolescence is often taboo and looked at with moralistic judgement. Across all research I engage in, I think about how to translate research into practical lessons and actions. These days, I also think about how our work can be more trauma informed. This includes joining or co-creating spaces for victim-survivors in our field to come together in safe, supportive and caring environments.

IV Parting questions and thoughts

Violence is a fundamental injustice. It deprives a person of their personhood. Violence can be happening in families that look like a model family, and it happens because society fails to do something about it.

Women and girls who experience intimate partner violence have their unique stories, different levels of privilege, varying contexts, and their own reasons to continue being in violent relationships. Despite the differences, our common experience of facing this injustice connects us deeply and can foster solidarity and action towards justice.

I am drawing on my personal journey to surface three realizations about our field that are important to remember for professionals engaged in violence prevention. Each of these invoke questions we must grapple with, reflect on, and take action around.

1. There could be many among us who have experienced violence. We know that large numbers of women and girls experience intimate partner violence. It could be your friend, colleague, or neighbor. The same applies to our field of work. **Moreover, our experiences fuel the choices we make. Having lived experience can motivate some people to choose this profession.**

How many people have come into this field of work because they have experienced violence? How are we prepared to respond if victim-survivors in our field choose to talk about their experience? Do we instinctually find ourselves distancing or minimizing their experience?

In violence research, we train interviewers to create a rapport with study participants and be prepared to engage with someone experiencing violence and refer them to appropriate services. This is because we go into surveys knowing that we will encounter many women experiencing violence and by asking them questions on violence we are taking the risk of re-traumatizing them. In our work, we discuss violence routinely – that's part and parcel of realizing our mission to prevent and respond to violence. Victim-survivors who engage in this



work could be emotionally impacted in positive and negative ways. They can choose to open up and talk about their experience of violence.

If they do so, it is powerful to acknowledge that their story matters and have the tools at our disposal to respond with care. Moreover, those who share about their experiences of violence have a right to feel safe, that they won't be excluded or penalized for their disclosure.

2. People who have experienced violence are experts at surviving. They may not seek support if their surroundings do not feel safe.

How are we proactively creating environments in which people feel safe to talk about their experience or seek and have access to support?

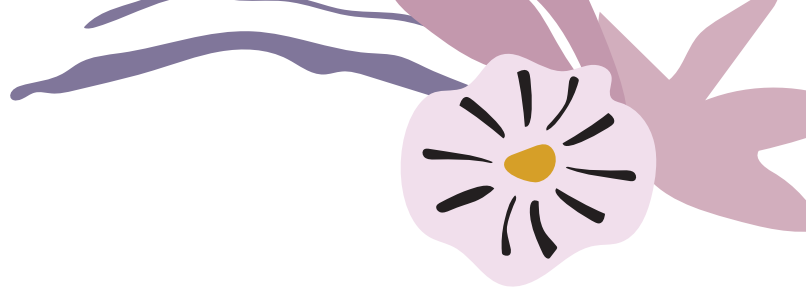
Even now, as I make visible this part of my life, it is a decision made carefully weighing the purpose and cost of sharing. It is critical to create a working environment that is trauma-aware, inclusive, and supportive for victim-survivors. We can't make assumptions about who is and who isn't a victim-survivor. Some may want to share their experiences, and some might never want to do so for any number of reasons. **We need to intentionally prioritize a culture of care, compassion, and solidarity (Billing et al., 2022) in our organizations, especially among those of us involved in this work.** Doing so not only carries the potential for healing and transformation among victim-survivors but can also support survivor-centered violence prevention and response.

3. Working on violence prevention for those of us who have experienced violence can be rewarding, healing and transformative.

How does working in this field fuel victim-survivors' activism? How does it impact them and their belief systems? How can we ensure they are not being re-traumatized?

Working in this field gives me purpose and energy to wake up every day and show up at work with commitment. There are others (Aroussi, 2020) who too have shared about been drawn to this work motivated by their own experiences of violence and the potential for transformation through this work. Yet, there is limited information publicly available on this topic. **We need more investment in understanding the experiences of victim-survivors engaged in violence prevention field.**

Lived experience is a vehicle for learning. As we develop our programs and research questions, we engage with communities and learn from their experiences. Similarly, to create a kinder and stronger field, we must also acknowledge and elevate the lived experiences present within our professional spaces.



Acknowledgements

I'm deeply grateful to my family and friends, who stuck by me in the most difficult moments, and without whom I couldn't have made this journey. I can't thank enough my teachers who, in whatever ways they could, cared enough to intervene by making me ask critical questions.

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Resources for victim-survivors or allies seeking help

- The Brave Movement is a survivor-centered global movement fighting to end childhood sexual violence. They offer a country-wise list of helplines & referral information at <https://www.bravemovement.org/get-help/>

- Chayn is a global nonprofit, run by survivors and allies, creating open, online resources and services for survivors of abuse. Their Your Story Matters (<https://ysmysm.co/>) is webapp providing support and resources for survivors of sexual assault.

Appendix

A page from my high school journal – realizing I am being wronged.

25/12/10.

“There are many things happening in my life that I can’t afford anyone else to know. I’ve searched internet for similar cases but whatever I’ve got is no solution for me.

There is a boy in my life who is the world to me. But he has terrorized my life. He has nothing good in him now. Two years back, he made me fall so deeply in his love that I’m drowning right now gasping for water, breath, release, and freedom.

Initially all was well, I got praises, expensive gifts which I never asked for, good advice, immense respect for my family and an undying devotion towards me that I hardly think anyone could have. I bet this devotion turned out to be obsession.

I don’t know how and when it exactly happened, but he started to force his decisions upon me. When I objected, I would be looked down upon as if I was a silly piece of garbage. Slowly and steadily I gave in. I dint take any step without his permission or without his knowing.

As time passed, we got to know more about each other. I never liked the way his family had grown him up but I never commented on it. He, although was different. I was abused for the outgoing friends I had, my parents and even my grandparents or siblings he didn’t leave.

He shook my self-esteem, destroyed my confidence and taught me words I’m ashamed I know. I am in a fix. One minute he is so caring, considerate, loving, the other minute he troubles my family, me in weird ways.”

