

Photovoice as a psychosocial intervention for survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method (CBPR) grounded in feminist theory, documentary photography, and empowerment education. In photovoice, participants take photographs to share their experiences and reflect on their stories. Though research has shown that photovoice can emotionally benefit participants, there is limited research with survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV). In this research brief, we share findings about the impact of photovoice participation on survivors in the Philippines.

Research methods

We used photovoice to explore what economic empowerment means to survivors of human trafficking and GBV. The photovoice process involved seven steps:



Participants took photographs representing economic empowerment and wrote narratives about their experiences.



Participants engaged in group discussions about their photos, and were invited to join a leadership team.



The survivor leadership team analyzed transcripts from the group discussion and identified themes.



Leadership team members conducted a member check with their peers to finalize themes.



In the fifth and sixth meetings, survivor leaders planned the final community forum.



Participants presented their photographs and study findings at a community event.



At the end, we conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with 12 survivor participants to understand the psychosocial impact of joining photovoice for survivors. The FGD was transcribed verbatim before undergoing thematic analysis. We also analyzed notes that participants wrote at the final community forum sharing lessons learned from photovoice and affirmations for co-participants.

Findings

The analysis revealed the following findings:

Overcoming Shame: Survivors shared that the process of reflecting on their experiences was difficult. However, through sharing their stories, they experienced solidarity with other survivors and overcame feelings of shame.

Sense of Belonging: Participants valued sharing with and learning from their peers, who had undergone similar experiences. This helped them feel a sense of belonging.

Enhanced Self-Efficacy: Participants felt a sense of accomplishment and a heightened awareness of their own skills and capabilities, especially from conducting data analysis.

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Inspiration: From listening to peers share about their photos, participants felt inspired in their own lives, empowered to support their community, and more hopeful about the future.

Bravery: The emotionally supportive environment created in photovoice allowed survivors to recognise their own bravery, face their fears, and share their stories with a wider audience.

Recommendations

The findings show that photovoice has the potential to act as a psychosocial intervention for survivors of human trafficking and GBV:

- ❖ Findings emphasise the power of photography in enhancing critical reflection, emotional safety, and a sense of connection.
- ❖ Research has shown that many survivors carry internalised stigma and shame, but shared storytelling helped to reduce this shame amongst survivors.
- ❖ Survivors' sense of autonomy and control were enhanced as they could choose how their own stories were presented.
- ❖ Photovoice helped survivors receive emotional support, build a new support system, and create a sense of belonging, connection, and community.



"I learned that when you have a problem, you should share it to close friends or others so you lighten what you feel. You don't have to be ashamed so that when you share, they would also help you. And I was able to say to myself that I am not the only one with the biggest problem - there are still others. Through photovoice, that is what I learned. Before I would just keep everything to myself." - Photovoice participant

Why it matters

- Research to inform interventions for survivors is often conducted in a way that is inaccessible and diminishing of survivors' agency.
- Findings show that photovoice is a research method which can reduce this harm. Photovoice can also be a psychosocial intervention, helping participants to build community and reduce shame.
- Photovoice is a promising approach in low-resource contexts, as it is accessible for community organisations and can be implemented by non-mental health professionals.