




SURVIVOR-CENTRED
SAFE GUARDING GUIDANCE

A white silhouette of a woman standing, centered within a white circle. The circle is part of a larger graphic where the text 'SURVIVOR-CENTRED' is arched above it and 'SAFE GUARDING GUIDANCE' is arched below it.

“It is very important to feel safe”

“Safeguarding is like... protection, like when someone is protecting you from something harmful or bad.”

This safeguarding guidance was co-created with survivors of trafficking in Sierra Leone, drawing on what they believed was most important to feel safe throughout research processes. Survivors are part of a Wellcome-funded participatory action research study aimed at understanding and advancing the sexual and reproductive health of survivors. However, this guidance is for anyone working with very vulnerable populations, especially survivors.



Whilst safeguarding is a universal concern, it can be context and location specific, researchers should begin by asking participants what would make them feel safe to participate in research as participants may ask for things which have not been considered by the research team but are very important for their ability to participate.

A green shield-shaped icon with a white border, containing the text 'Minimising potential harms' in white. The shield is positioned on the left side of the slide.

Minimising potential harms

- **Most survivors of trafficking are women**, and all are economically disadvantaged, leaving them open to exploitation. Access to research spaces and activities must be facilitated – for example, providing meals and a transportation allowance, and supporting childcare if possible. Anything that places demands on their personal resources, however small, might exacerbate economic vulnerability, putting them at risk of harm.
- **Manage expectations about the risks and benefits** of participating in the research – be very clear about what may be received, and what will not be received (e.g. financial support) by survivors. Be clear about what will happen when the research ends. Ensure that they can weigh this into their decision about whether to participate.



Creating a safe space

- **As predominantly women**, many survivors have specific domestic responsibilities. Ensuring flexible and responsive timing of study activities to accommodate survivors avoids putting them at risk at home. Keep to the times planned for research activities.

“Choosing our own time... whatever we choose, that is going along with our safety.”

“The time I took when I came here, I didn’t have anything to do at home.”

- **Survivors should know what to expect each day.** Transparency about research activities provides a sense of security.

“I say goodbye to my parents and tell them, ‘I have a workshop today’, or ‘I have an interview today’.”

- **Research activities should be carried out in familiar and trusted locations**, which are easy to access, and that can support the exchange of information, privately.



Creating a safe space

- **The experience of stigma and discrimination is constant.** Ensuring confidentiality – amongst survivors, and between survivors and researchers – is carefully explained and dutifully upheld throughout the research process is essential. For group activities, establishment of shared commitments to confidentiality is key. For example, facilitating survivor-led ground rules and a confidentiality agreement that can be referred back to throughout the research process. Survivors may disclose illegal activities (e.g. abortion) or experiences that, if shared, may make them victims of harassment and further discrimination. Upholding confidentiality is also fundamental to establishing trust between survivors and researchers, and without it, the research process will likely be compromised.

“We trust this office and you all give us courage, you all make us happy, you all talk to us politely. So, that alone... gives us the strength to feel safe, to do anything we want in that place.”

- **Researchers working closely with survivors** should have significant knowledge and skills in working with participants with shared experiences. Engaging with respect, kindness, openness, and without discrimination helps survivors to feel safe and to be open in their interactions.
- **Remember that some survivors may not be able to read and write**, so all language used must be kept clear and understandable.

- **Knowing that they could leave a study at any point without consequence** was highlighted as an important aspect of safeguarding – having the ability to leave if they ever felt unsafe. If using a service provider’s facilities to carry out research activities, it should be clear that survivors will not lose access to services if they withdraw from the research.

“Well... I will just tell you guys that I will quit out.”

- **Whilst not a central aspect of safeguarding**, researchers should ensure that some, if not all, dissemination materials of research findings are made accessible to participants, this guards against feelings of exploitation in the research process.





Having transparent safeguarding reporting structures

- **Depending on the research approach used**, survivors should have clear points of contact on the research team whom they trust. Time to build trusting relationships and rapport is essential. Reporting of safeguarding concerns is likely to be to this person, so their contact information should be made available to survivors.

“Like [facilitator] so I will make a call with her and talk to her and tell her that, ‘that office, I am not comfortable with it, I don’t like the way they are doing this and that’.”

- **However, should safeguarding concerns come from within the research team**, safeguarding reporting processes can, and should, involve trusted organisations with whom survivors have built a relationship. These organisations should then have sufficient information about how and when to report the concern onward.
- **Critically, safeguarding reporting processes** – who to report to and how – must be transparently conveyed to survivors. They must have phone numbers, email addresses, or other relevant contact information for more than one contact person (within and outside of the research team).



Recommendations to centre safeguarding within all research processes

- ✓ **Remove demands on personal resources** during research, and ensure possible risks and benefits are very clear
- ✓ **Plan study activities** to be flexible and accommodating of survivors' schedules and keep to time
- ✓ **Transparently communicate** all research activities and expectations
- ✓ **Carry out research activities** in familiar and trusted spaces
- ✓ **Build and maintain** trust and confidentiality
- ✓ **Recruit and capacitate** researchers to ensure they have adequate skills and knowledge to engage appropriately with survivors
- ✓ **Ensure survivors** are aware that they can leave a study at any time without consequence
- ✓ **Keep language appropriate** and understandable at all times
- ✓ **Transparently communicate** a safeguarding reporting structure to survivors – including close contacts on the research team, independent contacts on the research team, contact(s) from local trusted organisations, and a contact independent of the research team entirely



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