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Story circle on online GBV [deepening activity]

This activity allows participants to reflect upon and share experiences of online GBV.

About this learning activity

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This activity allows participants to reflect upon and share experiences of online GBV.

A safe space is the main prerequisite for this activity, and some quiet time for the participants to reflect.

This activity happens in two stages:

- Reflection Time, when each participant is given time to articulate and write down their story by answering a series of guide questions.
- Story Circle, where all the participants share their stories with each other.

It is important to note here that this Story Circle is not for the purposes of therapy. Being able to tell your story, even anonymised, has some therapeutic effects, but it should be made clear that this is not the purpose of the Story Circle. If you are dealing with a group that you know has experienced online GBV, especially if there are people in the group who have very recent experiences, you can either make sure that there is someone in the facilitating team who can provide therapy, or skip this learning activity, if you don't think you can handle the participants being re-traumatised.

Learning objectives this activity responds to

- An understanding of the forms of online GBV and its impacts on the survivors and their communities.
- An understanding of the continuum of violence between the offline and the online spheres, and the power structures that allow it.

Who is this activity for?

This activity can be carried out with participants with different levels of understanding and experience of online GBV.

It is important to know before doing this activity if there are participants whose experience of online GBV is current or fresh, as this activity might be a cause for stress for them. Knowing who your participants are, and also knowing what you as a trainer / facilitator can handle is important before considering this activity.

It is equally important for you, as a trainer / facilitator, to be honest about what you can and cannot hold. This activity is NOT recommended for situations where:

- you have not established trust between and among your participants
- you have not had the time to get to know your participants prior to the workshop
- you do not have any experience in handling difficult conversations

Based on the experience of story circle facilitators, it is ideal to have two facilitators for this activity.

Time required

Assuming that each participant will need about five minutes to tell their stories, and about 30 minutes will be needed to collectively reflect, plus some leeway to give instructions, then with a standard workshop size of 12, you will need a minimum of 100 minutes for this activity.

This suggested time for this activity does not include well-being activities that might be needed to address re-traumatisation of participants, or to take a break when needed. Ideally, for standard group size, holding this activity for half a day (4 hours, including breaks) would be sufficient to include well-being breaks and activities.

Resources needed for this activity

- Guide questions written down
- Space for people to reflect
- A big circle in the middle of the room for the participants to share.

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Mechanics

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This activity has two stages:

- Reflection Time, when each participant is given time to articulate and write down their story by answering a series of guide questions.
- Story Circle, where all the participants share their stories with each other.

During the Reflection Time stage, the participants are given 30 minutes to reflect upon a real-life example of online GBV. They can choose to tell their own experience or someone else's. Even if they are telling their own story, everyone is encouraged to anonymise their story. They should tell one story each.

In order to facilitate reflection, the participants may use the following guide questions to write down their story:

- Who is the survivor? Who was/were the aggressor/s? Who else is involved in the story?
- What happened? Where did the story happen? What kind of violence was committed?

- What was the impact of the violence? How did the survivor react? What did they fear the most? Did the situation escalate or worsen? How?
- What kind of support did the survivor get? Who able to provide support to the survivor?
- What actions did the survivor and their supporters take? How was the case resolved?
- How is the survivor doing now? How do they feel now about what had happened? What lessons have they learned from it?
- What role did technology play in this story? How did it affect the impact of the violence? How did it help in addressing the violence?

> **Facilitation Note:** These are guide questions, and participants don't need to answer all of them. They are just there to help them articulate their stories.

Anonymising stories

Participants are encouraged to anonymise their stories, even if the story is theirs:

- Give the survivor a pseudonym that's not close to their name.
- Make the location of the survivor more general. If there are contextual issues that would make it possible to identify the survivor based on where they are from, then give the location a bigger reach. It's one thing to say that the survivor is from Petaling Jaya in Malaysia, and another to say they are in Kuala Lumpur or even Malaysia.
- Give vague details about the survivor (keep to general markers: gender, sexuality, country, religion, race, social class) but not about their experience of online GBV (the platforms and spaces where the online GBV happened, what they experienced, how it escalated, the impact on them).

Once everyone has written down their stories, gather the participants in a circle.

Lay down the rules for this story circle. It would be good to also have these written down where everyone can see it and reiterate this message.

- What is said in the story circle does not leave the story circle without the express permission of everyone in the circle.
- No one in the circle is allowed to invalidate the experiences being shared. The severity of the violence experienced is not a competition. Don't ask about graphic details of the story.

- Listeners can ask clarification questions but not questions that are invasive. Don't ask “why” questions, ask instead “how” or “what” questions.
- There will be no interruptions when a story is being told. Listen deeply.

The point here is to create a safe space for people to share their stories.

Let everyone know that no one is being compelled to share their stories.

Open up the circle for stories.

> **Care Note:** Think about ways in which to open and close the story circle that honours the stories shared. Some suggestions:
> *Open with a breathing exercise, close with a breathing exercise*
> *Have a bowl of stones or shells that people can choose to hold, to close the story circle, have everyone put the stones or shells back in a bowl*

Then close the circle once the stories have been told. In closing the circle, do something to acknowledge the stories shared and strength of the storytellers.

Depending on the type of participants, and what you are comfortable with, you can:

- Do some deep breathing exercises as a group
- Have everyone go around and thank each other for sharing
- Light an incense and pass it around to cleanse the energy in the room
- Play some music and dance
- Read a poem that relates to honouring our stories. We use an Alice Walker quote to close our digital storytelling circles. Each person has a candle and they take a turn to light the candle at the end of the storycircle from the main candle.

> **Note:** It is essential to have a break for the participants to decompress on their own before summarising the activity.

Then the trainer/facilitator summarises the stories based on the following themes:

- What were the forms of online GBV that were shared?

- Where did the violence occur? Through this, draw out the linkages between online and offline spaces – how did they affect each other?
- Who was/were the usual aggressor/s?
- What was the impact of the online GBV, especially in the offline sphere?
- What were the issues that the survivors faced in resolving their cases?
- How did intersectional issues affect the experience of the violence? For example, specific kinds of aggression, the role of culture/religion and norms, invisibility, challenges in getting support/access to justice.

Facilitator preparation notes

This is not an activity for every trainer/facilitator. Or for every kind of participant.

If you don't think you can handle this, then choose another Learning Activity. Being able to admit what you can and cannot handle as a trainer/facilitator will only make you a better one – and capable of creating safe spaces for training.

This activity also requires a lot of trust between the facilitator and the participants. This requires mental and emotional preparation for the participants. This is not recommended as a starting activity, especially if the participants are not prepared for it.

Some guidelines to follow, if you do choose to use this learning activity:

- During the Story Circle, just allow each participant to tell their story in their own way. Don't rush them. Don't correct their grammar. Don't interrupt them.
- Do not force everyone to tell a story. Maybe, for some people, being able to write down their stories is good enough. Not everyone needs to tell a story, but encourage everyone to do so.
- If a participant is triggered, take a break. Don't force them to continue their story.
- Remind yourself and your participants that healing is a process, and telling stories and being heard is a step towards ending the cycle of violence.
- Doing this activity with a co-facilitator is ideal then you and your co-facilitator can hold the space together.

Read the section on handling emotional situations in the Holistic Security Training Guide.

> **Facilitation Note:** How do you keep to time and respect the storyteller?
> Remember, that this activity is about opening up a space for participants to share and reflect upon experiences of online GBV towards understanding the issue a bit more. So while you might want to give the participants more time than 5 minutes to share their stories, you will also have to determine a time limit so that everyone can have the chance to share their stories (if they so choose), and equally important, to have space to reflect on each others stories. Time-keeping is essential to that. It is important that you let the participants know why you are time-keeping.

There are several tactics to gently remind people of that. Here are some:

- Prepare note cards or boards that you can use to signal to them how much time they have left
- Assign a timekeeper from the group so that time keeping is a shared task among the participants
- Wait for pauses in their story telling to remind them of the time they have left

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