

## EMPOWERING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SURVIVORS THROUGH CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

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### Abstract

The role of crisis communication in empowering survivors of Gender-based violence (GBV) through effective support services is central to curbing the menace. GBV is regarded as an endemic issue that affects millions across the globe which often leaves survivors to grapple with severe emotional and physical trauma. However, integrating crisis communication into support services such as hotlines, counselling, shelters, and legal aid can enhance GBV survivors' accessibility and effectiveness. By swiftly disseminating vital information emphatically, crisis communication strategies can help GBV survivors to understand legal rights, access relevant resources and get necessary support during the recovery process after the traumatic experience. This paper uses a systematic literature review to explore critically the importance of combining crisis communication with vigorous support services to provide necessary assistance to GBV survivors in their healing journey. It concluded that combining crisis communication and essential support services for GBV survivors will foster societal awareness and drive the institutional cultural change that can help address GBV over time.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Crisis Communication, Gender-Based Violence, Support Services

### Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) has remained a pervasive issue in the world today which affects women and girls every year. GBV survivors frequently face many challenges which include physical and psychological trauma, social stigma as well as barriers to accessing required support services (Ugowe, 2022). The use of effective crisis communication could play a crucial role in addressing the challenges being faced by GBV survivors and also empowering them. Crisis communication deals with the timely and effective dissemination of information to manage and mitigate the impact of GBV on survivors (Wild, Young, de Araujo, Fernandes, Gomes, Kelly & Taft, 2022). In the context of GBV, crisis communication approaches can provide survivors with necessary information about open resources,

legal rights and safety by encouraging more survivors to be open in seeking help.

However, recent developments globally have shown the urgency to address gender-based violence (GBV), with special attention on the role that communication plays in empowering those who have survived it. Crisis communication as well as robust support services has emerged as a central approach for preventing GBV by providing required help to those affected by it. Effective management of crisis communication does not only provide immediate help and information but serves as an essential to for advocacy, awareness and systematic change (Isaboke, 2019). Most survivors of GBV frequently face major barriers such as societal stigma, lack of resources, and inadequate legal protection which is required to access necessary help. Crisis communication in the context of this

paper refers to approaches that have to do with provisions of helplines, mobile applications and social media campaigns which are necessary for bridging these gaps. The tools highlighted offer survivors' immediate open access to support services, legal counsel and robust counselling which also offer life-saving help right on time to survivors of gender-based violence at critical moments.

Furthermore, required support services channelled to GBV survivors' needs play a critical role in their empowerment and recovery. Aside from the highlighted support services, there is also the need for comprehensive support which includes medical care, psychological counselling, legal assistance and safe housing. These services do not only provide the immediate needs of GBV survivors but contribute to their long-term well-being as well as reintegration into society. The integration of these services coupled with effective communication approaches can ensure that survivors receive on-time and holistic support (John, Casey, Carino & McGovern, 2020). Targeted communication campaigns can raise awareness about support services that direct survivors to get immediate help in critical moments. Clear and robust communication from essential service providers to survivors of GBV can help build trust over time by making them utilise the available services. The empowerment of GBV survivors via crisis communication and support services can aid their quick recovery after such traumatic experiences and contribute to the social change process (Mshelia, 2021). This paper therefore presents an evaluation of essential support services that can empower GBV survivors and the utilisation of crisis communication to promote awareness about how they can seek help as well as efforts that can reduce the incidence of GBV in society.

### **What is Gender-Base Violence (GBV)?**

Cotter and Savage (2019) define GBV violence as "violence committed against someone based on gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender." Similarly, the definition of GBV is "violence directed against a person because of that person's gender (including gender identity/expression) or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately" is given in the European Commission's Gender Equality in Sport: Proposal for Strategic Actions 2014–2020 (2014, p. 47). Violence against women is defined by the United Nations as any act of gender-based violence, whether committed in public or private that causes, or is likely to cause, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women (Greene, Bencomo, Rees, Ventevogel, Likindikoki, Nemiro & McGovern, 2021). This definition also includes threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty.

Given that GBV is common in both industrialised and developing nations, it is acknowledged as a worldwide human rights problem (Bradbury-Jones, Appleton, Clark & Paavilainen, 2019; Russo, 2019). The recognition of gender inequality, particularly the historical dominance of men and women and girls' subordinate status in society that serves to maintain an unequal balance of power, makes gender-based violence an important and separate category of violence (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019 & Russo, 2019). This male dominance is unique to White males in Western societies since men who identify as racialised, Indigenous, members of sexual minorities, or who have disabilities are also frequently victims of gender-based violence. According to Bradbury-Jones *et al.* (2019), women and girls who belong to equity-deserving groups represent the majority of GBV victims.

Physical, psychological, and sexual abuse are the types of GBV that are most frequently reported (Russo, 2019). Crucially, these GBV types can manifest alone or in tandem with one another. Inherent in both physical and sexual abuse as well as neglect, psychological violence can also exist independently (Wild, *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, some writers classify economic violence as a distinct category of violence, citing instances like as embezzlement, underpayment, or blocking a partner's ability to make money (Russo, 2019). There are situations when cyber violence is seen as a distinct kind of violence and times when it is seen as a conduit for other types of violence.

Cyber violence may take many forms, including sending offensive or threatening messages, posting pornographic images without permission, and stalking someone online. The danger of injury resulting from the conduct is just as serious and concerning as actual harm, much like the definition of violence (Coombs, 2022). Furthermore, equal consideration must be given to the possible psychological and bodily consequences, such as sadness or bruising (Cahill, Kern, Dadvand, Cruickshank, Midford, Smith & Oades, 2019). Numerous instances of gender-based violence, including jokes, media representations, and wage disparities, are ingrained in cultural norms and have therefore normalised, legitimised, and become unnoticeable. These instances also involve structural violence (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

### **The Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

Scholars employ many standards to characterise acts of violence, which are contingent not only on the nature of the violence but also on the nature of the connection between the offender and the victim. Ishrat and Abdul (2016) define violence as destructive behaviour in an

intimate relationship where one person attempts to dominate and control the other in a dating, married, or cohabiting relationship, resulting in physical, psychological, or sexual harm. This definition of violence is based on the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. However, the writers of this page use the 1993 definition of "violence against women" (VAW) as established by the United Nations. "Any act of gender-based violence (GBV) that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" is defined as violence against women (Izzi & Umunna, 2020). This definition is comprehensive since it takes into account the origins, impacts, and manifestations of all forms of gender-based violence, regardless of their types or relationships.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a phenomenon common to men and it is a pervasive issue that affects millions of people globally most especially girls and women across cultural divides. The World Bank and UN Women once noted that one in three women worldwide have experienced domestic, physical or sexual violence from people they are intimate with at different times in their lives. GBV in the context of this paper ranges from very harmful behaviour such as sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking, severe emotional, psychological and physical abuse as well as female genital mutilation (FGM) all of which result in traumatic experiences and consequences survivors (Fawole, van Wyk, Balogun, Akinsola & Adejimi, 2019). These survivors often experience long-term mental health issues which are not limited to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stigma and isolation which are social consequences. The societal economic and social costs of GBV are enormous as this

affects not only the survivors but also their families and communities. Studies have also indicated that children who experience GBV are more likely to have emotional and behavioural issues while growing up which may propagate a cycle of violence in future relationships with others.

### **What is Crisis Communication?**

This is a specialised field in communication that deals with how information is managed and disseminated in times of crisis. The central aim of crisis communication is to effectively manage as crisis without escalating the issue at hand and also a response that is needed to reposition the perception of the public. What makes crisis communication relevant to GBV is, the fact that it ensures accurate, timely and useful information is made available to GBV survivors as well as stakeholders managing the crisis. Aside from managing perception crisis communication to a large extent influences public perception and the outcome of a crisis such as GBV.

Crisis communication is a strategic method that many organisations adopt to manage business crises and NGOs also adopt is as a tactic to inform the public about GBV as well as manage such crises effectively. NGOs use effective crisis communication techniques to manage GBV because it requires accuracy, transparency and empathy. The NGOs also mainly adopt crisis communication as it in the long run affect behavioural change in the society, as this helps to improve human behaviour towards an issue and GBV is one of such issue. Within the purview of crisis communication, it deals with how people are influenced to adopt certain attitudes that can alleviate the impact of GBV crisis and also facilitate recovery for survivors.

### **The Role of Crisis Communication in GBV**

When a crisis occurs, an organization or individuals may safeguard its/their reputation by using crisis communication as a communication strategy. To be effective, crisis communication protocols need to cover message creation, distribution and monitoring throughout the crisis (from start to finish) (Diers-Lawson, 2017). These procedures guarantee efficient communication with important crisis stakeholders by incorporating relevant procedures and viable solutions. Crisis communication is the immediate response that is a critical component in managing GBV incidence (Menon, Pattnaik, Ipsita, & Padhy, 2020). An effective crisis communication strategy comprises timely and accurate dissemination of supportive information to survivors, as this would help them to understand their rights under the law of the land and how to access available support services that can help them through the crisis.

This form of communication can also a critical role in raising public awareness about GBV as it helps to challenge dangerous social norms, thereby encouraging wide supportive community response. Comprehensive training on GBV dynamics, trauma-informed treatment, and successful communication techniques are needed by critical stakeholders. Training is required to ascertain cultural competency to guarantee that career communicators can give adequate and considerate assistance to survivors from various backgrounds (John, *et al*, 2020). To stay current on developing trends in GBV assistance and best practices, service providers through their organisations need to engage in continuous professional development. To guarantee their efficacy, communication tactics and support services must be routinely assessed.

### **Importance of Support Services and Integrated Approach to GBV**

Critical support services such as the provision of hotlines, counselling, shelters and legal aid can help survivors of GBV quickly recover from such traumatic emotional experiences. Services such as this address the urgent and immediate needs of survivors which support their long-term empowerment and recovery. Access to holistic support services can considerably improve survivors' mental and physical health outcomes which can enhance their sense of safety and add to their ability to continue or start life afresh (Raftery, Howard, Palmer & Hossain, 2022). This cannot be achieved without an integrated strategy that takes into effective crisis communication with robust essential support services that empower GBV survivors.

Technology is needed to improve the efficacy and accessibility of support services. This includes offering online counselling sessions, using social media channels to spread information about rights and services, and reporting GBV using mobile applications. Technology can also make it easier to gather information for bettering services and adjusting treatments to better meet the requirements of survivors. Involving the community is essential to establishing a supportive atmosphere for GBV survivors (Greene, *et al.* 2021). To combat harmful norms, build a culture of support and responsibility, and increase public knowledge of GBV, organisations should interact with local leaders, organisations in the community, and the general public. Community-based strategies can increase the likelihood that survivors will seek assistance by making them feel supported.

### **Empowerment of GBV Survivors**

Empowerment takes a long-term process especially for survivors of GBV because this enables them to rebuild their lives and take

charge of it. This also helps them to make informed decisions with self-efficacy. This generally focuses on how GBV survivors can be helped to take control of their lives by fostering efficacy after a violent and traumatized experience (Cahill, *et al.* 2019). Empowerment for GBV survivors involves regaining their psychological and physical comportsment to make informed decisions about their current and future endeavours. Effective crisis communication and support services empower GBV survivors by providing them with the required information that leads to knowledge, available resources and confidence needed to take control of their lives and fundamental human rights too.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Crisis Communication Theory**

Crisis communication theory most especially Timothy Coombs's (2022) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) serves as a foundation for understanding how information on GBV is disseminated and requires response through the right strategies which can mitigate the impact of traumatic experiences such as GBV. It is a known fact that not all crises can be avoided by planning and occasionally individuals need to take active action in response to any crises that occur. Every crisis needs effective communication to be managed successfully. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the implementation of several communication techniques is necessary for successful change management when dealing with GBV. Crises can be addressed in a way that benefits survivors of GBV and all stakeholders providing support services, although there might be unforeseen disastrous consequences during the process of managing the traumatic experience (Coombs, 2022). However, the outcome of the crisis is largely dependent on the communication that occurs during the crisis and not after it. Crisis communications are a crucial component of effective crisis

management as they may sometimes improve the outcome in addition to mitigating or ending the issue. SCCT as a theoretical framework emphasizes the significance of channelling communication strategies on the type and seriousness of the crisis at hand, as crisis communication has to do with making survivors have timely, relevant, emphatic and accurate information that would help them access support services on time to navigate their recovery journey.

### **Social Support Theory**

This theory states that social networks as well as supportive relationships are key because they play a crucial role in individuals' ability to cope with traumatic experiences and stress-related issues such as GBV. To Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can be informational, emotional or instrumental but must have the element of relief. GBV survivors have highlighted earlier much have access to support services, shelters, hotlines, legal aid and counselling. This will serve as balanced emotional and informational support that will help GBV survivors not to feel isolated but more empowered to openly seek help. The social resources that a person can turn to while facing challenges and difficulties in times of crisis are typically understood as social support. It is the process of transferring social, cultural, material, and human capital between people or between members of larger social units (states, communities, etc.). While support is frequently given informally through social connections, it can also be given formally by an organisation with official authority, such as the legal system or government aid programmes. People who get social assistance may, in turn, participate in less delinquent behaviour. Social support may have the unintentional benefit of preventing participation in delinquent behaviour and the risk factors for delinquency. Social support theory explicates the significance of

accessible and responsive support service systems for GBV survivors in their recovery process. Support is crucial in helping survivors of GBV to withstand social pressures to laws into their own hands and seek relevant support through critical stakeholders. The livewire in managing any crisis is largely dependent on available support services that are provided as urgently required. Since the victims/survivors are members of society available support helps to create a social network that helps their recovery process.

### **Applicability of the Theories to GBV**

The relevance of these theories to the discourse of GBV is that they both provide framework towards understanding Gender-based violence as social phenomenon within the context of larger society. Social support theory for instance establishes the social networks and relationships that can mitigate the impact of GBV trauma on survivors and also guarantee their speedy recovery. This theory submits that what can lead to the resilient and recovery of GBV survivors after a traumatic experience is the support such survivors get from their family, friends and other critical stakeholders through a community networking. Social support theory is fundamental for understanding critical support system available for GBV survivors in a complex social network. It is used address the needed psychological, physical and examine GBV survivors' support system which helps to improve their recovery and total well-being, as the integration of a holistic support systems are needed in such situation.

On the other hand, crisis communication theory is critical to addressing GBV, as it helps to structure the strategy for an effective management of information dissemination to support GBV survivors after the crisis. Its central focus is on providing accurate, empathic and timely

information to allay the traumatic experience impact of GBV which is important for survivors. Public awareness campaign is necessary to curb the menace of GBV, as this is used to educate the public on the harmful impact of GBV and how to promote supportive behaviours for survivors. Crisis communication also deals with a robust framework for improving the support system for GBV survivors by effectively disseminating information on crisis response and recovery process for survivors. This do not only guarantee prompt response to GBV situation but contributes long-term efforts towards reducing the prevalence of the issue, as well as provide appropriate support mechanism for survivors' recovery and empowerment.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study "Empowering Gender-Based Violence Survivors through Crisis Communication and Support Services" emphasises how important it is to have thorough support services and efficient communication to empower GBV survivors. Crisis communication is the timely and compassionate sharing of information that is necessary to support survivors in understanding their rights, navigating the aftermath of violence, and gaining access to assistance. Hotlines, shelters, counselling, and legal aid are examples of support services that offer both short-term and long-term assistance to victims, assisting them in getting well and starting again. When crisis communication and support services are combined, a strong framework that increases the empowerment of GBV survivors is produced. Good communication techniques enable survivors to seek assistance, lessen the stigma attached to GBV, and increase knowledge of the resources for support that are available. When available and helpful, support programmes provide survivors with the tools and guidance they need to move past their traumas and take back control of their

lives. It is recommended that critical stakeholders should get input from survivors before carrying out any evaluations on GBV survivors by leveraging on data drive to drive tangible productivity.

Through this iterative approach, services will be improved, gaps will be filled, and the entire support network for GBV survivors will be strengthened. GBV survivors also should have easier access to support services. This entails making certain that services are approachable via a variety of communication channels (e.g., phone, internet, and in-person), are offered in different languages, and are physically accessible. Service providers should also endeavour to lower obstacles that can keep survivors from seeking assistance, such as financial constraints, fear of reprisals, and transportation issues. Establishing and executing crisis communication plans that give survivors accurate, understandable, and compassionate information is something that organisations should do. This entails imparting good communication skills to staff members, speaking in simple terms, and making sure that all communications are survivor-centred.

Communication campaigns should also focus on increasing public knowledge of GBV and the resources accessible to survivors. Organisations may improve the effectiveness and supportiveness of their environment for GBV survivors by putting these ideas into practice. Improving crisis communication and services for survivors not only helps them heal immediately but also helps achieve the long-term objective of lowering GBV and fostering an empowerment and support culture. To meet the complex needs of GBV survivors and promote a culture in which survivors feel empowered and supported, an integrated approach is important.

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