

PSEA and Safeguarding in Fragile Settings

Survivor-Centered Principles
Context Risks | Staff Safety

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Opening Challenge.



You receive this call at 10pm:

Our female staff member was threatened tonight after she refused a community leader's demands. He said if she doesn't cooperate, he'll spread rumors that our GBV program is 'corrupting local women.' She's scared, the community is turning against us, and we have 200 women depending on our services. Our security protocol says evacuate staff, but that means abandoning survivors who have nowhere else to go. What do we do?

Spontaneous answers

- 01 What's your immediate response?
- 02 Who's safety comes first?
- 03 How do you protect both staff and survivors?

Ground Rules for Our Safe Space.

- 01 **Confidentiality:** Stories stay here, learning travels with you
- 02 **Respectful Engagement:** Everyone's experience and perspective is valued. It's okay to disagree respectfully
- 03 **Emotional Safety:** Content may trigger difficult emotions or memories
- 04 **Learning Mindset** We're all here to improve our practice. Ask questions freely

————— **What we'll do:** Practice real scenarios, build practical tools, share workable strategies



Today's Learning Framework.

01 PSEA & Safeguarding Survivor-Centered Principles

- How do we keep survivor agency at the center when systems are failing?
- What does "survivor choice" mean when options are severely limited?

02 Context Risks

- Cultural, political, and security factors that create unique vulnerabilities
- How fragile settings amplify both risks and response challenges

03 Staff Safety

- Protecting those who protect others
- When staff safety conflicts with survivor needs
- Sustainable programming that doesn't sacrifice either

These three areas often conflict - we'll practice navigating tensions

KEY TERMS

- PSEA**
- Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse by organizational staff and associated personnel.
- SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**
- Abuse of position of vulnerability, power, or trust for sexual purposes
- SEXUAL ABUSE**
- Physical intrusion of sexual nature, by force or under coercive conditions

SAFEGUARDING

Safeguarding means taking all reasonable steps to prevent Sexual Exploitation Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) and other forms of harm from occurring and to respond appropriately when harm does occur.

Or more simply:

We do not harm people who come into contact with us.

SCA

Prioritizes survivors' rights, needs, and wishes; empowers them to make informed decisions about their recovery.

Core Principles: Safety, Confidentiality, Respect, Non-discrimination, Survivor Agency

DO NO HARM

Ensuring humanitarian action does not inadvertently cause harm or increase people's vulnerability.

DUTY OF CARE

Legal and moral obligation to ensure reasonable safety and wellbeing of those we serve.



Power Dynamics and Documentation Challenges.

Organizational Power Imbalances

- **Hierarchical exploitation:** Senior staff exploiting junior colleagues or beneficiaries
- **Economic leverage:** Organizations controlling access to employment, resources, services
- **Information asymmetry:** Staff having privileged access to beneficiary vulnerabilities
- **Protection paradox:** Those meant to provide protection becoming sources of harm

Documentation Dilemmas

- **Safety vs. Services:** Limited budgets requiring choice between security measures and programming
- **Staff retention vs. Standards:** Keeping problematic staff due to recruitment challenges
- **Compliance vs. Access:** Meeting donor requirements vs. maintaining community acceptance
- **Individual vs. Collective:** Protecting one person vs. maintaining services for many

Resource Scarcity Forcing Impossible Choices

- **Insecure storage:** Physical and digital records vulnerable to theft, corruption
- **Confidentiality breaches:** Information used to harm survivors or silence staff
- **Evidence destruction:** Pressure to eliminate records that implicate powerful actors
- **Access exploitation:** Case files becoming tools for blackmail or continued abuse
- **Legal risks:** Documentation creating liability for organizations and individuals

Context Risks in Fragile Settings.

Cultural

- **Traditional authority** structures that enable exploitation (chiefs, religious leaders, elders)
- **Gender power dynamics** where male gatekeepers control women's access to services
- **Shame and stigma** preventing survivors from seeking help or reporting incidents
- **Community loyalty** that protects perpetrators over survivors
- **Generational hierarchies** silencing younger voices against elder exploitation

Economic

- **Extreme poverty** creating coercive environments where survival depends on compliance
- **Limited livelihood alternatives** giving exploiters significant leverage over beneficiaries
- **Economic gatekeeping** where access to resources is controlled by potential perpetrators
- **Transactional relationships** becoming normalized in desperate circumstances
- **Organizational dependency** where communities cannot afford to lose services

Political

- **Weak formal justice systems** that fail to protect survivors or prosecute perpetrators
- **Corrupt officials** who may be perpetrators themselves or protect other perpetrators
- **Political instrumentalization of gender issues** for partisan gain
- **Backlash** against "Western" gender equality concepts
- **State capture** where government officials benefit from maintaining exploitation

Security

- **Breakdown of social protection** systems due to conflict/displacement
- **Increased vulnerability of displaced populations**, especially women and girls
- **Impunity for violations** in lawless or contested areas
- **Limited safe spaces** and privacy for reporting or seeking help
- **Information warfare** where safeguarding reports become political weapons

Staff Safety in Fragile Settings.

Physical Safety Threats

- **Direct threats** from perpetrators who don't want to be exposed
- **Community backlash** against staff working on "sensitive" issues
- **Security risks** from documenting violations by powerful actors
- **Targeted violence** for challenging traditional power structures
- **Retaliation** for reporting colleagues or superiors

Professional Safety Risks

- **Reputational attacks** and false accusations against staff
- **Legal threats** and intimidation tactics
- **Career consequences** for speaking out against violations
- **Organizational liability** when staff safety measures are inadequate
- **Whistleblower persecution** for exposing internal misconduct

Psychological Safety Concerns

- **Secondary trauma** from repeated exposure to survivor stories
- **Isolation and stress** when working in difficult conditions
- **Moral distress** when unable to provide adequate protection
- **Burnout** from overwhelming caseloads and limited resources
- **Guilt and shame** when organizational systems fail survivors

Unique Challenges for Staff

- **Live in the community** where perpetrators and survivors are neighbors
- **Face ongoing social consequences** for their professional choices
- **Limited protection** from organizational security protocols designed for international staff
- **Economic vulnerability** making them susceptible to pressure and exploitation

When Staff Are Part of the Problem.

- **Internal reporting dilemmas** when supervisors are implicated
- **Institutional protection** of problematic staff due to organizational image concerns
- **Peer pressure** to cover up colleague misconduct
- **System failure** when safeguarding mechanisms protect perpetrators instead of survivors

Integration Challenge: Staff safety measures often conflict with survivor-centered principles and service delivery.



The Survivor-Centered Framework for Fragile Settings.

Traditional Crisis Response

"We must evacuate for safety"

"Standard protocols apply"

"Report through official channels"

"Suspend services until secure"

Survivor-Centered Approach

"What do survivors need to feel safe?"

"How do we adapt protocols to context?"

"What reporting options do survivors trust?"

"How do we maintain support while managing risk?"

**Core Principles: Safety, Confidentiality,
Respect, Non-discrimination, Survivor Agency**

Survivors know their context best. Even when we're the experts.

MOVING TO PRACTICE

Focused Learning Stations.

Station 1

The Consent Dilemma

Station 2

Context Risk Navigation

Station 3

Internal Safeguarding Failure

7 participants per station, 20 minutes each

Station 1

The Consent Dilemma.

Scenario: You are the coordinator for a women's economic empowerment program. The program's operation provides women with business loans through a male supervisor, Umar, a trusted partner of your NGO. Amina (22) reports that Umar is demanding sexual favors in exchange for her loan approval. Amina begs you not to report it. She says she desperately needs the money, fears Umar's retaliation, and believes she can handle it herself. The sexual exploitation is a direct consequence of your NGO's operations. Your associate is using the power your program gave him to cause harm. You must navigate a difficult ethical and professional dilemma: balancing your duty to report to your management, your organization's duty to protect Amina and other beneficiaries with the risk of retaliation that could jeopardize the entire program.

Questions

- What would truly informed consent look like in this situation?
- How can you expand Amina's limited options?
- What creative solutions honor her agency while meeting your duty of care?
- How do you involve her in designing the response process?

Station 2: Context Risk Navigation.

Scenario: Your women's programs face pressure from traditional leaders. Your program's design, which gives cash and direct control to women, is seen as a threat. The leaders demand control over training materials, women's earnings, and the grievance process. By making these demands, the leaders are effectively attempting to become an associate of your organization.

These demands are a direct attempt to use your program to cause harm. By becoming an "associate," the leaders would create a system where they can use their newfound power to demand sexual exploitation in exchange for cash or access to the grievance process. This is a major safeguarding failure, but defiance could lead to your expulsion from the community. You must find a way to honor the local context without compromising your principles.

Questions

- How can you respond to the leaders without immediately giving in or provoking them, while clearly communicating that their demands would make them an "associate" of your program?
- What creative solutions can you propose that allow the leaders to save face while you maintain control over women's earnings and grievance reporting?
- How can you frame the discussion to show that your program protects families and culture rather than harming it, while also explaining the risks of their proposed system?
- How do you protect your national staff who live in the community from being targeted by these leaders?

Station 3: Internal Safeguarding Failure.

Scenario: Your GBV program in Northeast Nigeria is known for its survivor-centered approach, which involves meticulous, confidential documentation of survivors' stories for individual and legal support. A survivor, who had previously reported a case of sexual violence to your program, approaches you in a state of extreme distress. She reveals that a male staff member, a trusted psychosocial support (PSS) counsellor is threatening her. He has accessed her confidential case file and is using her personal information to threaten her. He says he will leak the photos and details of her case to her family, friends and even make it go viral online, unless you sleep with him." The very system designed to protect survivors has become the source of their re-traumatization and a new form of sexual exploitation. The perpetrator is an insider, a trusted member of your organization. The harm being caused is a direct result of the program's operations and a failure in internal safeguards.

Questions

- What is your immediate priority: addressing the perpetrator or securing the survivor's data? Why?
- How do you respond to the perpetrator's blackmail to ensure he cannot carry out his threats?
- How can you handle the perpetrator's employment status without provoking him to leak the information he holds?
- What steps must you take to rebuild trust with the survivors who have been exposed to harm by your own staff?
- What changes to your program's operations and data management policies must be made immediately to ensure this can never happen again?

Key Takeaway Check.

Complete this sentence: "The most important thing I learned about balancing survivor needs, context realities, and staff safety is..."

Remember! It's About Informed Compromises

- Perfect solutions rarely exist in fragile settings
- The goal is minimizing harm to both survivors and staff
- Integration requires creativity, not choosing one priority over others
- Your safety and sustainability serve survivors' long-term interests



Synthesis & Action Planning

Identify

- ONE specific action to implement within 1 week (not 48 hours - more realistic)
- ONE system/policy to review/update within 1 month
- ONE peer partnership formed today for ongoing consultation.



Wrap Up

"In fragile settings, our greatest strength is not choosing between survivor safety and staff safety, but refusing to accept that we must sacrifice one for the other. True protection means finding the third way - together."

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Resources

Visit RSH Nigeria's webpage to access the variety of safeguarding resources.

<https://nigeria.safeguardingsupporthub.org/>

Sign up for RSH Nigeria's newsletter for updates on SEAH safeguarding resources