

The background is a dark purple space with a light purple grid of curved lines. Scattered throughout are white stars of various sizes and colors. In the top right, there is a large, irregularly shaped planet with purple and cyan colors and several smaller cyan circles on its surface. In the bottom left, there is a large planet with purple and cyan bands and a purple ring system. In the middle right, there is a smaller purple planet with a thin ring.

ORBITS

Research chapters

When research creates harm

There's no dearth of research on GBV. Early records go back to the beginning of our understanding of human psychology. Unfortunately, harmful practices in research settings have a long history, too. For example, psychologists and physicians such as Sigmund [Freud](#) ignored women's experiences of sexual abuse in hysteria studies in the 1800s.

Though research methods have changed over time, ethical considerations about how trauma is studied, believed, portrayed, and extrapolated into findings remains highly relevant today. The term 'extractive research' is used to refer to research where information or knowledge is 'extracted' from those with experience or knowledge of the research subject without care or interest in their wellbeing, preferences, and needs.

In regards to GBV, research is extractive when it uses the experiences and labour of survivors without appropriate consent, control, or compensation. This might involve reducing a survivor's role and input to that of an informant, disregarding pain or discomfort that may be caused by participation in the research, or discarding information that dissents from the organisation's own ideas.

Issues of extraction are particularly pressing in a global context. Firstly, many international research projects are shaped by geopolitical power dynamics and colonial history. Annie Bunting and Joel Quirk have [written](#) about considering ethical research practice when studying GBV in African

conflicts; they say, "the French, Portuguese and British continue to play major roles in producing knowledge about their former colonies, contributing to a larger pattern which involves privileged outsiders parachuting into 'exotic' locations for short 'fact-finding' expeditions." At the same time, zooming out to look at the overall research landscape shows staggering inequality in what research is funded, [who produces it](#), [where it's produced](#), and whose research interests are prioritised. When survivors' insights are treated like an asset but their own agency in the process isn't, when they are consulted but have no idea of why and how their experience will be used, and when language, culture, race, disability, and other characteristics aren't considered even when survivors mention them, it's extractive.

"Harmful research methods are basically extractive research methods where with that quantitative data side you go in, you collect the information then you come out and go and give it to someone else and don't give it back to the community that participated in it.

The politics of research means that someone who's based in a university in the UK or US would be comfortable to name the issues of violence against African women. So there's that power dynamic within the research space that makes one feel like they can write about and on these particular groups of people without really engaging with them." - Chenai Chair, Mozilla Foundation

In the case of researching GBV, or any other form of trauma, a further concern is 'retraumatisation'. While there are various definitions of retraumatisation, and the term is not [clinically validated](#), it is widely used to refer to instances when an experience causes a survivor's negative feelings of trauma to reemerge. As holocaust survivor Primo Levi has written in [The Drowned and The Saved](#), "the memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing." If special care and attention is not given, research can end up being a painful experience for survivors which reignites past hurt and emotions. Retraumatisation can occur when interviews force survivors to disclose trauma in gory detail though there is no need for it, or when questions aren't asked with the understanding that trauma might elicit leading responses.

"Gender-based violence research is actually quite traumatic. So I'm always wondering what are the safe spaces for the people who do this research?"

Chenai Chair, Mozilla Foundation

A further issue is [vicarious trauma](#), where those doing the research experience trauma through exposure to and engagement with the subject matter. Through consistently engaging with traumatic content, researchers can themselves experience trauma symptoms and negative emotions, especially if they have a [personal connection](#) to or experience of what they are researching. This is an especially pertinent issue when it comes to GBV, as its ubiquitous nature means that many researchers will

have direct experience of it. When the possibility of vicarious trauma is not considered and mitigated, researching the issue can extend rather than address trauma.

Just because we can ask something shouldn't mean we have to. Just because we can record audio doesn't mean we should hold on to it for years. The research team and, where relevant, commissioning organisations are responsible for reducing the likelihood of extraction, retraumatisation, and vicarious trauma.

User Research

In both the product and policy design worlds, there has been a move towards more robust, evidence-based models. As a result, user research has emerged as a flourishing field and profession. It seeks to understand the behaviours, needs, and motivations of users or potential users of any product, service, or policy. In the non-profit space too, many funders require organisations to validate their hypothesis about user behaviour with research methods such as surveys, interviews, and personas. This development is encouraging, but extractive and retraumatising practices still remain a concern.

In the technology sector, there is one particular methodology of user research that has been considered ground-breaking and has had substantial traction. The launch of the [Human-Centred Design \(HCD\)](#) toolkit by IDEO in 2009 brought a wave of change in the way academics and researchers approached subjects like poverty, abuse, and unemployment. This shift rapidly put more agency in the hands of the interviewees and soon, they were co-producing rather

than passively engaging in research. The principles of human-centred design are to encourage open and non-leading questions to help understand the needs and lives of people we're designing for, improve ideation, and lead to more productive and creative idea prototypes. HCD provides a toolbox of more than 150 design techniques and tools, including personas, experience maps, and empathy maps. It has become the methodology of choice for most technology and public policy companies and is largely considered as best practice, so we're going to focus on it here.

HCD undoubtedly did tackle and respond to many of the limitations of traditional research. However, it is not without its own limitations, especially when applied to gender-based violence without an intersectional, survivor-centred, and trauma-informed lens. As Tania Anaissie, a design thinking practitioner and lecturer, [critiques](#), "it exacerbates power asymmetries, that it pretends to be apolitical, that it ignores the complexity of systems, and that it does not hold designers accountable for the impact of their work."

Indeed, many women and people of colour who worked for IDEO and were swept up in this wave of HCD-led transformation have [written](#) about their negative experiences with the organisation, highlighting their disillusionment with the methodology.

Given HCD's predominance in the technology sector, it is worthwhile to understand where and why it is lacking. There are several important criticisms of HCD, many of which apply equally, if not even more so, to other forms of user research.

1. Favours generalisation and oversimplification

Personas, experience maps, and surveys are especially prone to this. The tools themselves do not present the limitation, it's the assumption that a group of humans can be reduced down to a snippet of their lives. It's what Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the danger of a single story". In her TED Talk she explains, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete."

These are just some of the errors that can make their way into our work:

- ★ Out-group homogeneity bias: Where we see our community as diverse but an 'out-group' (a group that feels different) as being homogenous, or unvarying.
- ★ Fundamental attribution error: Where we believe someone's actions are because of their character (something in their control) and our actions are based on external factors (not in our control).
- ★ Confirmation bias: Where we seek, interpret, and remember information that confirms our beliefs and opinions.

2. Doesn't prioritise safety

When we research traumatic pasts and presents, it is natural that our research intervention will be difficult for some people. This includes the researchers themselves, especially if they've had experience with similar issues. While we cannot prevent the emergence of these emotions and memories as they may be related to

memories as they may be related to our subject area, we can acknowledge them and plan for them. Human-centred design approaches often miss this because they believe co-production is enough to negate these emotions, and researchers should be able to manage their own emotional safety because they have to.

3. Ignores or worsens power asymmetries

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research, and HCD is no different. Consent forms are a critical part of the administration, but researchers often do not go far enough to explain the purpose of research, why they need consent, and when people can opt out.

This becomes really important when there are power asymmetries - financial, social, or political. Due to historical abuse by people or institutions, many people may sign consent forms simply because you've asked them to and they're used to doing that.

Reasons why someone might not opt out even when they want to:

- ★ Politeness: Someone might feel it's too awkward to opt out as they do not want to embarrass you or appear rude.

- ★ Financial: They really need the money and think they won't get the compensation if they opt out (if people take part in the research, they should be partially or fully compensated irrespective of what stage they drop out of).

To build and honour trust, we need to make sure the people who are aiding our research with their stories truly understand the intent and process through which their pain and experiences will be treated.

4. Assumes neutrality of the designer and design processes

Some research should not be done because there is a possibility to perpetuate harm through incomplete, superficial, and biased research. Systems design doesn't acknowledge historical trauma and structural oppression.

Research often assumes neutrality of the designer and design processes but we know that is far from being true. Our privilege and affiliation with institutions, which may have a history of cultural blindness and discrimination, can introduce so many visible and invisible harms. This is further supported by the 'toolification' of user needs, which isn't being viewed as a framework to investigate needs, and has instead become a lazy template for generalising complex circumstances.

Sometimes 'empathy' can end up being misguided and ultimately harmful, when researchers seek to 'empathise' with experiences they do not know first hand. Ableist and offensive approaches include instances where designers wear crutches and blindfolds, and walk around for a few hours to 'understand' what life is like for users, or when they



create virtual reality games to immerse people into a new experience. Instead, these research methods are often celebrated as breakthroughs and given public acclaim within the research community.

“We teach designers that they can tap into empathy to design for communities that aren’t their own, or for people whose lived experience they don’t share. And we see this a lot, we see designers who are trying to improve some part of the disabled experience by walking around blindfolded or walking with crutches, instead of actually centering the lived experience of people with disabilities. As a designer, I’d rather you show me the practices built into your design process that focus on improving the material conditions of the people you engage, making sure that they are compensated, that they are treated well, that their wellbeing is a priority for you, that you’re actively countering dominant behaviours in the way you work with them, that you’re giving them opportunities to make choices for themselves.”

Sarah Fathallah, independent social designer and researcher

time of dedicated people burns out or when the energy of funders who like new things fizzles out. HCD believes in continuous improvements, but if pilots or preliminary research stages are set up without the realities of resources and leadership sustainability in mind, there’s a good chance the project might fail.

Overall, it is clear that for all the progress that HCD has brought to the research field, there remain several, serious shortcomings, especially when applied to an area of research as sensitive as tech abuse. For all its advantages, it still has the potential of creating research environments that feel one-sided and extractive, leaving survivors feeling powerless. The need for more trauma-informed, intersectional, and survivor-centred approaches to research remains crucial.

5. Short lived processes without followups

Some research should not be done. How do you support the adaptation of your prototype to a changing environment? Shiny prototypes, especially if they require high-resources in a low-funding context, will evidently die out when the volunteer

Rethinking research: enrichment not extraction

It is possible for researchers to design settings and processes that are non-extractive, affirming, and enabling. Many survivors are eager to participate in research because they have experiences of not being heard or believed, and because they want to share their own experience to help others going through the same trauma. Trauma survivors report [benefits](#) from engaging in research including feelings of validation, catharsis, or altruism. Understanding this and putting survivors and their many different experiences, perspectives, and needs at the centre of your research process is imperative. Research on trauma does not need to be extractive or retraumatizing; it can be enriching.

Design Beku, a design agency in India, introduced [the distinction](#) between extractive and enriching experiences when talking about their research into pregnancy care in rural India:

“The foundation of any ethical research framework is the approach, which must choose to be enriching rather than extractive from the outset. This means discarding stereotypes of researcher-respondent relationships and creating a collaborative system where everyone is a co-creator. This requires thinking through ways in which one can consider, engage, and determine with user communities what should be researched, how that research should be conducted, and how the data should be shared.”

For leading academic research on TGBV, check out [University College London SteAPP](#) and [Queensland University of Technology](#).

Women’s Aid [Research Integrity Framework](#) provides a framework to consider and discuss what feminist, ethical research of GBV looks like.

Participatory methods

Participatory methods have shifted traditional research dynamics of the passive ‘subject’ and ‘expert’ researcher. They have opened up exciting opportunities to challenge how agency, power, and consent are practised. However, no research method should be viewed as a silver bullet.

Jagosh et. al [describe](#) participatory research as a discipline that prioritises “co-constructing research through partnerships between researchers and stakeholders, community members, or others with insider knowledge and lived expertise.”

Usually, participatory research will involve stages of planning, recruitment, collaborative research techniques, data collection, analysis, and plans for iteration. Not all participatory methods are appropriate or needed, and when they are, they require care and active facilitation. There must be degrees of participation from people with

lived experiences and these must be calibrated on a case-by-case basis. Just because a research is participatory doesn't mean that it cannot be harmful in itself - all other ethical considerations remain just as important.

Participatory research can take many forms. In the technology space, user-centred design is most commonly used and therefore will be our focus. In this field, most user-centred design research is done with primary interviews with survivors of gender-based violence, as well as a mix of traditional methods such as surveys and focus groups.

With some groups, a qualitative approach might be better suited; this can include receiving interview responses via a series of voice notes on a messaging app, asking a question in a social media group where there is already established trust, or just observing natural behaviour during an activity. These techniques can add more context and fill the gaps present in a purely quantitative approach.

For participatory research, feedback loops must be active and adaptive. Survivors should be involved in as many stages as appropriate and must be informed of the progress of the project. Within Chayn and End Cyber Abuse, for example, participatory research is done with survivors who form part of the team and have decision-making power, and also involves survivors from outside of our teams so that we always consider more perspectives. Survivors should not be seen as informants who simply provide data points.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that research into gender-based violence is trauma-inducing, and is difficult for not just the survivor but also the researcher.

Steps taken to create an enriching environment for survivors will also benefit the researcher, and wellbeing measures for the research team should also form part of the project design. Organisations should include survivors in long-term decision-making where technology and research design will have a direct impact on how platforms can become a tool for violence. However, even in research projects based on short-term models and deductive methods - as is common in the technology sector - we can apply the Orbits design principles to ensure the process is intersectional, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred.

Research process

We advocate for research projects that are participatory and involve the following layers (though not always). These layers will not necessarily take place in this order. These are based on our experience of undertaking research within a user centred product design process, alongside the input of stakeholders who undertake wide ranging research approaches and methodologies in diverse settings. These layers follow good practice in research design, but are often overlooked in the context of tight timeframes and limited budgets, particularly in technology design settings.

★ **Reflection and ethical exploration:**

Before embarking on a research project, the first question to ask is why? You should start with considering why the research is important and exploring the ethical implications and questions that might arise. For example, in Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn's book [Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities](#), the following

questions are helpful:

1. *Why are you engaging in this research project? Who will it impact? How and why?*
2. *Who will you collaborate with to engage in this research? How will these relationships be established? What are your political goals for this research project? What contributions can you make toward these political goals in addition to your research?*
3. *How have your emotions shaped how and what you research? What emotions are produced through your research? How are these emotions linked to wider circulations of public feeling? How have your emotions shifted throughout the research process?*
4. *After the research is completed, what are your ongoing commitments to the political goals you identified as important for this research?*

Engaging in this sort of reflection upfront will help to refine the research plan, unearth any key ethical considerations, and ground the rest of the process with clear purpose and intention.

★ **Hypothesis:** What are we trying to find out? What do we know? What's unknown?

A clear purpose and mapping of assumptions sets the project up for success. This might involve an in-depth discussion with your team and could also involve the [Consequences Scanning](#) exercise by Doteveryone, a

process which unearths the possible positive and negative consequences, intended and unintended, of your research and technological intervention.

★ **Desk research:** What can we find out from existing research that can help us refine our hypothesis?

Using your own research archives and those of others in the public domain, you can cut down on the amount of trauma extraction, inefficient research design, and time spent on re-doing a piece of work that has been done many times before. For example, we already know survivors of tech abuse are often not taken as seriously as those that experience physical assault. It's been shown in many high-profile cases, studies, and surveys. This is not to say that this question cannot be asked if it makes sense for the context, but we can form better questions having known the history.

★ **Internal group research:** What knowledge do we already hold in-house?

There's a wealth of knowledge within our team members, especially if they come from a diverse set of life experiences and backgrounds. We should use it.

Test ideas and do research sprints within the team before going outside. This enables us to test our questions and approach, and also gather valuable data from people who are already invested in and have co-designed the process. It's important to understand where the gaps in knowledge and experiences are likely to be, as no team can be perfectly diverse or capture all perspectives that are important for your project.

★ **External research:** Who can we speak to, learn from, and collaborate with to build on and test our hypothesis?

By this point, we usually have a more refined research plan and can embark on finding interviewees and participants. This is when we focus on questions of remuneration, safety, and creating a warm space online or offline. The hardest part is going beyond a known community that we already have access to because unless your project is hyperlocal, doing different research with the same people is likely going to result in significant gaps. It's vital that we ensure participants have the agency to refuse participation altogether or are involved in varying degrees based on their preferences.

★ **Internal synthesis:** How can we make sense of what we've heard? What conclusions can we draw from it?

The synthesis requires us to explore and identify common themes emerging from the data, look at enablers, barriers, and needs, and make a plan for research gaps. This can form a first draft of insights.

★ **Open findings:** How can we share our analysis to improve and enrich it?

This gives participants a chance to see what the conclusions and insights have been gathered, so that they can comment to correct mistakes, if any, and also build on what's been documented. You can also open this draft to other organisations

in your sector and/or share publicly but care must be taken to provide sufficient context and anonymise any survivor input. Inviting comments and feedback on an open research is inherently enriching, and not extractive, as it contributes to open knowledge rather than accumulating information for just one organisation's benefit.

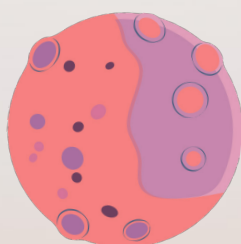
★ **Recalibration:** How can we incorporate ideas and feedback into a coherent analysis?

This requires us to validate what is known and identify what's still missing. We repeat the synthesis process from before but with more scrutiny because advice, feedback, and edits have come from people who do not know enough about the particular issue. This is one of the dangers of open feedback, so rather than looking at the number of responses, we have to capture the merit of each one and assess how relatable it is for our work.

★ **Use and re-use:** How can we best use what we have and share it with others so it enriches their work too?

Research analysis must inform product and policy design, otherwise it does a great disservice to all involved, especially survivors who share their trauma to improve things for others. Research projects do not end when the research is complete; rather it is our responsibility to disseminate and stimulate uptake of the research findings. This should be considered and encouraged throughout the research process, and should not be an afterthought.

We must explore ways to make such research re-usable by others. Writing reports and blogs is useful here, but there's more that can be done.



One exciting idea is to create an open research library for the entire ecosystem to reduce the need for re-doing research, as design agency [Snook](#) have done with the local council in Hackney, London. This would include things like user needs, statements, quotes, and anecdotes that can be categorised and tagged for ease of finding. Opening up research in this way would also enable us to focus our collective efforts on identifying and filling gaps.

★ **Storytelling:** What is the most impactful way we can recount what we've researched?

In many cases, storytelling is an instrumental part of using research for change. Simply presenting research is not always sufficient to really communicate the full weight of the findings. Especially in the case of GBV, storytelling helps to illustrate the depth and nuance of the pain, trauma, resilience of survivors, and the complexities of each story.

"It is important to combine qualitative data with survivor stories to make people see what it's really like."

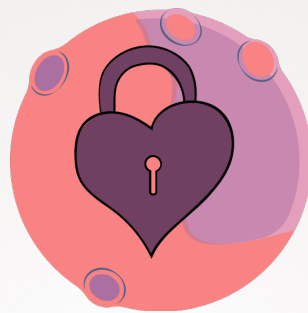
Mariana G. Valente, InternetLab

"At Luchadoras, research and healing go hand in hand. Most research sessions are participatory and also informative. Instead of approaching the research with a theory or hypothesis first, Luchadoras, first spends time simply listening and documenting the lived experiences of the participants. Only once they have a good grasp of this, do they aim to connect these experiences with an existing theory on the field."

Lulú V. Barrera, Luchadoras

Design principles and applications

The Orbits principles can be used to demonstrate what enriching research looks like, and to avoid using extractive practices. Though we focus on gender-based violence, these principles can be applied to any research setting with a vulnerable group.



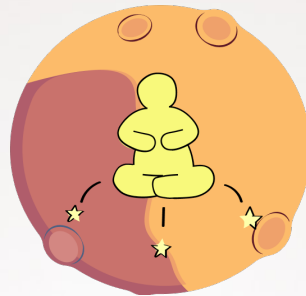
1. Safety

Ensuring that survivors' safety is not threatened by their participation in research is paramount, and taking care of their emotional safety is equally important. We must design research settings where survivors feel safe, secure, and able to participate fully.

Application examples:

- ★ Carefully considering who to involve in the research - just because someone is up for the research doesn't mean it is the best thing for them.
- ★ Clearly communicating to participants about what topics will be covered.
- ★ Offering interviewees the option of choosing the time and channel of communication.
- ★ Building a relationship with participants through pre-research checks.
- ★ Building a rapport at the beginning of interviews.
- ★ Being mindful of interviewees' body language and take a break if you think they might need it.
- ★ Offering a debrief with researchers and/or a restorative activity like mindfulness, yoga, or a walk.

- ★ Offering interviewees the option of choosing the time and channel of communication.
- ★ Offering a therapist right after sessions or as support that they can use later on. Prompt this in follow-ups.
- ★ Establishing referral pathways to services.



2. Agency

Survivors can feel a great sense of agency just by participating in research, but we must also be mindful to design the research process in such a manner that this agency is respected and maintained.

Application examples:

- ★ Seeking informed consent. We must ensure participants understand and fully consent to the ways their stories and contributions will be stored, shared, and attributed to them.
- ★ Offering multiple ways to opt out of research.
- ★ Giving generous time scales at every stage of the research (giving initial consent, approving final product) to allow participants space to read and digest information.
- ★ Offering different options for contributing to research (for example: audio, video, submitting a piece of writing, or reviewing what you've written).
- ★ Not restricting a survivor's input to only interviews if they want to be involved in other ways. If they've offered to do more because they want to, that's not an extractive practice. This can come from a place of empowerment.
- ★ Acknowledging and affirming the contributions of survivors.



3. Equity

An equitable approach to research means that we must acknowledge how different forms of oppression might restrict or impact someone's way of engaging, and create research settings that mitigate this risk. Where barriers to participation exist, extra support should be provided.

Application examples:

- ★ Compensating people. Keeping in mind that there may be legal restrictions for some to accept money, provide alternatives like vouchers for food.
- ★ Providing nursery and child-caring responsibilities, as well as helping with travel costs.
- ★ Letting people talk about challenges that go beyond your subject area. If someone struggles to name their experience, ask them how it felt instead. And once they have explained, validate their experience and name it so they can take that awareness with them.
- ★ Physical and online spaces need to be accessible to people with disabilities.



4. Privacy

A survivor's choice to contribute towards research should never impact their privacy. Strict confidentiality policies and processes are prerequisites, and they should be followed at all times.

Application examples:

- ★ Deleting voice and video recordings after a certain period of time. You can keep an anonymised script.
- ★ Making survivor testimonies anonymous by default. Allow people to choose their own pseudonym. Remember that some people want to share their stories with their names as part of their healing journey so if your project has space to give that visibility, do that.
- ★ If conducting research for a company that the survivor is a user of, offering survivors the option to have their views decoupled from their user account.

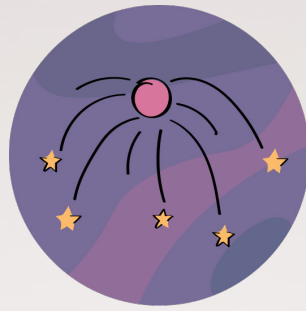


5. Accountability

Researchers should be open about the details, scope, and limitations of their research, and establish two-way communication and feedback loops with participants.

Application examples:

- ★ Being transparent about the process, time, and compensation from the outset.
- ★ Being upfront about gaps in knowledge and how systemic bias may affect the project.
- ★ Responding to questions in a thorough and timely manner.
- ★ Being clear about sample sizes. Small sample sizes, even when diverse, can give misleading results if they are used to represent their entire community or a larger, diverse population.

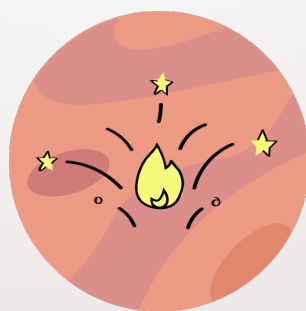


6. Plurality

The purpose of doing research is to understand different survivor experiences - and they will be different. Our research design should create space for that and strive to capture the complexity and diversity of different views and perspectives.

Application examples:

- ★ Mitigating the impact of group participation where some participant(s) are uncomfortable or alienated due to their identity or cultural background. Mitigating the impact of group participation where some participant(s) are uncomfortable or alienated due to their identity or cultural background. Avoiding leading questions.
- ★ Leaving space for interviewees to share what they want to share about other aspects of their life that are relevant to them.
- ★ Letting the interviewee lead the conversation.
- ★ Considering and capturing the context of the experience.



7. Power redistribution

Researchers may not feel powerful in the context of the technology and policy ecosystem they are researching, but within the confines of the research environment, they hold an incredible amount of power. All efforts should be made to share this power with participants as well and enable them to harness it through the research process.

Application examples:

- ★ Giving survivors decision-making roles in research projects.
- ★ Working with survivors to shape the research (e.g. in defining the scope of the research or co-creating research questions)
- ★ Letting interviewees choose aspects of the interview (e.g who the interviewer will be, what's the interview medium)
- ★ Giving interviewees review and final sign off over anything produced with their story.
- ★ Creating space for interviewees to co-design and provide feedback on the research process.



8. Hope

There are many ways that research can offer hope to survivors: by demonstrating that they are heard and believed, creating a space of solace, and contributing towards systemic changes. Regardless of the aims and outcomes of the research, the design should inspire hope for the participants.

Application examples:

- ★ Creating warm interview and research spaces, online and offline. Comfortable, non-clinical ambience, especially for those who have experienced oppression at the hands of police and/or state, is likely to result in more open and explorative conversations. Recreating this online can be much harder, but is possible through friendly facial expressions and grounding exercises.
- ★ Always leaving space for reflection at the end of an interview. Not ending conversations abruptly. Where possible, end the interview on a positive note.
- ★ Planning how you will use the research to actively affect change and sharing with participants how their story is going to improve conditions for others.
- ★ Thanking survivors for their contributions to any research projects.

Case Study:

InternetLab - researching TGBV for impact

[InternetLab](#) is an independent Brazilian research centre working on issues related to law, technology, and the internet. Their work focuses on five thematic areas: privacy and surveillance, freedom of expression, information and politics, inequalities and identities, and culture and knowledge. As part of several of these streams, especially inequalities and identities, they have done extensive work on gender, including TGBV, and have demonstrated ways in which non-extractive research can form part of effective interventions to tackle tech abuse.

Research methods

For InternetLab, one of the most important aspects of doing trauma-informed research is understanding when it isn't appropriate or necessary to do the research at all, or when you are not the right researcher or research organisation to be undertaking it. For example, since 2015, the organisation has researched [non-consensual intimate images \(NCII\) in Brazil](#) and beyond. As part of this work, a case study was done in certain schools in the city of São Paulo, where NCII was happening to teenage girls at an alarming rate and, tragically, had resulted in several suicides. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and how young the affected women were, the InternetLab team realised that they did not have the required experience to carry out research with the survivors responsibly. Instead, they spoke to local activists who were working closely with the survivors on this issue. In this way, they were able to ensure the voices of survivors were central to their research, without taking the risk of retraumatising them.

"I don't think it's a problem to speak to survivors at all, but I think you have to consider case by case if you have the correct skills in your team and if the situation allows. I think there's gonna be situations in which these people just need to be protected from speaking, but it's very different to situations when survivors want to go out and reach the world with their stories and they are ready for that. I think having the skills in your own team to be able to differentiate those situations is really important."

Mariana Valente, Director, InternetLab

InternetLab continuously experiments with different ways to practice trauma-informed, non-extractive research. For example, in 2017 they applied action research methodology on a [research project](#) which was about domestic workers in São Paulo and their use of technology. The project worked with a group of 30 domestic workers to develop the questions and analyse the results. Having domestic workers interpret the research themselves yielded much more in-depth and accurate results. For example, the research found that only 8% of domestic workers said that the internet was helping them find work. While the researchers might have assumed that this

implied that domestic workers did not know how to use the internet to effectively find work, the workers explained that it was not an issue of ability but safety. Because of multiple experiences of violence or harassment when doing domestic work, they do not want to work for people they don't know, and thus prefer to get work through their own networks rather than going online. Employing this action research methodology therefore enabled InternetLab to get richer insights.

Influencing policy and the media

"I really believe that research is really important, but have also learnt that just doing research reports - that are so difficult to read and are so long that we just put out in the world and expect people to read - is probably not going to make the full difference that we want it to. Of course it's not that it's not relevant at all, and some people might pick it up and make it more simple and make it more straightforward, but it's really important to think of these strategies of calling attention to the things you're doing."

Mariana Valente

The InternetLab team also innovates with ways to make sure their research has an impact - in the media, and on policy. For example, as part of their work on NCII, they partnered with the University of São Paulo to influence the legislative process around a bill that was being developed in response to NCII. They worked with a group of law students and, together, went to the capital of Brazil to deliver the policy paper to the rapporteur working on the bill. The students explained the issues identified in the research and why their recommendations were so important. The rapporteur listened and their recommendations were implemented. Partnering with a well-respected educational institution, and having students lead the engagement with policy makers, was instrumental in getting this successful result.

Another example comes from the 2020 municipal elections in Brazil. InternetLab partnered with feminist news organisation Azmina to [monitor and research](#) online hate and harassment targeting female candidates. During the run-up to the election, they worked with Azmina to not only research the harassment as it was unfolding but also, crucially, to disseminate their research through the media. The impact of this was huge: candidates mentioned the research during the election and, in some cases, used it to speak out about the abuse they were facing. By directing attention towards their research, InternetLab was able to highlight the extent of the issue and advance conversation about the necessity for policy to address it.

Our principles in practice

InternetLab prioritises **safety** by considering carefully when it is appropriate to do research directly with survivors, and whether or not they have the necessary expertise to carry out the research. They also employ the principles of **agency** and **power redistribution**, by finding ways for research subjects to actively shape the research design and contribute to the research analysis. Finally, by not only carrying out the research but continuously finding partnerships that will help the research have an impact in the real world, the InternetLab demonstrates and exemplifies the principle of **hope** - and shows how research can be an effective tool to tackle tech abuse.

Case Study:

Point of View: Storytelling for change

[Point of View](#) is a non-profit organisation based in Mumbai, India which works towards building and amplifying the voices of women and other marginalised genders. They are a collective of gender rights activists and researchers, with vast experience working with women, LGBTQ+ persons, and people with disabilities, especially those belonging to low-income groups. Their work has been instrumental in breaking stereotypes and changing the narrative on sex, desire, and gender roles in India. Point of View centres their work on issues at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and digital technologies and is involved in research, advocacy and spreading rights awareness. Since 2017, Point of View has been conducting digital literacy, skills, and resilience building workshops with marginalised women, girls, and queer persons from grassroots communities across India. The workshops help enhance the understanding of tech abuse, harassment, and violence, how to deal with these in different ways, and reduce TGBV.

Storytelling

Point of View uses storytelling as a tool to tackle tech abuse. They document and disseminate stories through several zines, shift the narrative on gender, and advocate for societal change. In 2019, they published '[Free to be Mobile](#)', a zine documenting ten stories of everyday struggles and resistance against digital violence. They published anonymised accounts of women, girls, and queer and trans-persons across India who experienced violence perpetrated through mobile phones, including those that are not connected to the Internet. In doing so, they highlighted how violence carried out through telecommunications is often ignored in conversations about tech abuse, which often focuses on social media. The research demonstrated the prevalence of "wrong number" harassment, location tracking, WhatsApp hacking, and checking of itemised phone bills by male family members, among other kinds of digital violence through phones, and how each story was rooted in questions of gender and access. Through their storytelling, they were able to show the diversity of tech abuse and survivor experiences. The zine powerfully portrayed how survivors are leading resistance against tech abuse, as it shared stories of home-spun remedies to counter violence, comforting and supporting others facing similar issues, and creating space for solidarity and empathy.

"Stories really give survivors a sort of credibility. They honour the experience... storytelling is incredibly powerful and I think it's actually an overlooked tool when we think about dealing with GBV. It makes cases real, considering digital violence is always put at a lower pedestal."

Bishakha Datta, Executive Director, Point of View

Prioritising lived experience

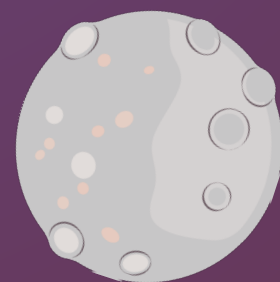
Lived experiences are central to their approach. Point of View operates on the philosophy that 'survivors know best' and hence, sources research and solutions from the lived experiences of survivors. They centre survivor's consent at every step in the creation, delivery, and sharing of stories to ensure survivors retain control over how their stories are told.

"Survivors know it best. That's the simple reason why survivors should lead these kinds of initiatives. We really believe quite strongly at Point of View that lived experience is at the heart of good policy making, good advocacy, good responses to GBV."

Bishakha Datta

Giving primacy to lived experience shapes and deepens Point of View's analysis of tech abuse, and generates new ideas for solutions. For example, their work with sex workers has highlighted the importance of multi-modal, not text-based communication. Most of the sex workers they work with cannot read or write, but do use mobile phones for personal and private matters. Given they cannot write, when they save somebody's number they use emojis: someone is a lion, somebody else is a tiger, another person is a rose. Point of View therefore highlights the importance of building non-written communication into tech platform design, such as visible buttons and symbols, and using voice for reporting processes.

The consideration of lived experiences shapes the way Point of View delivers their community workshops too. They operate a peer training model, where they train a number of people to train and share their learnings with a larger group in their community. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Point of View trained domestic workers on how to use mobile phones, mobile banking and digital security, who then trained their peers and neighbours. Similarly, Point of View supports queer activists in Gujarat to become 'community digital trainers', where they train their peers in local languages on the specific digital rights issues that queer folk in the region face. Running these digital literacy workshops highlighted the need for information which is available in local languages, formats other than text, and for different levels of digital access. Responding to this need, Point of View launched [TechSakhi](#), a digital safety omnichannel helpline service which is accessible via phone, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other channels, and is operated by women from the same demographics as Point of View's workshop participants.



Influencing Policy, Media and Community

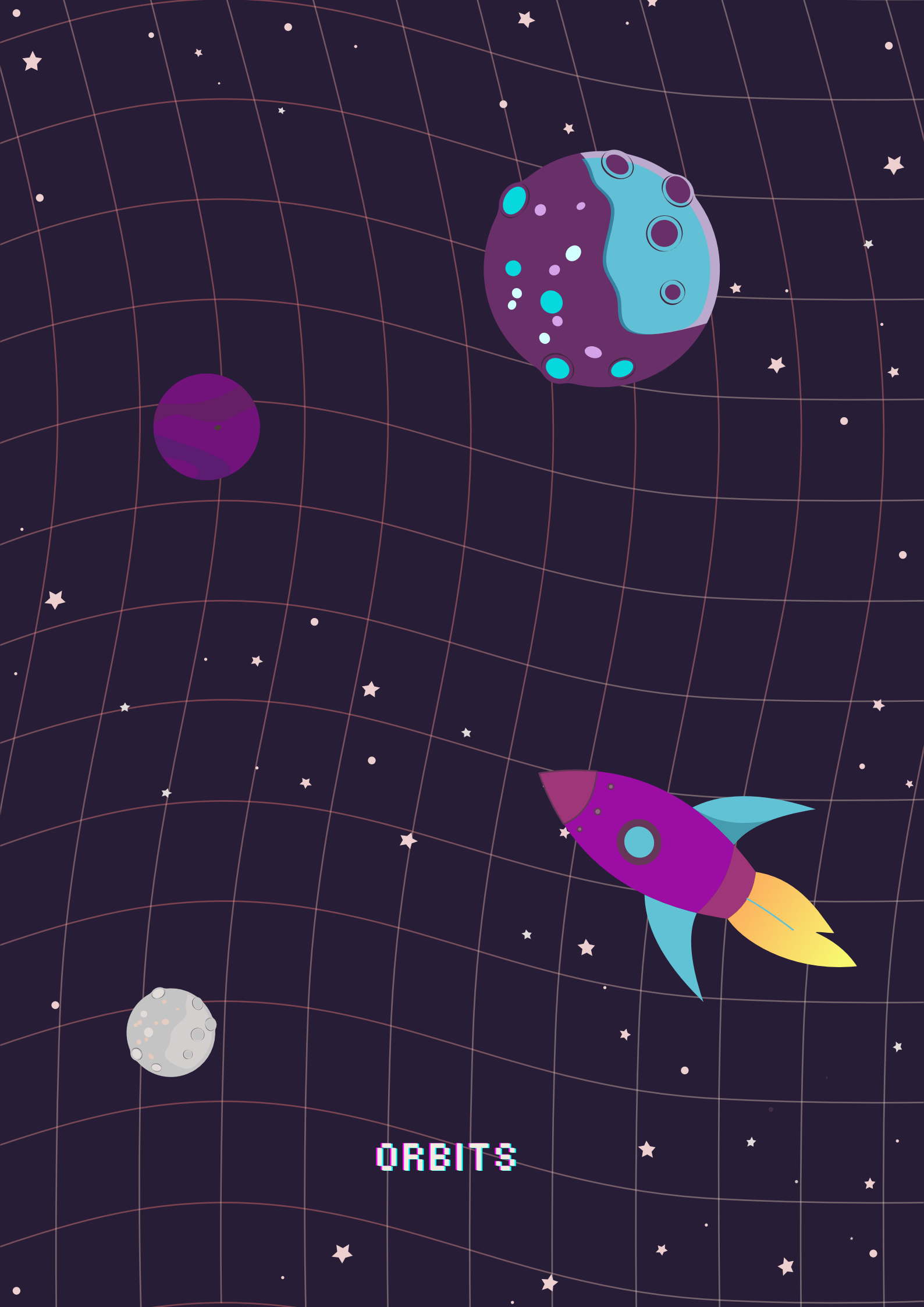
Through its rigorous research, Point of View draws attention of civil society organisations, media, and policy makers towards everyday workings of the law in the field of gender and sexuality. For instance, in 2017, Point of View conducted a research '[Guavas and Genitals](#)' where they studied 99 cases filed between the years 2015-17 on the charge of Section 67 of Information Technology Act, 2000 (the digital counterpart of obscenity provision present under the Indian Penal Code, 1860). The research found that this provision was being misused to criminalise political speech, for online harassment, crimes of consent, censoring artistic expression, and for punishing obscenity. The research made a strong case for popularising the use of Section 66E by police for punishing non-consensual circulation of intimate images as a violation of privacy and consent, instead of using the obscenity law of Section 67 of the Information Technology Act, 2000. It also demystified concepts of consent, culpability, and sexual expression, and it pushed for a more informed and non-stigmatising approach to policy making.

"Our sense of our experience on platforms, and what constitutes violence or harassment or abuse, is not aligned with platforms and their sense of what constitutes harassment and violence and abuse. So if you ask what to change, I would love it if we could really have a ground up, user-centred, understanding. Based on lived experience, not based on categories or words."

Bishakha Datta

Our principles in practice

Point of View uses storytelling to illustrate the **plurality** of survivor experiences - and the need for **plurality** in solutions, too. They promote **agency** by ensuring the informed consent of survivors in the way their stories are told, and by centering lived experience in everything they do. They particularly focus their work on the most marginalised communities in India, demonstrating a deep commitment to **equity**. By telling stories not only of harm but also of resistance, and offering tools and guidance to help people resist, they encourage **hope** for all.



ORBITS