

FOSTERING PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITY-BASED ADVOCACY & PREVENTION NETWORKS: CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

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Violence against women persists and prevails worldwide. Women who survive are isolated in service-providing systems, with case management professionals who support navigating within the judicial, welfare, and health systems. The present study results from a PAR project “PEER NETWORK: Gender Violence and Empowerment” aimed at potentiating partnerships with women who are survivors of gender violence establishing a nationwide network of women representatives for advocacy and violence prevention. This qualitative study analyses 18 focus-group meetings transcribed verbatim (2021-2022) through thematic analysis with MAXQDA, focused on four domains: a) co-construction of guidelines for Peer Networks; b) notions of leadership and advocacy; c) facilitation and meeting management; d) roles for professionals and e) sustainability challenges. Results indicate that to build and sustain a survivor’s network and support peer advocacy efforts, the survivors require systematized knowledge of key documents and information on gender-based violence to integrate and validate their personal experiences, require a framework of systems articulated to increase effectiveness, anticipate critical incidents/crisis, and advocate a culture of prevention of abusive interpersonal relations. The resulting co-constructed PAR model reflects the multidimensional nature of gender-based violence and the relevance of extended community-based networks for Gendered-based violence prevention.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Peer-Networks, Collaboration, Advocacy, Prevention

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence comprises a broad spectrum of events and realities and may occur in intimate relations, interpersonal relations, or perpetrated by unknown or strange persons (EU Commission, 2023), but violent situations may also be associated with structural, social, cultural, and/or religious realities (Green 2005; Oakley, 1972; West & Zimmerman, 1987). All these forms of violence are considered to be crimes or objectionable forms of abuse of power (Aghtaie & Gangoli, 2015). It is also acknowledged that gendered-based violence persists on a global scale with pandemic features being widespread, with severe impacts in other social areas

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such as homelessness, compromising physical and psychosocial well-being (The Lancet Public Health, 2022). The severity of violence against women is still minimized or denied by perpetrators and justice systems, with prevailing levels of hostility within the judicial and political systems (Catlett et al., 2010).

For the current study, we adopted a perspective associated with the multifaceted nature of violence against women for the fact of being women, which ranges from femicide, rape, sexual assault, physical, emotional, or psychological violence, stalking, forced prostitution, genital mutilation, sexual harassment, forced pornography, forced marriages, honor crimes, and sexual trafficking (Saltzman et al., 1999/ 2002).

The United Nations' sustainable development goals - SDG 5 – clearly defines priorities related to forms of discrimination, violence, and degrading practices, acknowledge domestic work, civic, public, political, and economic participation, sexual and reproductive health, equality of rights, and access to technology, recommending states to develop public policies to attain these goals (UN Women, 2020). We have global-scale declarations, treaties, and extensive legislative bodies to respond to all the crimes, and stakeholders of different scientific and sociopolitical backgrounds are committed to change, that ameliorated the existing systems. Yet, the reality of violence persists and prevails, and we question what is the missing link, piece, or effort that can potentiate transformative change (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Sullivan & Goodman, 2019).

The 2030 Development Agenda reports that 243 million women and girls were subjected to sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner in the prior year. The scale of these numbers indicates the urgency of women's voices to be amplified, and that concrete measures are taken to promote basic human rights and a life in safety, with equal freedoms and self-determination (UN Women, 2020).

We, therefore, probe to understand how women survivors of violence may provide direct contributions to co-construct policies, programs, and practices towards significant and transformative social change at the local, regional, and national levels to redirect and enhance the concrete system's response (Vargas-Moniz et al., 2022). The challenge is therefore focused on how to promote: a) the effective and concrete participation of women survivors as self-representants, together with advocates to potentiate effective results in terms of justice, autonomy, restitution, and safety; b) as community-based networks that respond to women and children affected by all forms of gendered based violence (Vargas-Moniz et al., 2022).

2. Gendered based violence and empowerment

Prevailing notions and norms of masculine hierarchic power require that violence against women be analyzed as a social problem and a result of regularities provided by social norms (Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Mshweshwe, 2020). These notions and norms reinforce women's subordination; systematically women report loss of control (physical, psychological, and social) and agency over their lives (Stark, 2007), particularly related to housing, financial, and material strains (Goodman-Williams et al, 2023). Current systems and programs, perhaps inadvertently or with *bonafide*, tend to replicate power and control dynamics offering few options, and

eligibility conditions to access resources and supports that do not ensure the cessation of violence. Services tend to generate further structural inequalities and fail to acknowledge the intersection of personal and contextual factors for effective interventions (Koss et al., 2017), reducing survivors' choices and decision-making ability regarding their best for themselves and their families (Fleury et al., 2000; McFarlane et al., 2002; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Services tend to generate further structural inequalities and fail to acknowledge the intersection of personal and contextual factors for effective interventions (Koss et al., 2017).

Violence against women is associated with a multiplicity of factors involving the person, her capacities, and the concrete circumstances (personal, familial, financial, and cultural), but also the access to community-based articulated systems associated with justice, social welfare, health, and housing instability (Allen et al., 2013; Kahan et al., 2020). This phenomenon cannot be explained exclusively by idiosyncratic or individual characteristics, it is a global-scale phenomenon associated with gender, sexual identity, talents and capacities, socioeconomic status, health conditions, and many other determinants related to human diversity (Esposito et al., 2019). The challenges faced by women survivors when social responses are insufficient may result in severe additional consequences such as housing instability or even homelessness or related to the disclosure of information associated with children (e.g., age or gender not accepted in existing resources), mental health, other health challenges, substance abuse, or sexual identity (Pavao et al., 2007; Flynn et al., 2023).

There are long-standing arguments advocating for social and community-based support networks probing to empower women to restore their sense of agency and prevent extreme loss while seeking safety from violence (Kasturiranjana, 2008; Thomas et al., 2015). The Women's empowerment movements in the context of gender-based violence integrate countless agendas of public and civic community non-profit organizations, and services, reaffirming that empowerment has the potential to open paths toward long-term safety (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015; Goodman & Epstein, 2008). However, the validity of this premise may only become real upon the concrete capacity of communities, programs, and services to respond to the women survivors with a diverse and flexible array of formal and/or informal focused responses (Menon & Allen, 2020).

Inspired by the "classic" definition of Empowerment, which is not a mere general affirmation of compliance with regulatory procedures, we assume it does correspond to a set of values and style of practice, oriented toward the effective mastery and control over one's life (Rappaport, 1977; Vargas-Moniz, et al., 2022). Therefore, an empowering intervention requires the aim of promoting further opportunities to strengthen the survivor's interactions with the communities of their choice or interest not looked upon as just people in need, but as stakeholders of their path, opinions, knowledge, and purposes, not as passive victims or service recipients (Leburu, 2023). This paradigm shift potentiates the connection with the diversity of the social world (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010), and fosters participation in the establishment of collaborative platforms where the hierarchic positioning of professionals and services users is levered, and the person receiving support is considered to be capable and knowledgeable of the contexts and concrete situation (Velonis et al., 2023; Vargas-Moniz et al., 2022).

This approach emerges associated with the conceptualization and practice of advocacy, facilitating the amplification of the survivor's voice with the focus of restoring autonomy,

power, and a sense of self-worth (Goodman & Epstein, 2008). According to Allen et al., (2004), the advocates should focus their attention on changing the context and not the survivor; supporting the survivor's decisions; broadening the spectrum of their action according to the survivor's priorities; aiming toward long-term changes and sharing responsibilities within community contexts. The advocates may play a crucial role in supporting survivors in navigating the complexities associated with the terms and procedures of the systems whilst buffering potential new forms of dependency and revictimization risks (Menon & Allen, 2021).

The Women empowerment and advocacy movements are required to have high levels of flexibility and rapid adaptability associated with the specific contexts of intervention other than the large urban contexts, where the majority of response resources are concentrated. In rural areas, the challenges for effective response require a close intersectoral connection (Nyhlén & Nygren, 2019) or even the use of alternative methods such as technology learning to overcome persistent women silencing (Adams et al., 2021). Furthermore, the current migration and refugees' recurrent crisis represents a renovated series of challenges associated with a diversity of cultural approaches, including access to information, services, and support (Freedman, 2016; Wachter et al., 2021).

The advocate becomes then a crucial liaison that provides information for collaborative and substantive decision-making processes echoing the survivor's interests and priorities despite the myriad of problems or even dilemmas that are facing while asking for support. This line of thought seems to be obvious and strengthens the community's capacity to respond to the challenges at the local level, but it is complex to implement due to the reverse tendency of governmental centralized resources management that offers placement options with eligibility criteria (e.g., health status, mental health, substance use, children's age or gender, elders) to access resources, instead of a series of place-based resources for families in distress (Vargas-Moniz et al., 2022).

Sullivan and Goodman (2019), brilliantly defined advocacy as the opportunity to establish a partnership with women survivors of violence to "represent their rights and interests while linking them to concrete resources, protections, and opportunities" (p. 207). Advocacy probes to encompass multilevel social changes both at the individual and community levels (Campbell, 2009).

Moreover and Sullivan (2011), acknowledging the diverse scale and scope of support programs, advanced a framework for evaluation questioning what programs provide for survivors and their communities with four components, designated as the JARS Premises, where JUSTICE (promoting legal, economic, and social justice); AUTONOMY (re-establishing survivors' right to self-determination); RESTORATION (restoring emotional well-being) and SAFETY (enhancing physical and psychological safety), guided an in-depth understanding about how program outcomes may contribute for the empowerment and self-determination of women violence survivors.

Peer support networks (Goodman et al., 2016) are increasingly considered relevant in different areas of the social realm, including youth health behavior (e.g., Konya et al., 2020; Montgomery et al., 2020), people with disabilities (Biggs & Robison, 2023), and sexual assault survivors (Konya et al., 2020) providing a broad spectrum of information regarding the

pertinence and documented benefits of these self-representant networks to promote individual, community and sociopolitical change.

3. PAR project PEER NETWORK: “Gender Violence and Empowerment”

The “PEER NETWORK: Gender Violence and Empowerment” (EEAGRANTS/CIG_OC4_B11) was designed to generate new opportunities to improve the long-term protection of women survivors of violence including domestic violence. It was promoted by APPsyCI/ISPA, funded by EAA Grants, and operated by the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, in Portugal. National official data available from 2022 report that in the 4th trimester, there were almost 9000 police reports for domestic violence, and during the year 24 femicides and 4 additional infanticides were registered within domestic violence-associated crimes (PT Violence Portal, 2022).

The project was designed to respond to the persistent and prevailing lack of participatory processes by the women who are directly affected by violence. Therefore, a multipurpose research and action project was organized to respond to a) understand the processes, challenges, and gains of the development of local Women violence survivors’ self-representation networks, for prevention and intervention; b) co-construct and adapt informational and advocacy materials available for the use of stakeholders at the local level or within broader territorial spaces; and c) to explore strategies to promote the empowerment and civic participation of women who are/were victims of violence, with a particular focus on migrant women, and women both from urban and rural areas.

The project was developed from October 2020 until December 2022, framing its action in three fundamental axes linked to (1) information and communication; (2) science and knowledge made available to the general public; and (3) advocacy/activism.

This project was implemented through a university-community partnership composed of three community-based organizations and one academic partner: Casa do Brasil de Lisboa (CBL- see <https://casadobrasildelisboa.pt>), the Organização Cooperativa para o Desenvolvimento Integrado do Município de Odemira (TAIPA-CRL- see <https://www.taipa-desenvolvimento.pt>), the Associação CaboVerdiana de Setúbal (ACVS- see <https://www.facebook.com/acvsetubal/>), the international partner Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland (W.O.M.E.N.- see <https://womeniniceland.is/en/we-are-w-o-m-e-n/>) and APPsyCI/ Ispa-Instituto Universitário (see <https://appsyci.pt>), as the promoter.

Within the scope of the Project (2020-2022), the first phase was focused on the development of a peer network with 12 women survivors as regular members. In a second phase, and as a concurrent action, the focus broadened to foster access to updated information on personal empowerment resources and other supports, the network members also participated in online training with national and international experts on themes such as a) advocacy of women survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse; b) organization of services and support in the community, and c) the involvement of men in the prevention of interpersonal violence – with translation-English/Portuguese/English-as well as two presential meetings (see <https://redepares.eu>). These training and awareness events were also open to

wider audiences, and for the overall 52,5 hours of sessions with different experts, we were able to engage 1103 participants (85.6% women and 14.4% men). This second stage was also the basis for developing and adapting materials to the public, but also the means to engage more women and facilitate participation, activism, and further advocacy efforts.

4. Method

For the present study, and the implementation of the project we considered the pertinence of Participatory-Action Research (PAR), as a relevant approach to support the development of relations with people in communities and address severe public health and well-being challenges (Minkler, 2000). PAR also provides guidance to foster grassroots participation towards social justice (Christens et al., 2016). It was also considered appropriate to attain visibility to peer networks based on the survivor's narratives and experiences. The ability to generate an atmosphere for sharing information about hardship, and the reflection on potential solutions, including the access and quality analysis of support from informal and formal social networks and professionals, e.g., relevant information, the timing of response, procedures, and interactions (Vargas-Moniz, et al., 2022).

Concrete PAR features were considered relevant to this study in particular because it involves members of the affected community in all stages of research design, implementation, and analysis (White et al., 1991), to provide opportunities for learning from each other (Hatch et al., 1993), to address power imbalances amongst survivors, professionals, and researchers (Israel et al., 1998), empower participants (Fawcett et al., 1995), democratize knowledge through the validation of experiences and the power of authenticity for advocacy and policy development (Gaye, 2008), and the opportunity to connect the research to large social change efforts (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, 2008).

The decision for the organization of focus groups was anchored on the need to provide opportunities for deliberative and focused discussions (Rothwell, Anderson, Botkin, 2016), therefore building the focus-group session guides was comprised of two stages. The first, for domain selection, was generated by literature (Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Sullivan & Goodman, 2019) that provide core, yet open guidelines to understand what the features of a peer network of survivors would be (e.g., time of experiential sharing; group climate to exchange ideas and opinions; introducing the relevance of activism beyond the personal narrative, the impact of isolation), including the difference from mutual-help groups, the concrete meaning of advocacy, and what would be the roles of advocates and/or professionals, considering that some of the organizational leaders also identified themselves as people with personal experiences of violence and discrimination. The second was focused on the strategies for peer network management and sustainability, as these networks strengthen, focus, and contextualize mutual-help groups and movements (Levy, 2000; Pistrang et al., 2008; Riessman, 1990). We acknowledge that these processes have the potential to go beyond the experiential knowledge and idiosyncrasies of individual participants, and also support survivors to cope, recover, and thrive, generating new opportunities for self-determination (Gregory et al., 2022) and awareness for systems efficacy and prevention efforts (Branco et al., 2022).

4.1. Participants

The study participants comprise two groups. One was composed of women who identified themselves as survivors of violence and discrimination, and the second was composed of both professionals and community-based organizational advocate leaders. The survivor's group was composed of twelve (n=12) women (Table 1), currently living in the districts of Lisbon and Setúbal, Alentejo, and Algarve. The geographical origin of the participants is spread over 5 countries on 3 continents. The three main origins in the participants are 42% from Brazil, 25% from Portugal, and 17% from Guinea-Bissau. The most frequent age range is 30-39 years. At the time of the interviews, all participants except two were employed. The participants' names were anonymized for data protection and generated an acronym.

Table 1. Participants characterization – Survivors Group

Participant Acronym	Country of origin	Residence Region	Age	Employment status
LD	Guinea-Bissau (GW)	Lisboa	38	Caregiver (people with disabilities)
FT	Guinea-Bissau (GW)	Lisboa	37	Caregiver (Home-Care)
CA	Cape Verde (CV)	Lisboa	49	Administrative
SB	Portugal (PT)	Algarve	35	Teacher
RS	Angola (AO)	Algarve	32	Unemployed
AS	Portugal (PT)	Alentejo	34	Waitress/Local Authority
NL	Brazil (BR)	Minho	49	Translator
BG	Brazil (BR)	Lisboa	33	Teacher
SM	Brazil (BR)	Santarém	47	Researcher
JL	Brazil (BR)	Minho	44	Journalist
JC	Portugal (PT)	Lisboa	42	Researcher
DS	Brazil (BR)	Lisboa	58	Unemployed

The group of advocates/professionals (Table 2) is composed of 8 professionals (representing the different territorial branches of the partner organizations, nominated by their governing boards, being that one is the President of one partner organization).

Table 2. Participants Group – Professionals/ Advocates

Participants	Country of origin	Residence Region	Age	Organisation
MM	Portugal (PT)	Lisboa	57	ISPA
MC	Portugal (PT)	Lisboa	46	ISPA
FM	Cape Verde (CV)	Setúbal	57	ACVS
JW	Brazil (BR)	Lisboa	43	CBL
CP	Brazil (BR)	Lisboa	50	CBL
SH	Portugal (PT)	Alentejo	38	TAIPA
AJ	Portugal (BR)	Algarve	36	TAIPA
DM	Portugal (BR)	Lisboa	42	ISPA

All identify as female and from 3 different countries, also participated in Peer Network activities as advocate partners and liaisons, providing technological support, access to written materials for revision and validation, and keeping an atmosphere an open fluid communication among all members.

4.2. Procedures

The participants' recruitment was through the partner community-based organizations, considering that all three have long-standing community action and networks and develop their activities in different territories. The pandemic constraints introduced restrictions to presential activities planned from north to south of the national territory, including large urban and rural areas, therefore most networking activities were held online. The selection criteria were: a) Women who experienced domestic violence and discrimination, but were currently in a position of safety enabling them to share experiences, opinions, and reflections; b) Women willing to share their experiences considering that their identities would be preserved in all instances; c) Women with 18 years of age or older; d) Women available to participate in periodic online meetings during approximately 2 years. The project made available 20 Euro vouchers for participation in each of the meetings. The following challenge was the Focus-Groups organization; as the lead partner was a University, it had unlimited access to the online platform. The aim was to make sure that all participants had access to the platform for participation, such as downloading software, in some circumstances made with the direct involvement of support professionals and in some situations by the participant's children, knowledgeable of such procedures due to the pandemic homeschooling situation. The days and hours of the monthly meetings were scheduled with the guidance of survivors, considering working hours, and other activities the hour agreed was 20.00 hours and the concrete day was scheduled in each of the meetings, mostly the last Tuesday of each month.

4.3. Data analysis strategy

The transcribed verbatim of the 18 focus groups (17 online and 1 *in-vivo*) held with survivors supported by the professionals and as liaison with the organizations, resulted in a total volume of 25,5 hours, from which there was an initial selection of 500 segments extracted and analyzed by two independent coders, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) with the support of the MAXQDA 2020, and later 2022 version (Table 3), with domains guided by literature: Peer Network guidelines; advocacy; management; the role of professionals and sustainability coherent with the overall purpose of the study an in-depth understanding of the potential of building peer networks of women survivor of gendered-based violence. The selected domains were multipurpose being that two are conceptually driven (Peer Network guidelines and advocacy) and organized for a group in-depth understanding of the purpose of peer groups as a co-learning journey, and considering the cultural diversity of the participants it was particularly relevant to share the relevance of a substantive understanding of the meaning of advocacy. The remaining three domains are instrumental (meeting procedural management of time and emotional intensity in the meetings, the roles of professionals, and the sustainability

challenges) to provide the group with a multiplier potential of the learning processes for future networking endeavors. Coding divergences were resolved by consensus. Considering the volume of segments extracted, the coders re-analyzed the information with a selection of approximately 25 segments per domain presented in Focus Group 13 and 14, where sentences were presented, and the participants made key choices on representative segments that were inserted in this manuscript to which others were added to illustrate each of the analyzed segments. The different segments are identified with the participant's initials, the country of origin, the month, and the date of the Focus Group (e.g., SB, PT 05/2022).

Table 3. Focus group analysis domain

Domain	Segments	%
Peer Network Guidelines	138	27.6
Advocacy	239	47.8
Meeting Management	7	1.4
Professionals	71	14.2
Sustainability	45	9.0
Total	500	100

5. Results

The study results are organized by analytic domain: guidelines for the peer-support network; advocacy, the roles of professionals, and sustainability with segment selection to illustrate both process descriptions and content for further reflection on the results attained. Considering the reduced number of segments (see Table 3, n=7) resulting from the domain meeting management, this domain was analyzed together with the peer network guidelines. In Table 4, we present a synthesis of the four domains associated with the narratives to illustrate the critical understanding of the survivors on their paths from violence toward building a renovated sense of Justice, Autonomy, Restitution, and Safety (Sullivan, 2011). Table 4 presents a selection of segments distributed on the four analyzed domains.

5.1 Guidelines for Peer Support Network

The basic guidelines were initially inspired by the literature on PAR assumptions of participants in equal standing positionings, a mutual learning approach, as well as knowledge and experience validation.

The information resulting from initial focus group discussions was systematized to generate a climate of encouragement extracted from prior contributions emphasizing that “each participant speaks on her name...I have an experience! Our experiences are unique and part of a wider reality, with many features and contexts.”; “...This is a meeting in which we want to learn, but we all need to feel safe to share our experiences of violence and discrimination...how participants became violence survivors... and how the individual experiences may have further

impacts on social change...there is not „a magic formula“; we have to build the peer network together” (MM, PT 03/2021).

From the initial shared material, participants were encouraged to further reflect on the common experiences of violence based on gender, a) what the support services did or should have done, but did not, and what could have been different (MM, PT 03/2021); b) How self-representation is relevant to inform sociopolitical systems (MC, PT 03/2021); c) the relevance of consultation to develop ideas about what is still needed to develop in the Judicial System and the State (SH, PT 03/2021).

Further questions emerged from the group discussion to encourage participation, and reflection and generate dialogue among participants: *“How do you think your story influences who you are today?”*; a second question was about the network features *“How should this group work?”*.

Table 4 data illustrate the two questions that endured throughout the whole period of the 18 monthly focus groups and some contributions were made at different moments. This first section reflects survivors’ contributions to the potential nature of the content associated with peer networks revealing narratives of both hardship and strength, and the second section is focused on concrete features of a violence survivor’s peer network, including the procedural and premises for quality implementation.

The core results extracted from the narratives indicate tales of hardship as “I endured so much, I doubted my capacities” (AS, PT 10/2022); “I was crying all the time...couldn’t speak!” (RG, AO 03/2021); “Our first concern is with our children (BG, BR 12/2021); “...some days I still look over my shoulder!” (AS, PT 07/2022); I was threatened, stalked, and left with nothing!” (SB, PT 05/2022). Simultaneously, the peer network emphasized the opportunity to reframe personal experiences requiring respect and validation reminding that women’s stories must be heard and echoed for policy and intervention evaluation, “from my personal experience I can understand how women are feeling...that agony!” (JL, BR 03/2021); “we are not superior to men we have the same level of rights (FM, GW 11/2021); “We need a lot of courage to face our situation.” (AS, PT 06/2022); “Listening to others...there is a connection ...a kind of friendship” (AS, PT 06/2022).

5.2 Advocacy and Leadership

The advocacy actions are anchored in the first-person narratives of survivors. To entail a relational process the first component is to probe to understand the departure situation of the survivor and co-construct an action plan that includes the four JARS premises (Justice, Autonomy, Restitution, and Safety). The following sentences illustrate those accounts and how survivors narrate elements associated with their understanding of what the content of advocacy and the promotion of their leadership need to be about the focus on strength facing extreme hardship, a reflection on the expectations about the support, and the persistent sense of blame for the violence situation “Sometimes it is very hard, but we have to overcome all barriers” (FT, GW 03/2021); “For some time I slept on a doorstep [Homelessness], and my babies were with a nanny” (FT, GW 07/2022); “ If we react to violence...we are no longer victims in the eyes of the Judge (AS, PT 3/ 2021)

5.3. Professional roles

In this section, we present in Table 4 extracts to illustrate results associated with the role and positionings of the professionals as they echoed the emotions of survivors with contributions such as “She is Brazilian...we could see she was desperate and was not speaking...we gave her some hours and then I spoke to my Association peers ... and we were able to gain some trust and delineate a safety plan!” (SM, BR 05/2021) or “we need to build trust and there are different levels for decision-making.” (SH, PT 05/2021) or even that “for women, the system critical factors are associated with safety and housing alternatives” (FM, CV 05/2022) or “I always focus on women’s networks...to strengthen and discover alternatives” (SM, BR 05/2021). In the words of the survivors the roles of professionals emerge as “having the time to speak, tell our story and feelings...many things were not clear to me.” (AS, PT 06/2021), or “I was able to calm down and gain trust!” (AS, PT 06/2021).

5.4 Sustainability

This section also integrated in Table 4, similarly to the previous section, is composed of segments both by survivors and by support professionals who identify as advocates. The section is focused on personal reflections on the impact of the Peer Network and directions for the future of this resource to support survivors and to inform systems. The selected segments are a portion of those with similarities retrieved from the transcribed verbatim throughout the several sessions and emphasize aspects like “with this experience I fell less alone” (SB, PT 05/2022); “I feel we are like a rope that gets stronger” (SB, PT 10/2022); “we can multiply these networks from wherever we are” (AS, PT 06/2021).

From the 500 segments coded resulting from the transcribed verbatim, we selected 47 segments (9.4%) of direct speech excerpts, being that 50% were revised and approved by the participants in Focus Group 14 and the other 50% resulted from further analysis performed by authors.

6. Discussion

The diversity of the contributions provided both by survivors and advocates emphasized the pertinence of a co-construction perspective (Horner, 2016) in the process of building peer networks as sustainability requires consolidated partnerships among both stakeholders. Through the domain of guidelines for peer network building, an initial stage of consultation was relevant to generate knowledge regarding key content, and also understand how to generate knowledge. It was also relevant to acknowledge the diversity of community partners to facilitate the liaison with survivors always keeping place-based contact connections to ensure additional support, trust, and safety.

Table 4 Domains and participant's narratives

Domains	Narratives
Guidelines for the peer-support network	<p>"I have endured so much until I doubted my capacities...I knew I had to fight for my rights, but I felt weak because I endured too much... sometimes I think that sometimes we need just a magic word to get back on our feet." (AS, PT 04/2021).</p> <p>"Change comes from within... not enough just to talk, until the person thinks in her head, she needs to change... she changes." (FT, GW 03/2021).</p> <p>"I was crying all the time... couldn't speak... I am a foreigner... didn't have anyone to speak to or trust... my landlady heard me crying... said I could trust her, and I told her... very afraid that he could know, or the police know... I am not legal... I would lose my girls" (RG, BR 03/2021).</p> <p>"I had peer support experiences in the UK it was very important for me... I learned I was not alone... it was crucial for our survival... I had no money, I was not in [my country], we do not have these groups here... I looked for this for a long time... I am glad we are starting" (MB, PT 03/2021).</p> <p>"We are not superior to the male gender, we just need to feel we have the same level of rights... we need to have more women leaders to promote change in social policies" (FM, GW 11/2021).</p> <p>"We need a lot of courage to face our situation, expose our family... it means to expose our intimacy... no one presents complaints for fun to expose what happened within our household...If we do it is because it is serious" (AS, PT 4/2021).</p> <p>"Having the opportunity to speak is very important, we need to frame what we feel... it is so deep that sometimes we cannot even say it to ourselves... it is hard to take it out of our chest. When we can do that, it is a relief... almost absurd... it feels like taking action... it is the movement and the ideas to plan action." (FT, GW 04/2021).</p> <p>"This experience was very important for me...I feel less alone, one thing is to have a person to support us, who is on our side and is there for us... we know... but it is something else to integrate a group in which there is not much to be said to understand that we are all united, there some a strength there, there is such a sense of togetherness!" (AS, PT 06/2022)</p> <p>"[Hearing others] I felt that in some situations I see I could have acted differently... I always felt I was guilty! Sometimes I speak to myself... ah! wait all this was not about me... I was stalked, I was threatened, I was left with nothing... guilt is like untying little nots, release the strings and move forward feeling free!" (SB, PT 05/2022).</p> <p>"We need to listen to what one person said on the first meeting... in the second and so forth... and then a connection, a specific kind of friendship, kinship emerges... that is our connection." (AS, PT 06/2022).</p> <p>"The violence is also upon us... recently we had a situation where a woman was a rape victim twice, and was discredited by the police, by the legal-medical department... she preserved her clothes, and they didn't accept them. Sometimes other professionals are not sensible. She was married in a small rural town, everyone knew her and assumed she betrayed her husband, so there was no rape... it is so hard for us too! The shame and the social pressure resulted in no judicial process proceedings, so everything remains the same." (SH, PT 10/2021)</p> <p>"We must acknowledge that our first concerns are with our children, with justice, with health, with employment, with friends and family... these key elements are a priority... that is why people ask for help and need support services" (BG, BR 12/2021).</p> <p>"I know that in some days or some situations... I still look over my shoulder... it is a complicated mind work... but the support I receive gives me the energy and overcome my fears, and plan for action. (AS, PT 07/2022)</p> <p>"A peer network needs to be flexible and constantly invent itself... we always need to re-invent ourselves." (MJ, PT 11/2021).</p>

Advocacy and
Leadership

"I am fighting for them [children]. I just wanted him to assume the responsibility, a year ago we were in Court, and nothing happened, we have been abandoned [mother and twins] ... I fear for them, I do not want them to have my difficulties... sometimes it is very hard, but we must overcome all barriers (FT, GW 03/2021).

"Since my pregnancy I starved, had no clothes, had nothing... I almost lost my babies... I gave birth here and had nobody... when the babies were born, I was completely alone. I managed to get social care for my babies because I was homeless for some months... and slept on the stairs of the house the babies were with the carer... still fundamental for me today, because I work nights" (FT, GW 07/2022).

"My dilemma was if I didn't act, it would be worse. If I scream, shout, and fight back I'm not a victim anymore... it is so hard... I reacted and I was condemned as guilty in one of the judicial processes. The Judge didn't understand that if we reacted, we could not handle the violence anymore. All this does not make me a violent person (AS, PT 3/2021).

"We need to be focused on rapid service response, we as survivors sometimes take too much time understanding what is happening to us... if we had said NO earlier... if we had the courage and strength to act before. Maybe this would not have been so severe... I was thrown out of a window, and still have pain from injuries. I was stuck in fear, panic, and terror for too long. I say this over and over... we need to say no... even if we fear rejection. It may save our lives!" (DS, BR 11/ 2022).

"Deciding to ask for help is the beginning of a pilgrimage until one can feel we are OK; the professionals need to work not from what they think should happen but listen to what we bring to them... this should be consolidated in the public policies so that we do not keep running after our tails" (FM, CV 01/ 2022).

"He called the Police complaining against me on domestic violence [UK]... but they were fantastic and well prepared to recognize these kinds of situations... they understood me!" (SB, PT 03/2021).

"I come from a different culture... in Africa, women must submit... even if you have a black eye, you must say you hit on a door... everything is always our fault... if not, our children will suffer. If the marriage is over, the woman is to blame... she becomes badly spoken to by the family, by the neighbors, and by the whole society... so the woman suffers at home and outside. When I came here his family didn't accept me because I am black... my mother-in-law told me that because of past post-colonial experiences, she doesn't want to have anything to do with blacks!" (MT, AO 06/2021).

Role of the
professionals

"She is Brazilian... we could see she was desperate and was not speaking... we gave her some hours and then I spoke to my Association peers and tried to understand who part of her network was, and from there we were able to gain some trust and delineate a safety plan! Her network was extremely important to her." When we feel like peers, we look for ways to strengthen ourselves and discover alternatives, we look for other solutions" (SM, BR 05/2021).

"We need to think differently if the survivor wants to keep the relation with the perpetrator... we need to think and reflect on this. We need to build trust and there are different levels for decision-making... because if the complaint and referral did not come from the survivor but from a community stakeholder (e.g., the child's school) the decision to move forward with the judicial process needs to be carefully pondered. The person may have taken a decision, but sometimes it is necessary to acknowledge when to go ahead" (SH, PT 05/2021).

"For women, the system critical factors are associated with safety and housing alternatives" (FM, CV 05/2022)

"With her [professional], I was able to calm down and gain trust. I had an electronic device for panic situations... it was terrible... it stopped working in the mall... and once left it at home I would eventually receive police calls, and it was nothing... I decided not to have it anymore, because if he was there, what could they do with a phone call?" (AS, PT 06/2021).

"For me, the worse situation is that survivors are revictimized by other professionals that don't value their words and don't support them or their decisions... it seems we are always going back to the start so that we find the personal worth, ownership." (FM, CV 10/2022).

"We need to recognize the voice, the capacity, the search for truth, and legitimacy of each survivor positioning" (MC, PT 10/2022).

“Having the time to speak, tell our story and feelings... many things were not clear to me.” (AS, PT 06/2021)

Sustainability of the
Peer Network

“I think that this [peer network] was for me a very important experience to feel less alone... we feel that we are united... and there is a lot of support included.!” (SB, PT 05/2022).

“It is like a current... or a rope that gets stronger when you add more strings... it is a form of prevention for a sense of safety when we have to face these situations. The violence is damaging, if we have the opportunity to think and reflect upon what happened to us we understand we need to move forward, and this network is moving forward.” (SB, PT 10/ 2022).

“The fact that we were here online every month generated a bond... we have time to speak... tell our story... share feelings. We were together in presence twice... it was even better. I have learned a lot... many things were not clear to me. Now it is different, there should be more of these groups” (AS, PT 10/2022).

“It is gratifying because now I am sure that I am not the only one... there will be more like me, unfortunately” (NL, BR 12/2021).

“United we are stronger, and one day I am sure we are going to make a difference... I think we are doing that right now... Women’s voices need to be heard... we can make it, that is why we are here” (SM, PT 10/2022).

“Meeting online is fine... but being with you in person was another league, strengthened our bonds, and gives a living sense of network... and the notion that we can multiply the network from wherever we are” (AS, PT 12/2021).

“How do we disseminate the network... we have many connections with the community services, we may contact them and disseminate... even to involve the municipality... to make the network grow... that must be through the agencies or organizations so that the survivors have additional and territorial based contact liaisons for support and even emergency interventions” (SH, PT 10/ 2022).

“The peer network challenge is also about the ability to keep privacy and safety” (MJ, PT 12/2021).

“We are women from different origins, different countries, that experienced different forms of violence and discrimination, disinformation and other difficulties also associated to migration... we are quite peculiar... we speak from what we learn from participants, not from previous ideas... we need to go on” (JM, BR 10/ 2022).

“We cannot afford to go around and around, we have to focus on the essential” (FT, GW 12/ 2021). Therefore, we need to strengthen civic leadership, from victim to survivor, to activist and leader” (MM, PT 12/2021).

“We know that many people have done so much and invested a lot in this area, but events keep taking place... the systems are slow, but we would like more entrepreneurship, more strength to women, and more support to those who support survivors” (FM, CV 05/ 2022).

“We need to support women to have the autonomy to break the cycle of violence” (JM, BR 6/ 2022).

“Deciding to ask for help is the beginning of a pilgrimage until one can feel we are OK; the professionals need to work not from what they think should happen but listen to what we bring to them... this should be consolidated in the public policies so that we do not keep running after our tails” (FM, CV 01/ 2022).

“I understand that is very important that there are others in this and listening to other people’s experiences we understand the common things and we see that there are other ways to look at what happened to us and for our own lives” (SB, PT 09/ 2022).

“Those of us that went through violent experiences may help others... we may have a special contribution for restitution, and the possibility to overcome the situation. We may show ways to inspire others!” (AS, PT 10/ 2022).

Following Horner's argument (2016), co-construction-associated participatory procedures generate a sense of lived democracy, with shared aims and activities. The resulting structure is not hierarchic and grounded in joint efforts for problem-solving (e.g., technological accessibility; willingness to share the personal image online, absolute respect for individual silence) where everyone may equally contribute to a logic of alliance or combined efforts to generate effective and long-term change (Wolf, 2010).

The generated dynamics open renovated forms of communication, with opportunities to validate knowledge, and sharing based on shared notions of joint compromise "I was there...I participated...I was part!" (AS, PT 7/2022). Apgar et al. (2016) argue that co-constructed knowledge is not enough to ensure inclusion, it must integrate self-determination for intervention. Self-determination is a critical element for innovation, it allows us to understand the value of authenticity of the survivor's narratives about endurance, their fight for their rights, and the children's rights. "Sometimes it is very hard, but we have to overcome all barriers." (FT, GW 03/2021) or "Deciding to ask for help is the beginning of a pilgrimage until one can feel we are ok... and we do not keep running after our tails" (FM, CV 01/ 2022).

It is also relevant to echo the persistent fragmentation of systems resources (Allen et al., 2013; Kahan, et al., 2020), which results in discrediting women's narratives and implicates additional efforts from both the survivors and the community-based advocates that may be illustrated "For me, the worse situation is that survivors are revictimized by other professionals that don't value their words and don't support them or their decisions...it seems we are always going back to the start so that we find the personal worth, ownership." (FM, CV 10/2022). Peer networks validate the complexities of the experiences and the potential of collaborative solutions for change (Goodman & Smyth, 2011), being that these networks may play a relevant role in the systems to strengthen both the survivors and the system's response capacity because it is focused on what is relevant for survivors, here illustrated by Sustainability of the Peer Network "I think that this [peer network] was for me a very important experience to feel less alone...we feel that we are united...and there is a lot of support included.!" (SB, PT 05/2022).

The roles of professionals may be identified as relevant in several domains, generating trust in relationships so that they effectively focus on crucial and relevant information and the capacity to plan for action (Sullivan & Goodman, 2019) for action entails "The decision to move forward with the judicial process needs to be carefully pondered. The person may have taken a decision, but sometimes it is necessary to acknowledge the when to go ahead" (SH, PT 05/2021). The equal standing positioning of professionals and survivors is an opportunity to validate a collaborative approach to intervention facilitating the restitution procedures (Lerhner & Allen, 2009). and a renovated sense of community and social justice "United we are stronger, and one day I am sure we are going to make a difference...I think we are doing that right now...Women's voices need to be heard...we can make it, that is why we are here" (SM, BR 10/2022) or "We cannot afford to go around and around, we have to focus on the essential" (FT, GW 12/ 2021). Therefore, we need to strengthen civic leadership, "from victim to survivor, to activist and leader" (MM, PT 12/2021) crucial for long-term transformative change.

Sustainable social change focused on justice requires renovated forms of leadership for those particularly affected by injustice and inequality as is the case of women with experiences

of violence in all its forms (Wolff et al., 2017), therefore renovated opportunities for new forms of leadership need to emerge so that we can build healthier and more inclusive communities.

In our path towards social and community-based change, we must not be insensitive to the fact that women may not be able to participate in social and community-based change processes due to many sorts of reasons that may be associated with different factors as transportation availability and associated costs, children's or other family members care, access or being technology savvy; therefore resources and supports need to be made available with continuity and stability to ensure long-term participation and that the liaisons are kept, despite territorial changes, employment changes, health status illustrated by "This experience was very important for me...I feel less alone, one thing is to have a person to support us, who is on our side and is there for us... we know... but it is something else to integrate a group in which there is not much to be said to understand that we are all united, there some a strength there, there such a sense of togetherness!" (AS, PT 06/2022).

With this journey, we were able to understand that the core features of advocacy need to be anchored in:

- a) empowering women towards informed decision-making for action in their terms needs priorities, and interests;
- b) advancing rights-based information is relevant with clear and substantive information sources;
- c) the acknowledgment that community-based liaisons are very important for trust, energy for action and reassurance, and
- d) the support for documents and concrete access to housing educational or employment opportunities – when applicable – are pillars for future violence prevention (Vargas-Moniz, et al., 2022).

We understand that we have learned substantive lessons for the renovation of systems' effective response to gendered-based violence and that we need to learn from the survivor's strengths, capacities, and ability to guide their path toward restitution resulting from violence experiences as SB PT 05/2022 so eloquently posed: "...untying the little knots, release the strings and move forward feeling free!".

7. Conclusions

In pursuit of bringing to attainment the UN-SDG 5 "Gender Equality" and exploring the challenge brought to the discussion of the idea of transformative equality by Fredman et al. (2016), we advance a contribution toward systems transformation supporting the emergence of national and/or transnational advocacy networks to foster the prevention of femicide and provides survivors an informed journey aimed to the attainment of Justice, Autonomy, Restitution, and Safety (Sullivan et al., 1999; Sullivan, 2011).

We conclude that peer networks supported by community-based advocates have the potential to engage survivors in direct participation, and long-term support for women affected by violence in all its forms.

Survivor's contributions are crucial for ensuring the quality of the societal response to violence against women, and those affected by violence have opportunities to be active and direct stakeholders in this human development aim.

From the direct contributions of the participants, we feel encouraged to advance proposals towards the implementation of a community-based model for women survivors of violence advocacy, that includes four components: 1. Co-constructed guidelines; 2. Conceptualization and appropriation of advocacy; 3. The roles of professionals; and 4. Initiatives toward Sustainability.

Concerning the integration and validation of the narratives about personal stories and strengths: a) acknowledging human rights, b) the courage to change, c) overcoming isolation and material deprivation, d) understanding other survivor's pain, and shame.

About the purpose, content, and operation of peer networks, we learned more about the relevance of fostering the survivor's control over decision-making processes, with access to substantive information about options. Acknowledging that women only address support services, and ask for help after enduring violence in their lives, to a point where they feel to be on the limit of their capacities, and their ability to act is compromised by fear (for their lives, or their children when they have them), by terror and sometimes the fear of ostracism from families and communities (social, religious, etc.). The findings on the relevance of the mobilization of formal and informal social network supports are congruent with the contributions of Goodman et al. (2016) about the relevance of preserving the helpful community liaisons survivors identify and reach out for other support whenever considered relevant as a part of the response of a system.

We conclude that a collaborative model is crucial for community-based action. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of the intervention with survivors, we advance the pertinence of peer networks as reflexive *fora* for broad participation and information sources for sociopolitical purposes potentiating benefits for survivors. Gendered violence requires affirmative action, and transformational capacity to effectively reduce the number of femicides and the persistence of life-threatening conditions of women survivors.

For services and professional intervention, the contributions of the Peer Network were relevant to the vision of a passive victim transformed into the protagonist and leader of her own story and the importance of that fact in their lives. To potentiate JARS premises (Sullivan, 2011), women report the relevance of ensuring that there will be positive outcomes from their interactions with police or other judicial stakeholders, the guidelines and information about rights are clear.

We have also learned about the importance of distinguishing interventions related to crises or critical events from peer networks and other reflexive moments to understand how systems operate and critical thinking about one's own experience (see Allen & Lehrner, 2009).

This study has the limitation of documenting the lived experience of a group of women in a concrete country, with a concrete reality although in different contexts both territorial urban/rural areas and migrant women, even so, the results reflect a partial world vision of the analyzed phenomena, and that future studies would be relevant to further document regularities and specificities according to location; therefore it would be of utmost relevance to

developing experiences on transnational networks, and also further experimentation with local initiatives.

We conclude that from collaborative efforts we may generate new opportunities for information sharing, to reflect on the pertinence of available resources, and how we may potentiate survivors' benefits by increasing the quality of the services, sharing resources, responsibilities, and merits (Wolff, 2010; Himmelman, 2001). Aligned with Goodman et al. (2017) the principles for the implementation of peer networks and consolidated partnerships with advocates may generate more transparency, more trust within stakeholders' relationships, find renovated forms of power-sharing, share responsibilities, and foster long-term outcomes in terms of safety and decision-making capacity.

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