Prevention, healing, and justice: a survivor-centred framework for ending violence against women and children

Violence against women and children is a grave violation of human rights, impacting one-third of women globally and nearly 1 billion children annually. Violence can have severe consequences, including injuries, disabilities, and death. Individuals exposed to violence are more likely to face various health and social risks throughout their lives—for example, mental illness, anxiety disorders, high-risk behaviours, such as substance misuse and unsafe sex, chronic and infectious diseases, and social issues, such as poor educational attainment and involvement in violence and crime. The prevalence and far-reaching effects of this violence necessitate urgent and comprehensive action.

Several frameworks have sought to tackle the complex issues surrounding violence against women and children. Among the internationally accepted global frameworks, the central concepts of prevention and response have guided actions against both forms of violence. However, this approach fails short in crucial ways. Although prevention aligns with the goal of eliminating violence, which we wholeheartedly support, the concept of response does not offer sufficient guidance for advocates and policy makers or comprehensively address the multifaceted, often enduring, needs of survivors, their families, and communities.

The global Brave Movement, which was launched in 2022, builds on the work of survivor advocates and puts forward a new, comprehensive framework for action that encompasses prevention, healing, and justice. This innovative framework was the result of multiple global consultations with survivors, who repeatedly articulated that existing frameworks do not offer an inspiring vision for true transformation or adequately capture what survivors need. As individuals with lived experience of trauma (we use the terms survivor and people with lived experience interchangeably, noting that there is great variation in preferred terminology), we endorse this survivor-centred framework as a guide for transformative action. We call on decision makers, practitioners, researchers, academics, and advocates to adopt this framework in policy, programmes, research, and resource allocation. The relevance of this framework for a survivor is shown in the panel.

As survivors, we are driven by the fervent hope that no individual will endure what we experienced. Prevention is the first component and fulcrum, dedicated to the goals of ending violence against women and children and stopping harm before it occurs. Efforts must persist in raising awareness, promoting education, and facilitating early intervention to reduce the incidence of violence, as evidenced by successful, evidence-based interventions to reduce violence against both children and women. The term prevention also guides advocates, researchers, law makers, and service providers towards a future free from violence, including an important role for the health-care system, as outlined in guidance by WHO.

For those of us who have experienced violence, healing is a transformative aspiration. It underscores the essential journey towards wholeness, joy, and renewed vigour after trauma and the objective of living a long, fulfilling, and productive life. Trauma often perturbs various aspects of a survivor’s life and health. Recognising, diagnosing, and alleviating trauma symptoms and supporting mental health all fall within the purview of the health-care sector, which should do more than identify and treat disease and needs to ensure that links are made to other relevant services, including for justice, housing, education, and social protection. The health sector should seek to aid survivors in transcending their trauma to lead vibrant, healthy lives and facilitate access to multiple services and long-term mental health support. The ongoing process of healing demands a comprehensive, whole of community, and multisectoral approach that addresses the cultural, communal, spiritual, physical, psychological, and emotional needs of survivors in a whole of person approach, as well as a collective strategy for those working to address violence.

Justice holds profound importance for those of us who are survivors. A broad concept encompassing principles such as due process, justice also envisions a world devoid of violence and exploitation. Justice is a central pillar in the framework for prevention, healing, and justice. True justice underscores the recognition of survivors’ fundamental human rights, including equality before the law and access to effective recourse through competent courts, and acknowledges society’s responsibility to
Comment

For the Lancet Commission on gender-based violence and maltreatment of young people see
https://miami.as.miami.edu/ initiatives/lancet-commission on-gender-based-violence/index.html
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Panel: Personal account of Brisa De Angulo, JD, MA

My life story embodies the necessity of prevention, healing, and justice as a global framework for addressing sexual violence against children. The crimes committed against me were entirely preventable. At age 15 years, an adult family member began raping and torturing me. Eventually, I broke the silence but could not find the healing support I desperately needed. I battled anorexia, bulimia, suicide attempts, severe depression, and self-mutilation.

After an arduous road, I became a psychologist. Yet, during my search for justice, I was viciously revictimised by my aggressor’s family and the justice system. I went to law school and two decades later, I took and won my case, the first of its kind, before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.8

Over the past 20 years, I have dedicated my life to providing other children with what I never received. Prevention ensures that no other child experiences the horrors of sexual violence, and truly transformative prevention includes healing and justice. Healing empowers survivor advocates to pursue structural changes, legislative reforms, and cultural transformation. Justice stops aggressors from expanding the scope of their destruction. Together, prevention, healing, and justice are the pillars of a better today and a brighter tomorrow for all children.

Restorative justice mechanisms can also have a place if they rigorously prioritise a survivor’s agency and rights. In our pursuit of justice, particularly in non-formal, restorative justice initiatives, it is imperative to avoid reverting to outdated dispute resolution methods that historically neglected the wellbeing of women and children. Such antiquated approaches typically uphold harmful patriarchal notions, such as pardoning a rapist who marries their victim.

These three pillars of prevention, healing, and justice deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of violence, necessitating a comprehensive societal response. As individuals with lived experience contributing to the Lancet Commission on gender-based violence and maltreatment of young people,9 we advocate for the widespread adoption of this framework to address violence against women and children. Policy makers should integrate prevention, healing, and justice into legislation and policies, while programmes must be tailored to diverse needs, recognising individual healing journeys. This framework can guide our collective mission to eradicate violence against women and children, serving as a beacon for action. Adopting this survivor-centred approach in research and resource allocation would ensure that evidence-based efforts in prevention, healing, and justice are integrated into national and global policy making and adequately funded. Crucially, global health and other key communities committed to ending violence against women and children need to prioritise meaningful engagement of individuals with lived experience in practice, research, and policy making, recognising the potential to create a safer, more compassionate world for future generations.

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