

Conveying safety: how to promote safeguarding when engaging people with lived experience in anti-modern slavery work

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Executive summary

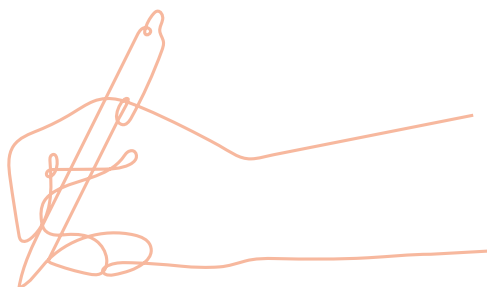
This study was conducted by Azadi Kenya in collaboration with the University of Liverpool from April to June 2023. This study aimed to promote safeguarding in Anti-Modern Slavery Work while engaging people with lived experiences. This study aimed to explore effective safeguarding practices and safe engagement with people with lived experiences, considering the complexities and intersections of their identities, to ensure a safer and more inclusive anti-trafficking environment.

Data was collected through two focus group discussions with 14 participants, four key informant interviews and a desk literature review of existing safeguarding procedures and practices focused on cultural competency. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in order to validate the research findings. The findings of this study provide valuable insights and practical guidance for promoting safeguarding in anti-modern slavery work in Kenya and beyond, ensuring the inclusion and protection of people with lived experiences.

The study found that a holistic organisation safeguarding policy is essential, with clear communication systems and ensuring full, prior, and informed consent. Confidentiality is vital for building trust between people with lived experiences and practitioners, and promoting lived experience knowledge makes safeguarding processes more inclusive. Building relationships and facilitating inclusive dialogue helps practitioners understand the different needs and identities of people with lived experiences. This involves an awareness of power imbalances and their impact on policies.

The findings also suggest that organisations should be flexible in reviewing and improving safety systems. Feedback and reporting mechanisms are critical for building trust and relationships, and practitioners should encourage both anonymous and non-anonymous reporting, particularly among people with lived experiences. Regular check-ins and dialogues help improve safety systems.

Finally, the study revealed several instances highlighting the necessity of emphasising accountability, learning, and unlearning in response to safeguarding issues. Practitioners should make complainants feel seen and heard throughout the process, and acknowledge the actions taken to address complaints. Mainstreaming safeguarding requires continuous learning, unsafe practices, and stringent safeguarding standards.



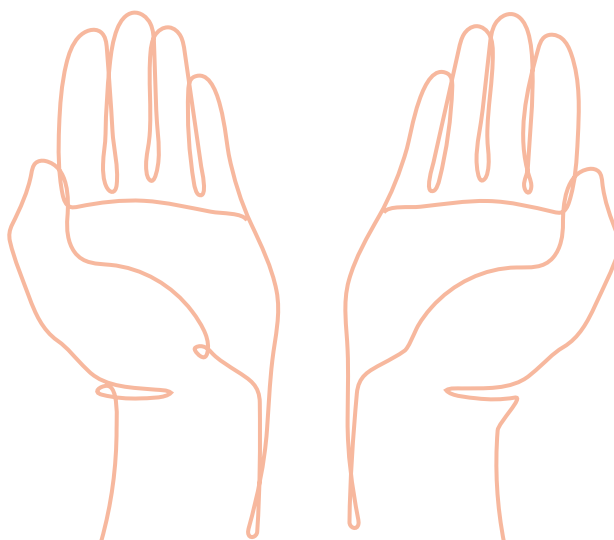
Acknowledgement

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Introduction and context

Azadi Kenya is a survivor-led, anti-trafficking organisation that provides long-term support to trafficking survivors seeking to reintegrate into society. Our programs aim to facilitate healing and reintegration and foster survivor leadership, ultimately enhancing survivors' agency, supporting trauma recovery, and promoting sustainable reintegration.¹

In 2022, we participated in a research study in collaboration with the University of Liverpool, which explored promising practices of engaging with lived experiences to address modern slavery.² This research examined issues such as tokenisation of engagement, improper terminology practices, prioritising certain lived experiences in the anti-slavery space, and inadequate safeguarding practices.³

Building on 2022 research, Azadi was commissioned by the University of Liverpool in 2023 to delve deeper into the theme of safeguarding. Safeguarding encompasses actions, policies, and procedures that create protective environments to prevent exploitation, abuse, and maltreatment, including obtaining full, prior, and informed consent and implementing confidentiality agreements. Unfortunately, safeguarding measures often remain underdeveloped and poorly implemented, as identified in 2022.⁴ The protocols often fail to fully consider the safety and well-being of those with lived experiences, lacking trauma-informed practices, and cultural competency.

The present study aimed to understand how effective safeguarding measures are enacted and how to safely engage people with lived experiences while respecting and celebrating their diverse cultural and identity characteristics, such as gender, sexuality, religion, geography, culture, and their intersections. Azadi's experience working with survivors shows that being mindful and aware of these factors is crucial to eliminating biases and prejudice and ensuring the safety and well-being of those engaged.

This study was conducted between April and June 2023, and existed within a broader study involving regional consultants worldwide, exploring meaningful engagement practices. This collaborative network facilitated the development of research skills, cross-cultural idea sharing, and exchange of knowledge and expertise.

1. Azadi Kenya: Human Trafficking, Women Empowerment

2. Wendy Asquith, Allen Kiconco, and Alex Balch, *A review of current promising practices in the engagement of people with lived experience to address modern slavery and human trafficking* (London: Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, 2022). Available at: <https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/best-practice-engagement-lived-experience>.

Meet trafficking survivors where they are, not where you wish them to be [Azadi Kenya](#) | [openDemocracy](#)

3. Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programming in human trafficking and modern slavery: reflections from Middle East and North Africa (MENA), East and West Africa. [Engagement-lived-experience-MENA-and-Africa.pdf \(modernslaverypec.org\)](#)

4. Wendy Asquith, Allen Kiconco, and Alex Balch, *A review of current promising practices in the engagement of people with lived experience to address modern slavery and human trafficking* (London: Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, 2022). Available at: <https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/best-practice-engagement-lived-experience>.

To achieve this, our research was guided by the following question: what are the best practices and principles for providing culturally competent safeguarding when engaging people with lived experiences? In line with this question, this study aims to address the following objectives:

1. How to set up organisational structures that facilitate safe environments for everyone involved, including safeguarding procedures, physical safety, and how to engage lived experience in safeguarding procedures.
2. Establishing a space that is built on trust, including how to build good relationships with the people that are being engaged; how to reckon with issues around power; and how to engage with their different cultures, values, and identities in a way that is conducive to their needs?
3. How to encourage consistent feedback from engaged people and have systems in place for their feedback or reports to be handled safely and effectively.
4. How to take accountability for safeguarding mistakes, whether on the interpersonal or organisational level, and to change the systems and behaviours using the feedback and knowledge received, towards a safer environment for everyone.

Being a lived experience-led organisation, Azadi has significant expertise in promoting safeguarding as a standard practice within our organisational makeup. By participating in this study, we deepened our understanding by reflecting on existing practices and establishing a comprehensive framework. This framework has the potential to be shared and utilised by other organisations and practitioners to promote meaningful and ethical engagement of people with lived experiences.

Our research findings target organisations, practitioners, and service providers who work with individuals who have experienced modern slavery in Kenya. We aim to provide these audiences with a practical and actionable set of strategies and tools to improve their safeguarding practices, promote inclusivity, and prioritise the well-being of people with lived experiences. Additionally, we hope that our work will empower people with lived experience to hold practitioners accountable. Our research can also benefit anyone working with individuals who have experienced abuse, trauma, or other vulnerable situations both within and outside Kenya.



Research methods

This study utilised focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and a desk literature review to collect primary and secondary data. Two focus group discussions were conducted with 14 participants from the Azadi community who had relevant lived experiences. Four key informant interviews were conducted with experts and safeguarding practitioners working in anti-modern slavery projects in Kenya.

A diverse group of participants representing different cultures, sexualities, religions, and ages was selected for this study. The second focus group discussion provided feedback on the findings, which helped develop the accompanying toolkit and facilitated the ethical and meaningful inclusion of diverse voices in our study on safeguarding matters.

This research was guided by ethical processes approved by the University of Liverpool. Consent forms were shared with all participants before their engagement to secure informed consent, and the study's objectives and intended use were explained. Debriefings were conducted to mitigate any distress caused by participating in this research, and compensation was provided to each participant involved in the study. Our research also promotes collaboration that enriches the final product. We co-designed the concept, methodology, research tools, and outputs with the support of the Liverpool researchers.

The data obtained from these methods and procedures were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. This enabled the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes that were later populated and used to validate the research findings.

Key definitions

Safeguarding refers to actions, policies, and procedures that establish and maintain protective environments for individuals and protect them from exploitation, abuse, and maltreatment. This includes obtaining full, prior, and informed consent and confidentiality agreements.

Cultural competency refers to the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from different cultures or belief systems. This report holistically considers cultural competency, including factors such as age, religion, sexuality, gender expression, tribe, disability, and anything related to someone's identity.

Key findings

1. Organisational safeguarding

Interviewees emphasised that organisations must establish clear and comprehensive policies that outline safeguarding principles, expectations and standards. Our participants understood organisational safeguarding as actions, policies, and procedures implemented to create and maintain protective environments that safeguard the well-being, safety, and rights of individuals involved or affected by the organisation's activities. This includes protecting against exploitation, abuse, harm, and maltreatment. Interviews show that organisational safeguarding typically encompasses many practices, protocols, and measures to prevent and address potential risks and vulnerabilities. These include safeguarding policies, culture, and lived Experience Expertise and Knowledge. The report discusses these issues in detail below.

1.1. Safeguarding policy

Interviews suggest that a safeguarding policy is essential for safeguarding work from an organisational perspective. The policy outlines the expectations, systems, and measures necessary to protect people from harm during engagement, and ensures that harm does not occur. A comprehensive safeguarding policy assists staff, volunteers, trustees, stakeholders, and community members to safeguard people from harm and respond to it when it occurs. However, discussions with research participants reveal that most organisations have developed a safeguarding policy solely to meet donor requirements rather than promoting the practice in their day-to-day engagement. This limits the ability of the policy to achieve its objective of protecting individuals and not the organisation. One participant stated, "Safeguarding policies are primarily donor-imposed. People are told that they must have a safeguard policy. And then people create it, and then they never use it" (Senior Advisor, NGO, Kenya).

The research findings imply that safeguarding is a continuous process that requires constant attention, care, and prioritisation of safety. It is crucial to ensure that practitioners have standardised safeguarding procedures before engaging with individuals with lived experiences, as this is vital to sustaining safety.

Participants in this study emphasised that a safeguarding policy should also be designed with an inclusive lens. According to the participants, safeguarding should be viewed as a roadmap for promoting inclusion by understanding how to keep everyone safe. It is challenging to appropriately safeguard people without considering their diverse and unique qualities. The key informant had this to say:

If you have a policy, look at who the policy excludes, and if anyone. Once it has become a tool, it should be used as a reference. It includes continuous training and reflection sessions where people can discuss how to implement the policy. For example, how do we report on safeguarding concerns? What is the procedure for the absence of the safeguarding focal point when an incident occurs? How can we maintain a safe environment to prevent harm? We must also practice inclusion by asking who is not in the room and how to bring them on the board. In this way, people actively consider upholding safeguarding standards before harm occurs. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

Safeguarding policies should focus on preventing harm in the digital realm and incorporating practices that promote safety in physical spaces, such as safe houses and shelters. For example, participants emphasised that practitioners and service providers must ensure that the locations of safe houses and shelters remain confidential. In addition, these facilities should have adequate security and safeguarding procedures, such as visitor policies and non-disclosure agreements. Furthermore, safeguarding physical spaces can be enhanced by co-creating norms, rules, and procedures with those under protection. Indeed, “people are much more likely to comply if they feel like they are involved in the system, in creating the systems and understanding the rules and why we have them” (Senior Advisor, NGO, Kenya).

1.2. Safeguarding culture

The interviews and literature review acknowledge and emphasise the need to foster a culture in which safeguarding is integrated into the day-to-day practices of organisations and the individuals they serve. The organisation should recognise the importance of understanding and respecting diverse cultures, identities, and backgrounds when implementing safeguarding measures. Organisation staff and stakeholders should be responsible for promoting safeguarding. Organisations should create an environment that allows everyone to feel comfortable expressing their concerns. Participants argued that safeguarding should be intentionally incorporated into the organisation’s structure, with clear communication systems encouraging feedback on improving safety. One participant observed the following.

Safeguarding is a collective responsibility and an individual action. So, if I know that my responsibility in any team meeting is to call out when harm happens and address it as soon as it happens, it means we will not be in a meeting [individualising safeguarding is counterproductive]. Something happens, and nobody speaks because that’s individual responsibility as much as it is a collective responsibility (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

When interacting with individuals with personal experiences, organisations must ensure that their practices do not harm those they intend to assist. Discussions with stakeholders during the research emphasised the need for systems to identify when an intervention is causing harm and to implement measures to address it. Having a clear mechanism to identify and stop harm when interacting with individuals with personal experiences is crucial at both interpersonal and organisational levels.

I always say that if somebody is not able [...] to build a system of safeguarding or work with intention around safeguarding, then I'd rather, they did not offer the services they were offering. Because almost always, owing to the level of negligence, more harm occurs. This compounds the effect of the trauma experienced by the people in the communities we are working with as well as your own trauma and experiences. It has become more complex that we will never determine where the crisis began and ended. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

During the interviews, it was found that developing an organisational safeguarding culture was key. Two practices stood out, informed consent and confidentiality. Participants emphasised the importance of obtaining people's full, prior, and informed consent before any engagement, focusing on the term "informed". Informed consent ensures that people voluntarily make their own decisions based on the information provided. Discussions with people with lived experiences during focus group discussions revealed situations in which they felt pressured to consent, even when the engagement was not ideal. People with lived experiences are vulnerable and may consent without proper information for fear of missing opportunities.

The research also highlighted technical language as a limiting factor in how people with lived experiences provided consent. Participants in the study stressed the importance of clear communication about the nature of engagement, expectations, and how their support would contribute to a project's overall goal or impact before implementation. This is crucial for ensuring that participants make informed decisions about whether to participate. This interviewee offered some reflection on how to seek informed consent.

I will ask you the following questions about yourself: your name and date of birth. This information is used in the case management process. Then, you [the organisation] should move to the next step where you ask about their family, such as whether they are married, have children, or how many people are in their family, and explain how that information will be used in their case. If you are still in the narrative of what happened, explain the importance of this section. In this way, you are not just extracting information but also offering feedback. As the person shares this information, they know how it will be used in the case plan of the case management process. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

According to the stakeholders who participated in this study, informed consent can be obtained using a simple and easy-to-read form that anyone can easily understand, regardless of their abilities and literacy levels. The participants engaged in the focus discussions also noted that consent forms should not be too long or linguistically inaccessible, because this discourages people with lived experiences from fully reading and understanding them. Developing a mechanism for obtaining consent in a clear, short, and easily understandable manner is essential to safeguard people with lived experiences. The participants recommended facilitating a session in which the nature of the consent was detailed. One of the reasons for having this session is that questions that may not have been asked for any reason can now be answered. It also means that anyone with a disability, limited English, or a tendency to not read the full consent form before signing will be well informed and base their consent on their best interest.

The findings suggest confidentiality as another key element in building an organisational safeguarding culture. Confidentiality is a set of rules that limits access or restricts the use of certain types of information. Confidentiality should be completely integrated into any safeguarding practices and is one of the cornerstones that promotes trust between people with lived experiences and service providers or practitioners. Confidentiality ensures the participant's identity, personal information, and responses will not be disclosed to anyone unless otherwise agreed upon. This includes pictures and videos documenting people's lived experiences. Discussions with key informants noted that confidentiality should be maintained unless there is a significant reason to break it, such as the potential safety risk to individuals or others around them.

1.3. Lived experience, expertise and knowledge

To encourage meaningful participation, our research findings indicated that organisations should involve people with lived experiences in developing safeguarding procedures, tools, and interventions because they are experts by experience. When asked about this process of coproduction, the Founder of NGO Kenya said, "I think that just makes things easier in terms of people feeling like they own it and being able to define a safe process or system. [...] so that they feel [...] like they are being represented and that there is ownership." (Founder, NGO, Kenya).

Promoting lived experience knowledge as part of organisational safeguarding nurtures trust and partnership and makes the process more inclusive and survivor-centred. Incorporating lived experience knowledge ensures that organisations practice safeguarding that identifies with people with lived experiences. This way, "You are making sure the process is dignifying, it is affirming agency, it responds to their needs as they identify them. Through a programmatic perspective, it means you're most likely to move towards holistic healing" (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

Organisations need to listen to people with lived experiences to identify and address safeguarding and ethical needs. Indeed, "when we are trying to build this

like collective safety, we can sometimes forget people's individual definitions of safety" (Founder, NGO, Kenya). Active listening is important for building trust among people with lived experiences. The participants in the focus group discussions highlighted that organisations or practitioners should understand that people have different demands, concerns, and needs. To ensure that organisations have relevant information for promoting and upholding a culture and policy of safeguarding, it is important to enhance continuous dialogue with individuals who have lived experience.

2. Organisational safeguarding and relationship building

We understand relationship building as involving the development and nurturing of positive and meaningful connections with individuals, communities, or partners. In the context of an organisation, strong relationship building is essential for creating a supportive and trusting environment where all stakeholders feel valued and respected. Safeguarding and Relationship Building are two interconnected aspects that are crucial in creating safe and supportive organisational environments.

Consultations with key informants suggest that organisational safeguarding and relationship building go hand in hand. By implementing robust safeguarding measures, an organisation demonstrates its commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of all individuals involved, thereby building trust and confidence. Conversely, building strong relationships based on trust and respect creates an environment in which individuals are more likely to come forward with safeguarding concerns and knowing that their voices will be heard and addressed appropriately.

It emerged in the interviews and literature review that as much as safeguarding is built on the existence of structures, a lot of it happens within the interpersonal relationships between people. Our research discovered that people with lived experiences struggle to be honest and feel safe if they do not trust the individuals engaging with them. The participant explained this point as follows:

It is about how someone feels from the moment they start engaging with that organisation, [...] how do they feel safe in your processes? Can they trust you with your money? Can they trust the organisation? How do I feel safe with you in any way? (Founder, NGO, Kenya).

To improve the relationship between the organisation and people with lived experience, the organisation should consider improving communication, establishing boundaries in relationships, enhancing cultural competency, and addressing the issue of power and power imbalances. This is discussed in detail below.

2.1. Effective communication

Building relationships with people with lived experiences is important for practitioners to recognise, as this promotes a feeling of comfort before engagement or provision of services. People with lived experience need to feel seen and heard to trust the organisation and practitioner. Therefore, effective communication is a key component in building relationships, requiring active listening to what people with lived experiences say and understand their concerns.

Listen, pay attention as they describe, ask them about themselves, you know, where they come from, who they are really, and get to know them at a personalised level. Like knowing them by name, they are called by name. Ask their preferred names. In certain contexts, if they offer pronouns, ask and use proper pronouns. Treat them dignifiedly because safety is created by how we interact with people. Not by simply saying: This is a safe space. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

Discussions with people with lived experiences in the focus groups highlighted the importance of practitioners being careful about their language of communication. The use of technical terms not easily understood discourages effective engagement. Clear explanations of terms in a language that is friendly to the target audience are highly encouraged in order to build relationships. Practitioners should respond urgently to the recommendations shared by the people they are engaging with. Continuous dialogue helps to build and strengthen relationships by encouraging people with lived experiences to speak up whenever they encounter situations that make them uncomfortable. Thus, “When people learn that they can speak up safely, or maybe they see somebody else do so. They can complain about something without being attacked and it is safe to say something. And that sometimes you might get what you are asking for”. (Senior Advisor, NGO, Kenya).

2.2. Boundaries in relationships

Our research findings emphasise the importance of practitioners encouraging people with lived experiences to set healthy boundaries within their relationships. Individuals who have experienced exploitation may inherently feel sceptical of systems and institutions, and it is crucial for practitioners to proceed with care and understanding to build trust. Accordingly, “Make it clear to people with lived experiences that if they want to share some information, that’s fine” (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

It is crucial to respect the boundaries of individuals with lived experiences when communicating with them if these limits fall within the organisation’s scope and limitations. Honouring these boundaries is vital to building trust and sustaining healthy relationships. This principle also extends to minors who prefer to address their

concerns with specific individuals within an organisation rather than others, as noted by key informants engaged in the research. So, “Sometimes the children themselves can also choose who they want to be their social worker [...], and they tell you: no, I don’t want to be placed under so and so I think I’m more comfortable in the presence of so and so.” (Founder and CEO, NGO, Kenya).

2.3. Cultural competency

If service providers, organisations, and practitioners fail to collaborate effectively in delivering culturally competent support, individuals with lived experiences may face an increased risk of receiving poor-quality services or experiencing further harm. Without cultural competence, there is a risk of misunderstandings. Due to a lack of understanding and cultural bias, some groups are more likely to be excluded, despite needing inclusive and holistic support to enable them to thrive.

According to our research findings, one of the best ways to become culturally competent is to ask questions and listen carefully with interest without any attempt to interrupt or persuade. This is an opportunity to learn more about the beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of the people with whom you work. Intersectional thinking, recognising, honouring, and supporting people in all their identities are essential for enhancing cultural competency. It is also important to acknowledge that people have different experiences that dictate their definition of safety. Being culturally competent implies ensuring a dignified approach to responding to specific needs. This participant reflected on this point in the following words.

Being aware of intersectionality and the multiplicity of identities, and how those identities influence how someone interacts with the world, it is important to analyse this critically in every interaction and phase of their life and story. It is also important to recognise that identities can influence interactions with the world differently at different times. [...] There will be considerable differences in choices, agency, freedom, opportunities, and other factors. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

Another aspect of cultural competence is understanding how a person’s experiences shape their interaction with others. For example, women who have been trafficked and abused by men may have difficulty trusting another man to promote safety. Discussions with people who have lived through these experiences have shown that they may feel safer when they can personally relate to someone who looks like them or has had similar experiences. Practitioners must be mindful of this to avoid assigning responsibility for promoting safety to those who may re-traumatise people with lived experiences. Indeed, “You can’t tell people to feel comfortable if they don’t see people that look like them or sound [like them], if they don’t see things that are familiar, right? So what are the things that would make someone feel familiar in terms of process, language, and everyone that is there?” (Founder, NGO, Kenya).

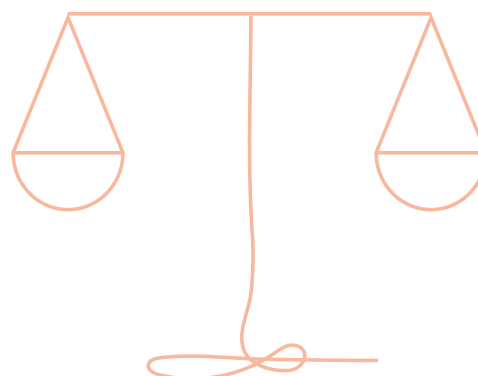
As a practitioner, it is important to recognise that there may not be any training that can make someone feel comfortable with you, especially if you remind them of their abusers. Consider the following reflections.

Let us consider who abused you and how it made you feel. Let us now consider how triggers occur. We are not saying that a man should not safeguard; we are saying that it is not appropriate for someone to safeguard someone else if they remind the person of the person who traumatises them. However, if one shifts the focus to a cultural understanding of trauma and its impact, this can be explained without implying that all men are abusive. (Founder, NGO, Kenya)

2.4. Power and power imbalances

Power differentials inevitably arise when services are provided. Those providing services have the power to grant or deny them, which can manifest in many ways when working with people. Practitioners must understand how power imbalances affect the safety of individuals with lived experiences in the antitrafficking sector. Discussions with professionals during our research revealed that practitioners must ensure that the voices of people are heard and that their safety is promoted, regardless of the existing power imbalances. Therefore, “Constantly asks yourself: Am I doing this because of the power I hold? Or is it about the person that I’m interacting with; have they given me the autonomy and the authority to do this?” (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

Organisations must recognise that as bearers of opportunities, they have the inherent power to influence the decisions of individuals with lived experiences. As power holders, organisations must also know how their policies and programs might unintentionally affect others. This requires introspection, especially if the organisation ends up causing harm while trying to provide safety. Organisations should establish an environment where people with lived experience can provide feedback to improve their policies, which goes a long way towards addressing power imbalances and improving safety.



3. Feedback and reporting

Effective safeguarding requires ongoing feedback and reporting, rather than being treated as a one-time event. Feedback and reporting are crucial in building trust and relationships with individuals. Our research findings indicate that formally reporting a safeguarding concern can put significant pressure on those with lived experiences, as many have experienced abuse and trauma and have felt voiceless for a long time. Asking individuals to file formal complaints may be futile if the system does not ensure safety.

Our experience shows that people with lived experiences tend to normalise certain behaviours based on their backgrounds. This affects what they may report or report. It is important to understand why some trauma survivors may not file a formal report and to provide other means for them to voice their concerns.

If you understand trauma, you know, people living with trauma actively normalise many of the things they have experienced; they think that the explanation is, you know, this, this is regular, and right. (Programme Manager, Foundation, Kenya).

People who had survived commercial sex exploitation, both men and women, were most unlikely to report the safeguarding concern that looked like that was along the lines of sexual harassment, just because of how blurred their judgement was. (Programme Manager, NGO, Kenya).

A feedback and reporting system should be trauma-informed to manage the effects of trauma and encourage reporting of safety concerns. Discussions with key informants and individuals with lived experiences during the study highlighted the need to strengthen systems that promote anonymous and non-anonymous reporting. Additionally, regular check-ins and dialogues should be encouraged to allow individuals to voice concerns if they feel uncomfortable making formal complaints or informing them of changes to the system.

In your engagement with someone, it is possible for you to make mistakes. It is possible for you to cause harm unintentionally. However, the question is, within the process, have you created a feedback loop where you can learn that you have made a mistake, or if this is right, this is wrong? The feedback loop could be, like, something wrong, as opposed to the language you have used or how the process has been managed. (Founder, NGO, Kenya).

When receiving a safeguarding complaint, handling it with respect and dignity is essential for building a safeguarding culture. If a complaint is not handled properly, individuals will not feel safe reporting or providing feedback in the future. While practitioners may feel defensive, particularly with negative feedback, research has shown that both negative and positive feedback can improve safety systems and pathways.

4. Accountability, learning and unlearning

During the focus group discussion, one participant shared frustration about speaking up and not seeing any changes. As discussed, providing feedback and reports can be daunting. When feedback is not heard or acted upon, it erodes trust, meaning that no one is held accountable for mistakes or mishaps. Another participant noted that because the practitioners or organisation are responsible for mistakes and the corrections, “the house always wins.” This makes it crucial for individuals and organisations to actively listen and be open to change. Acknowledging complaints and taking action to address them can help hold practitioners accountable. As emphasised by a respondent, “My understanding of how trauma happens is if somebody reports and nothing happens in support in the first three weeks, they start distrusting the process. And justifiably so, right?”.

Feedback and complaints inform organisations on how to be accountable to the people they are working with, which has the potential to improve an organisation’s infrastructure. Another approach to improving accountability is to review existing structures, such as safeguarding policies and reporting procedures, to ensure they are responsive to the safeguarding concerns of people with lived experiences.

Safety is like a dynamic thing that is constantly changing [...] an organisation could put all the structures and frameworks to make someone feel safe. In a moment, something shifts and the person feels unsafe. Therefore, if you are not keyed into listening, you will completely miss it. (Founder, NGO, Kenya).

Thus, safeguarding is a continuous process. Feedback helps organisations constantly improve their approach to safety through learning and unlearning. It is essential to include regular safeguarding training within the organisation and establishing best practices that address safeguarding concerns shared by people with lived experiences. Mainstreaming safeguarding requires unlearning, which can be achieved by reviewing and restructuring existing practices, policies, and procedures. Unlearning previous practices that have proven unsafe for people with lived experiences can help organisations and practitioners set higher safeguarding standards.

Have there been any safeguarding issues [...] or reasons for looking at the safeguarding manual? Then, you can [ask] at that point, can we [...] discuss this? Does anything need to be changed? [...] You also have that, like a once-a-year mandatory meeting, even if there have been no safeguarding incidents, you then review it and do another training for the staff at least once a year. (Senior Advisor, NGO, Kenya).

Conclusion

Our research findings have shown that promoting safeguarding requires establishing a culture built on a solid foundation of systems and procedures, strong relationships, trust, the capacity to recognise people's uniqueness, the willingness to take feedback, and using that feedback to improve those internal processes. The people involved should actively promote safety by listening, communicating, and acting with the knowledge they have gained. As much as it starts with structures and procedures, safeguarding cannot encourage holistic healing without everyone is intention and active participation.

Accountability and reckoning with mishaps and mistakes are necessary for people to trust structures meant to protect them. The prioritisation of strong relationships is important. To build the best relationships and deep trust, it is necessary to have the intention to know people as individuals for all they are and who they are. Safety and well-being must be centred, and for that meaningful engagement, the intention to support people where they are and celebrate their uniqueness is our highest recommendation.

It is also important to note that weaving safeguarding the organisational culture will take time. It is imperative that everyone takes it up as their individual responsibility and that there are ongoing initiatives and communication to reinforce the importance of safeguarding and policies and procedures in place. It requires work and effort, but it is the only way to ensure holistic healing and an environment in which everyone involved can be as safe as possible.



MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE

Led by the Bingham Centre

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-creates high quality research with a focus on policy impact, and brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society, survivors and the public on a scale not seen before in the UK to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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