



Transformative Approaches to Collective Healing:

A Participatory Method to Empower Women Victims

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Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organisation that works to increase the capacity of local and national actors, in particular victims, victims' groups and local civil society organisations (CSOs) in the fight against entrenched impunity. This work focuses on conflict transformation, human rights documentation, education and the development of strong south-south connections across the Asia-Pacific region.

KontraS Aceh was established in 1998 as a task force, formed by a number of CSOs and community leaders to monitor human rights issues. Initially, KontraS Aceh was formed to handle cases of missing persons (disappearances) that occurred during the implementation of the Military Operations Area (DOM) in Aceh in 1989-1998. It then evolved into an independent organisation, participating in a number of initiatives designed to dismantle the practices of violence, human rights violations, and the abuse of power. KontraS Aceh also strengthens conflict victims and victims of human rights violations, by providing an understanding of their rights and how to obtain these rights. KontraS Aceh has been facilitating and shepherding the community through the process of establishing and implementing the sub-national TRC.

Abstract

This paper examines transformative approaches of women survivors of conflict-related violence who experienced the ongoing impacts of conflict, from the stage of silence and trauma to collective efforts in pursuing acknowledgement both from the community and state. In collaboration with local NGOs, Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) conducted participatory action research to address the pervasive challenges of impunity, stigma, and systemic violence faced by women in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar. This research facilitated trauma-informed storytelling, community dialogue, and advocacy, enabling survivors to reclaim agency and confront societal and structural injustices. The findings underscore the efficacy of a bottom-up, victim-centred approach in addressing ongoing violence, impunity, social and economic discrimination, and the lack of long-term support mechanisms. Key outcomes of this approach include a shift in survivors' roles from passive victimhood to active community participation and their involvement in initiatives such as community memorialisation and grassroots advocacy for justice and reparations. Strengthened by facilitators'/researchers' perspectives through reflection discussions, this paper emphasises the critical importance of combining narrative approaches with advocacy to achieve sustainable healing and justice in post-conflict societies.

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1. BACKGROUND: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE ONGOING AND POST-CONFLICT CONTEXT

The struggle to address the impact of the conflict in the impunity contexts has left a footprint on how the victims' voices have been suppressed. The efforts around justice in post-conflict contexts such as Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar are often blocked by the power structures that entrench impunity. Victims of conflict, especially women, are usually absent or under-represented and unacknowledged in efforts to redress and prevent mass violations.¹ In Timor-Leste, the Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission (CAVR) found that the Timorese women were the primary victims of sexual violence during the conflict, with Indonesian security forces committing 93% of the crimes. Women also experienced discrimination and exclusion from their communities as survivors of sexual violence are stigmatised. The CAVR made comprehensive recommendations to push for accountability and prevent the recurrence of gender-based violence in a free Timor-Leste. However, decades into their transition to democracy, violence against women remains entrenched. In 2009, a report on Timor-Leste for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) highlighted concerns about “the prevalence of various forms of violence against

women, in particular, sexual violence and domestic violence.”²

In Indonesia, the anti-communist military regime led by Suharto marked its 32 years in power with violence that engulfed Indonesia and targeted women. It included a long period of violence to respond to voices of discontent in the far reaches of Indonesia, Aceh in the West and Papua in the East. In the initial years of its power, the regime orchestrated violence in 1965-1966 to eliminate communist ideology in Indonesia, including the women's movement considered part of the leftist group. They spread false rumours and campaigns depicting them as sexual torturers and killers. The women's movement members became the target of killings, illegal detention and sexual violence. The National Commission on Violation Against Women, or Komnas Perempuan, conducted an inquiry in 2007 and “found overwhelming evidence in the 122 statements it studied that gender-based crimes against humanity were committed against women in the context of the massive wave of attacks against civilians.”³

The gender-based violence has been a part of the experience of women in Aceh and

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1. Castillejo, C. (2011). 'Building a State that Works for Women: Integrating Gender into Post-Conflict State Building', FRIDE, Madrid; Denov, M. (2007). 'Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood', Canadian International Development Agency, Ottawa; Eade, D., & Macleod, M. (2011). Women and armed conflict: From victims to activists. Retrieved February 25, 2018.
 2. CEDAW (2009) "Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Timor-Leste." <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/153/11/pdf/n2315311.pdf>
 3. Komnas Perempuan (2007) "Gender-based Crimes against Humanity: Listening to the Voices of Women Survivors of 1965." https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session13/ID/Komnas_Perempuan_UPR_IDN_S13_2012_KomnasPerempuan_Anex8_E.pdf

Indigenous women in West Papua. In Aceh, women not only have suffered from the long-term impacts of more

than two decades of armed conflict. Not only suffer when the men in their families were killed, disappeared, or had to flee to the mountains or forests but also as victims of proxy violence, detained, tortured and raped as substitutes for the absent men.⁴ Decades after the peace agreement took place in 2005, the women in Aceh are still facing the prolonged impact of conflict. In Papua, the patterns of violence, including abuses committed by security forces and resulting from efforts to seize natural resources, also targeted Indigenous women. It also reported that the government of Indonesia has no serious response and political will to resolve the conflict in Papua in general or the problem of violence against women in particular, which has exacerbated layers of trauma and powerlessness that are not addressed, giving rise to a cycle of victimisation.⁵

Myanmar's democratic transition has been notable internationally since it passed a new Constitution in 2008. While the new

Constitution promises equality of rights for all its citizens and prohibits discrimination, gender discrimination and inequality persist in the country's legal framework. The 2008 Constitution contains language that entrenches gender stereotypes and protects "positions that are naturally suitable for men only." Myanmar has no specific laws on domestic violence, even as the parliament discussed four controversial laws on marriage, religion, polygamy, and family planning for adoption. The new draft laws reflect discriminatory attitudes and violate international human rights. In this context, the intensifying use of sexual and genderbased violence targeting women and girls, particularly ethnic minorities, is devised by the military regime in Myanmar.⁶ Major instances of conflict-related sexual violence that emerged since the 1990s are attributable to the military forces and become a part of the culture of abuse and impunity in Myanmar's civil wars with its ethnic groups.⁷ The military has created an environment that is not safe for anyone in the country and has exacerbated the risks of violence. The impact of war on women is enormous and results from a wide range of violations, from protracted displacement

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4. Komnas Perempuan (2006) "As victims, also survivors: experiences and voices of displaced Acehnese women concerning violence and discrimination." https://perpustakaan.komnasperempuan.go.id/web/index.php?p=show_detail&id=3400&keywords=
 5. In May 2009, the National Women's Commission of Indonesia (Komnas Perempuan) and the MRP, Papua Province's Indigenous People's Council, a consultative body established under the 2001 Special Autonomy Law, convened a group of Papuan women civil society workers to document violence against Papuan women from 1963 to 2009. A report entitled "Enough is Enough!: Testimonies of Papuan Women Victims of Violence and Human Rights Violations 1963-2009." See Komnas Perempuan (2010) "Enough is Enough!: Testimonies of Papuan Women Victims of Violence and Human Rights Violations 1963-2009." https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session13/ID/Komnas_Perempuan_UPR_IDN_S13_2012_KomnasPerempuan_Annex10_E.pdf
 6. Human Rights Council (2019) "Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impact of its ethnic conflicts" https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A_HRC_CRP_4.pdf; Sara E. Davies & Jacqui True (2017) "The politics of counting and reporting conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: the case of Myanmar", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19:1, 4-21, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2017.1282321; Susan Hutchinson (2018) "Gendered insecurity in the Rohingya crisis", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 72:1, 1-9, DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2017.1402291; Human Rights Watch (2018) "All of My Body Was Pain" Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma" https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/burma1117_web_1.pdf.
 7. Skye Wheeler (2018) "Sexual Violence by the Burmese Military Against Ethnic Minorities", Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/25/sexual-violence-burmese-military-against-ethnic-minorities>

to torture, killing, land confiscation, forced labour, trafficking, arbitrary detention and sexual violence. The situation was notably worsened by the recurrence of conflict, driven by the unsuccessful changes to the Constitution, which institutionalises military power and peaked in 2021 when the military launched a coup and took control.

This paper will highlight a reflection process taken by Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) on its research, initiated a decade ago to respond to the context's development described above. The reflections, which cover the

approach and methods and the impact of the implementation, were gained through a series of discussions from July to August 2024 with 45 researchers from Indonesia and Timor-Leste, who also have a role as community facilitators. This reflection is part of the "Transformational Approaches to Collective Healing" learning process initiated by the Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation. The initiative aimed to promote internal reflection within collective healing processes and identify blind spots in Transitional Justice efforts.

2. INTERVENTION FROM BELOW: FROM THE EFFORT OF REMEMBERING TO COLLECTIVE HEALING

2.1. *Initial phase of intervention*

AJAR was established in 2010, focusing on fighting the culture of impunity in Asia and the Pacific. AJAR prioritise its work to enhance the capacity of local actors, including victims of conflict, to build cultures based on accountability by learning from the root causes of the mass human rights violations. In its inception years, AJAR worked in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar, focusing on women survivors of mass human rights violations. In the following years, AJAR created a network with experts in Transitional Justice and developed learning exchange programs that involved more than 10 Asian countries.

In 2012-2013, AJAR conducted a comparative research project in Indonesia and Timor-Leste to capture the views of women victims about what they need to reach some degree

of satisfaction and what sources of strength they have turned to deal with the burden of traumatic memory while integrating a gendered lens. The research, which involved 92 survivors from both contexts, highlighted the victimhood that is gendered, when women victims not only experience sexual violence but are also viewed differently by the government and community in recent times, which led to ongoing trauma, fear and insecurity. In the context of entrenched impunity, women have suffered under legacies of conflict and authoritarianism, which exacerbates the poverty suffered by victims. Women victims continue to suffer the denial of justice, a lack of recognition, and the resulting shortage of programs and policies designed to address their specific needs and interests. Most of the survivors involved in the research expressed that while facing the ongoing impact of the conflict with limited

remedies, acknowledgement and support from the government and community are essential to healing, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

On a positive note, the research results have raised new awareness in AJAR that voices from the victims have the potential to strengthen their capacity to identify needs, analyse options, and develop an advocacy strategy. Involving victims in collecting and analysing information provided tangible benefits for the victims, including mutual support and healing during the process.⁸ As a response, AJAR seeks to promote “acceptable” reparation in the context of impunity. This approach encouraged women victims to lead a community-based reparation. Such initiative could clarify states’ legal obligation to rehabilitate victims, which was lacking and may have little impact. The flexibility in addressing victims’ needs allows for opportunities to assist victims of human rights violations even when national leaders have not warmed to the idea of providing reparations. Victims-led reparation at least needs to include a combination of material, psychological and economic support and attempting to change community attitudes about violence and its victims. Sustainable improvement in these areas can only be achieved gradually, from the bottom up. Women victims and affected communities, along with local leaders, civil society,

and changemakers, need to be involved in developing their answers to ongoing challenges while also strengthening the stepping stones for the rule of law.

In realisation of a bottom-up and participative approach, AJAR has created a series of tools titled “Stone and Flower,”⁹ reflecting its commitment to involving women survivors as active agents for change and not merely as relics of atrocities. Adapted the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology introduced into the social movement landscape in the 1940s, it integrates human rights, legal, and psycho-social approaches to assist victims and their communities in deepening and expanding their insights about their rights. This comprehensive method created a safe space for victims, embodied in trauma-friendly documentation, solidarity-building, and critical analysis so that the victims could participate, be empowered, and benefit from this process of gathering knowledge. The approach addresses human rights violations and the social and political impacts of violations and provides an environment where healing can take place.

The tools encouraged victims to share their stories in groups as part of the documentation process. This is an initial process to facilitate victims to break the silence of their horrifying experiences. As has been known, silence can be considered as denial, a coping mechanism for victims who are facing ongoing violence.¹⁰

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8. See AJAR (2013) “Remembering My Beloved, Remembering My Pain: Victims of atrocities collect photographs and stories to push for change” <https://asia-ajar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/REMEMBERING-MY-BELOVED-...-WEB.pdf>
 9. AJAR (2015) “Stone & Flower: A Guide to Understanding and Action for Women Survivors” <https://asiaajar.org/resources/books-research/stone-flower-a-guide-to-understanding-and-action-for-women-survivors/>¹⁰ See Lykes, M. B., & Mersky, M. (2006) “Reparations and mental health: Psychosocial interventions towards healing, human agency, and rethreading social realities.” In Pablo de Greiff (Ed.). *The Handbook of Reparations*.
 10. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 589-622. DOI: 10.1093/0199291926.003.0018

The tools then brought these individual stories into communal stories of violence, confirming historical reconstructions in the communities. This approach emphasises the importance of context and setting in creating environments where people's voices are heard and valued.¹¹ Victims' narratives are seen as a way to empower individuals by validating their experiences and identities. By sharing stories, individuals can connect with others, build a sense of community, and regain their dignity.

A sense of shared destiny gained through the exchange of narratives expanded to the community members, creating a dialogue and collective confirmation of the history of violence and its root causes. This builds empathy and solidarity, leading to a collective understanding of the values and norms of a community that has been destroyed by systematic violence. In this context, healing becomes a form of community transformation after sharing their collective trauma, followed by the awareness to rebuild trust and cohesion.¹² It is noticed, however, that the truth-telling process would be a potential healing if not isolated from other measures. It may depend on its congruence with other measures of reparations programs as well as initiatives to address the structural problems.¹³ The Stone and Flower then seek the intersection of narrative approaches and empowerment initiatives, highlighting how opening space for listening and sharing

personal stories can be a powerful tool for individuals and communities to conduct collective actions for their rights. The process of storytelling contributes to a psychological sense of community, which is essential for fostering a supportive and empowering environment. This leads to an understanding that the perspective is grounded in the fact that narratives are not just personal but also social and political tools that can drive change at various levels of society.

2.2 Implementation: creating safe space for learning

Seeing how the women victims in many post-conflict situations in Asia faced fear and uncertainty in the struggle for their rights, despite global commitments to end violence against women,¹⁴ AJAR began to implement the approach it had developed. In 2013-15, AJAR commenced participatory action research using Stone and Flower tools and included 140 women from 12 diverse geographical locations across Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Myanmar.¹⁵ They have struggled to survive in the aftermath of conflict, where impunity is entrenched. Those women involved in the research shared their stories, which shows the government's failure to fulfil their transformation from victims to holders of rights. The research, where the women facilitated unleashing the

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11. Julian Rappaport (1995) "Empowerment Meets Narrative: Listening to Stories and Creating Settings," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, DOI: 10.1007/BF02506992.
 12. Lederach, J. P.(2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. (2.a ed.). Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.
 13. Lykes *op.cit.*
 14. Kelly Askin (1997) "War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunal," Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
 15. AJAR (2015) "Enduring Impunity: Women Surviving Atrocities in the Absence of Justice" <https://asiaajar.org/resources/books-research/enduring-impunity-women-surviving-atrocities-in-the-absence-of-justice/>

transformative potential of reparations for women and girls, was designed to dislodge apathy and celebrate action. The research created a safe space that enabled them to speak out about their experiences and issues with each other, providing space for self-reflection and mutual support for action. In turn, they have transformed to be able to help themselves, using their strength and tenacity to fight for survival in grim situations and find a way to challenge impunity where there are no official mechanisms for accountability. While the research objective was to understand women's experiences better, the process was also designed to "unlearn" an acceptance of impunity. For a while, anger and a sense of injustice can serve as a motivation for survival. However, after years of neglect and inaction, many victims learn to accept impunity. Since sharing about the violence that happened with neglect and failed attempts to access justice can be frustrating, the process was designed to be more engaging and life-affirming.

AJAR collaboratively designed the research with nine NGOs that focus on violence against women and closely working with women victims/survivors' groups in 12 post-conflict and conflict areas in Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Myanmar. A total of 39 people, 38 women and one man, who worked for the mentioned NGOs, were involved in research as researchers and also took a role as community-level facilitators. They have varied backgrounds, such as women activists who have spent more than a decade working with women victims in conflict settings and young researchers who were new to the issue but had a close personal connection to survivors. In the project's first phase, AJAR conducted training for trainers

(TOT) for the 39 researchers to use the tools and enhance their capacity to facilitate trauma-friendly sessions and manage community dialogue. The researchers then returned to their areas (research locations) and conducted workshops with women victims in the community, involving 140 women victims/survivors. They used the tools and research guidelines to collect qualitative information with open-ended questions. Participants, the women victims, and their relatives were encouraged to share what information they were comfortable with.

Following community-level workshops, AJAR then facilitated a series of workshops to compile and analyse the data and produce initial findings. Based on the initial findings, the researchers conducted consultation and discussion with the women victims/survivors to finalise the findings and create the action plan in each community. AJAR provided seed funds to support community initiatives according to the survivors' needs, ranging from community-level dialogue and smallscale economic initiatives to local-level and community-led advocacy programs assisted by the mentioned local NGOs. Researchers were fully involved in all these phases, from documentation to facilitating community initiatives, in which then, they called community facilitators.

The research found the pattern of what has been experienced by the women victims identified in 12 critical findings divided into three categories, as follows:

1. Ongoing violence and impunity.

In all research contexts, women believed that seeking justice or redress would only bring

new problems and suffering upon them. This fear is reinforced by the failure of law enforcement and the judiciary to investigate or prosecute perpetrators. As impunity, stigma, and discrimination persist, women's confidence and capacity to articulate the injustice they experienced decrease. They have been actively involved in social relations but remain peripheral in formal negotiations and peacebuilding.

2. Social and economic violations.

Despite their resilience and innovation, women victims' struggle for economic survival affects their access to justice. Most participants were subsistence farmers or small traders, with little to cushion them in times of crisis. Widows, single mothers, and women left alone due to conflict are particularly vulnerable and need special assistance. Children are trapped in violence and poverty, but they also inspire women to strive for a better future. The vulnerability would be worse for those who are being displaced. Some of the refugees found their houses burned down and looted, their livestock slain, and their fields neglected when they returned to their lands. Women victims are also vulnerable to new forms of violence, including domestic and community violence. Many women found their already precarious

economic situation was worsened by being socially ostracised as victims or as children of targeted political or ethnic groups.

3. Recognition and long-term support.

While significant, recognition through ad-hoc mechanisms is not enough. The women described long-term needs for medical, psychological, economic, security, and legal support. Recognising a survivor is not the end of the process but a beginning that must be supplemented with longer-term government and civil society programming and support services. Women victims lack basic services and need specialised programs to deal with health, trauma, reproductive health and ageing to complement the social networks they build and rely on. They also face discrimination in securing citizenship rights, such as obtaining identity cards and birth and marriage certificates. Women survivors face discrimination and exclusion decades after violence takes place, weakening the social support and assistance they seek to survive. Even their children experience public stigma and discrimination in their ability to access employment and schooling and their ability to process basic government citizenship documents such as ID cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses.

3. LESSON LEARNED: CHANGES, ADAPTATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS.

Over a decade, AJAR has been practising and expanding its methods and tools in many conflict and post-conflict contexts across Asia and the Pacific. Hundreds of local

human rights defenders and humanitarian workers have been trained and provided their feedback. In some places, AJAR and partners have conducted follow-up research in

response to the previous research results and recommendations. For example, following the output and recommendations of the Enduring Impunity research with women victims in West Papua, in 2019, AJAR and partners designed a follow-up participatory action research in five areas, involving 100 Papuan Indigenous women, focusing on the impact of land-grabbing and forest loss, and how Indigenous women are coping and resisting these threats to their natural resources and survival.¹⁶ The participatory tools have been used not only to document Indigenous women's stories but also to amplify the voices of Indigenous Papuan women whose forests are under threat or have already been lost. The research captured the nexus of a centralised with no recognition of the victims of the violation development program, excessive military power in responding to self-determination voices, and ongoing violations of racism, sexism, and gender-based violence. The research concludes and encourages Papuan Indigenous women to demand that their rights and humanity be recognised, including acknowledging their traditional land ownership and practice. It also provided significant input to enrich the discourse of Indigenous women, racial discrimination, and deforestation globally. It became backbone research, alongside "I am Here: Voices of Papuan Women in the Face of Unrelenting Violence," for the establishment of PWG (Papua Women Working Group);¹⁷ able to reach a global audience and paved substantial support from the global to the Indigenous women in Papua.

The expanded research has empowered participants to become facilitators or researchers in the following loop of the process and action research, which leads to advocacy efforts. In this turn, AJAR positioned its role as a learning resource, providing more tools for advocacy, facilitating community dialogues, and enhancing the learning process on communities' achievements through the south-south exchange program. Furthermore, AJAR bridged local initiatives, ranging from victim-led truth-seeking initiatives, memorialisation, and advocacy to the national and regional levels.

3.1. *Key achievements and findings*

Below is the part where feedback and reflections on the process and the impact of the research's implementations are provided. It captures reflections from the victims, the researcher, and AJAR as an organisation. AJAR conducted three focus group discussions from July to August 2024 with 45 facilitators from Indonesia and Timor-Leste. The feedback was fruitful and ranged from the approach and design to the implementation reflections.

Most facilitators agreed that the Stone and Flower was a compacted flow to collect stories, facts, and victims' perspectives on their struggles and resilience. The tools invited victims to share their personal experiences. A facilitator from Timor-Leste stated that

16. AJAR (2021) "All the Birds are Gone: Indigenous Women Speak Out Against Forest Loss in Papua" <https://asiaajar.org/2021/03/30/all-the-birds-are-gone-indigenous-women-speak-out-against-forest-loss-in-papua/>

17. AJAR (2019) "I am Here: Voices of Papuan Women in the Face of Unrelenting Violence" <https://asiaajar.org/2019/04/03/i-am-here-report/>

the tools were “beneficial for the survivors to remember their plight past,” especially when it applied to the victims who were abducted by the military during the conflict in Timor-Leste from 1974 to 1999.¹⁸ One of the most prominent phenomena during documentation was many victims did not know the cause of the conflict and violence that occurred. The process of sharing stories has given them new knowledge about the truth of the violence they experienced, followed by the awareness of shared experiences of violence and suffering.

“It can help children who were forcibly taken, who are now old, to trace the events they experienced during their lives. They remember their childhood in East Timor, how life was during the conflict when they were forcibly taken to Indonesia, and when they grew up and had families in Indonesia. This process helps ensure the truth of their stories.”¹⁹

Discussing with victims helps them understand their lost rights, including the right to know the truth about what happened.

The tools also succeeded in exploring the violence experienced over decades and sharing it with facilitators who were born later, which helped both victims and facilitators to explore experiences and events of violence over a protracted timeframe. Involving the young generation in the process was also critical and provided an opportunity for intergenerational learning as a part of the effort to prevent atrocities in the future. The

human life span may not be long enough to witness the political shifts needed to uphold justice. The fight for truth and justice may have to be handed down to the next generation. An inter-generational solid relationship and a shared history and identity have empowered survivors and their family members. During the process, AJAR found that the young generation feels that they are part of the victims of the violence cycle, as stated by the facilitator,

“A young person who documented the story of violence experienced by his grandmother stated that he felt vulnerable and had just realised that the impact of his grandmother’s violence had also affected him because the past violence had never been resolved.”²⁰

It also paved the way for women victims to cope with their stories of pain when it comes to younger people or their children. Some have shared their experiences with their children, while others felt they had to protect their children from pain and shame. In Aceh, a survivor asked her daughter for help writing her life postcards to be placed inside her memory box. This exercise allowed her to share experiences her daughter never knew about. The woman felt closer to her daughter, who began to understand better and respect her mother.

Through the combination of narratives that unravel suffering with the identification of strength and resilience in the face of trauma and further violence, such as discrimination

18. Discussion with research facilitators during focus group discussions conducted on August 12, 2024.

19. Discussion with research facilitators during focus group discussions, conducted on August 5, 2024.

20. Discussion with research facilitators during focus group discussions, conducted on August 19, 2024.

and stigma, victims had the space to express the things they wanted to share. This storytelling process was carried out in some places using traditions or cultures inherent in their lives, such as those of Indigenous Women in Papua. “They tell stories by singing in turns.” While in Aceh, the storytelling process was accompanied by joint prayers. Their belief in God becomes a strength in such a painful process. This process overcame obstacles for some victims who still have difficulty telling stories, which can then release their burdens. A facilitator shared one victim’s testimony,

“I learned something and felt relief. It’s good to have this experience and tell a story about my pleasant moment and pain.”²¹

Being able to carry out their stories to others, women victims were encouraged to create a way to face their day-to-day challenges, for example, by collective actions in establishing their own small economic cooperation to support each other in agriculture and health emergencies.

Equipped with the tools and guidelines, AJAR and partners brought the storytelling process into community-based dialogue when women victims interacted with community members. They build understanding regarding the issues in the community, including discussing the forms of violence experienced by women victims in the current time. At this stage, women victims have new strength to speak up and have a critical view of existing social relations.

“This research has succeeded in empowering women victims when they can discuss to strengthen their economic resources, make their own decisions, and speak and convey their opinions in front of their families and communities. In fact, this is the first step in carrying out advocacy pioneered by women victims.”²²

This process was long, from accompanying women victims to daring to talk about themselves, sharing strength, and building new knowledge to change their lives. The critical point in this process was how community members acknowledged their suffering, realised the problems in the community, and opened a dialogue to improve the situation.

Timor-Leste had become the most advanced result in advocating for women survivors’ issues. Initiated with sexual violence and children born out of war issues, the research expanded to develop interim reparative measures, a community-based initiative to provide small-scale remedies for women. Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), a government institution mandated to implement the Truth and Reception Commission (CAVR) has adopted this initiative.

Limitations and Challenges

While the tools have strengths in exploring survivors’ experiences and creating a space for dialogue, they have limitations. Other specific considerations regarding victims’ status would

21. Discussion with research facilitators during focus group discussions, conducted on August 5, 2024.

22. Discussion with research facilitators during focus group discussions, conducted on August 12, 2024.

also be needed when facilitators conducted a discussion using tools that could trigger excessive emotional expressions and uncover traumatic events that had been hidden under the skin for years. In a more technical aspect, the tools also have limitations and challenges in the implementation phases, which can be categorised into three groups:

1. Participants' limitations. Many victims are elders who experienced the violations and have been continuing their lives in trauma for decades. They have difficulties remembering the event violations. Prolonged stigma and discrimination resulted in living in silence and trying to wipe out all the memories. Elders commonly face health issues that hinder their mobility when participating in the research. Challenges also come in languages as many survivors are more comfortable sharing in local languages, which the facilitators have not understood. Some elders did not read and had difficulties drawing and writing.

2. Sociocultural context. In some contexts, facilitators often face situations where the sharing process must be limited by taboos or social norms, as well as low-security guarantees, which make survivors not free or unwilling to tell stories, especially those related to sexual violence. This is also reinforced by the inequality of economic resources and minimal access to information that forces them to remain silent. Power relations within the community and widespread discrimination hinder revealing the truth.

3. Facilitators' skills. Transformative approaches with the Stone and Flower require facilitators who are experienced in applying adult education methodologies. They must also have adequate knowledge of Transitional Justice, feminist insights, or sensitivity to gender injustice issues. Intensive training is needed to ensure these facilitators have sufficient knowledge and skills. In addition, facilitators must improvise in isolated places because they often do not get enough equipment, such as drawing tools and large paper, to carry out the exercises.

Adaptation and Modifications

Amid the challenges, the flexible design of Stone and Flower makes the method easier to develop or apply more widely than previously intended. This is a reasonably prominent best practice. The most apparent, more comprehensive application is when AJAR partners use this method for issues that are not directly related to past human rights violations. In Indonesia, partners applied it to victims and survivors of human trafficking or to groups who are displaced by armed violence. This method has also been used with groups of young activists with various levels of education. Although the results are different, one thing that can be considered a common achievement is that the participants gain new knowledge regarding the impact of violence and are encouraged to build joint initiatives to fight for their rights. More specifically, AJAR partners have applied this method to government representatives at the

regional level. In this context, the tools were modified into a tool to identify forms of state accountability and obligations that the state should fulfil.

The modification includes developing new tools on specific issues that cannot be covered by existing tools. Combining more than one tool during the session expands participation from other parties, such as youth, and creates an intergenerational dialogue to understand the root causes of the conflict. Partners in Indonesia and Timor-Leste combined in-class documentation with the site visit, using the “transect walks”²³ or conducting exchanges and dialogues with other survivor groups. In some contexts, the documentation is combined with existing community activities, such as regular community meetings and religious and communal activities.

3.2 Reflection: Transforming women victims

Having reflected on the implementation and results of the tools, AJAR believes that the process has transformed participants’ and facilitators’ capacity to make independent decisions in critical forms. Referring to the empowerment creation through sharing stories as a collective healing process,²⁴ AJAR also identified the increase of victims in controlling emotions, including hate and anger, opening themselves, reflecting,

empathising, and sharing their experiences in public. For AJAR, reflection on the implementation of action research using a participatory approach has emphasised the importance of a “victim-centred approach,” encouraging victims, especially women, to recognise themselves and rebuild their shattered lives. This reflection confirms AJAR’s opinion that any effort towards a society based on accountability and justice cannot wait for the official state mechanisms to work first. In addition, as stated by de Grief, recognition and reparation require coherence with other justice initiatives,²⁵ including advocacy and institutional reform to achieve justice. These changes are indicated by changes in survivors’ perspectives on their experiences that lead to behaviour changes, including being free of the burden of the past, having the capability to share their experiences caused by the increase of trust, sharing solidarity and same value on the struggle in facing the impact of violence. Individual changes would open other behaviour changes in the willingness to be involved with the community, including organising and developing an agenda to pursue justice.

Changes led to the emergence of victims, who now can be named survivors, critical perspectives on violations and the rights taken from them, parallel with the consciousness and awareness of their situation as victims. Survivors can express their perspectives with clear and structured ideas, are open

23. Transect walk invites participant to “walks” toward specific sites in the community and collects spatial information, which may include information related to geographic features, land use, or historical aspects of the sites. The method encourages participant to active discussion and listening, identification of problems and their solutions. See Robert Chamber (1997) “Whose reality counts? Putting the first last,” Intermediate Technology Publications.”

24. Rappaport, *op.cit.*

25. Pablo de Greiff (Ed.). (2006) “The Handbook of Reparations.” Oxford: Oxford University Press DOI: 10.1093/0199291926.003.0018

to embracing their experiences, can share and listen, build solidarity, and have also identified the victims' vulnerability level. The discussion among survivors becomes a safe space for testimonial events. This new perspective has brought survivors into a phase of raising their experiences to the public and challenging the policy to fulfil their rights. Groups of survivors have initiated community-level memorialisation, urged the local government for basic access, especially to health, information, and education for their families, and even filed a case in court on their civic statuses. This could be seen as a transformation of the victims to survivors and later human rights defenders where they hold their ownership of the knowledge, are acknowledged by the state, participate in social relations, have equal access to government basic services, have a political voice, be protected from violence, and live with dignity. ***

