

# BREAKING THE SILENCE

## A needs assessment of survivors of sexual violence in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

*Executive Summary*  
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### **Report commissioned by Tearfund**

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*In partnership with: (in alphabetical order)*

Diakonia Council of Churches  
Kwazulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC)  
Lifeline Durban  
Oasis Umlazi  
Refugee Communities



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Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty. It has more than ten years' experience of working through church-based partners in the response to sexual violence.

Tearfund is also a founding member of We Will Speak Out ([www.wewillsspeakout.org](http://www.wewillsspeakout.org)) – an international Christian coalition working together to end sexual violence.



**Tearfund South Africa** is an affiliated organisation of Tearfund, based in Durban. It seeks to be an enabling organisation, coming alongside the most vulnerable people, building collaborations across boundaries so that the church and community work together to bring justice, peace and hope across the land.

**Front cover photo:** Christina Shange, Tearfund SA

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## Acronyms

KZNCC	KwaZulu Natal Council of Churches
KZN	KwaZulu Natal
SV	Sexual Violence
SAPS	South African Police service
NPO	Non profit organization
NGO	Non governmental organization
SA	South Africa
UNAIDS	United Nation Programme on HIV/AIDS
FGD	Focus group discussion

## Glossary

<i>Stigma</i>	A mark of disgrace associated with a particular person or quality.
<i>Perpetrator</i>	A person who carries out a harmful, illegal or immoral action.
<i>Rape</i>	The crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will.
<i>Survivor Movement</i>	A movement of survivors that allow would a community of survivors to meet one another and express their needs and requirements, that would effect and advocate informed change within communities.

# **1. BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH**

## **1.1 Research Overview**

Tearfund SA commissioned this qualitative research study within KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, to explore the needs of survivors of sexual violence. KwaZulu Natal province, which comprises of major cities such as Durban and Pietermaritzburg as well rural township areas has been identified as having one of the highest incidence of sexual violence within South Africa. For the purposes of this research both urban and rural communities were sampled to participate in this study, to capture the perceptions of survivors living in these diverse communities. The findings of this study give a likely impression of the needs of survivors of sexual violence in other contexts.

The term survivor of sexual violence is used to refer to people who have experienced sexual violence and lived afterwards. While it is acknowledged that men are also survivors of sexual violence, for the purposes of this research study, women are seen as survivors of sexual violence and men are seen as perpetrators. The partners with which Tearfund SA collaborated with in this study only had access to female survivors. However, during focus groups, the growing prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated against males was iterated.

The real names of participants are not used to protect their identities. Likewise, where quotes are connected with a named participant; these names are pseudonyms.

Thirty-seven female survivors of sexual violence were interviewed in focus group discussions and one on one interviews. Tearfund partners known and trusted by partners facilitated the research. Counseling was available after focus group interviews for any participants who requested this and written consent was obtained by all participants prior to commencing interviews. The full research report is available from Tearfund.

## **1.2 Sexual violence in KwaZulu Natal**

Sexual violence, like all other forms of violence is about asserting domination and control over another. Despite significant developments at the policy and support levels, there are still enormous challenges in relation to changing the underlying values, attitudes and behavior that define and influence gender roles in South African communities. According to current research, key drivers of sexual violence are a crisis in masculinity in which men resort to violence to be recognized and affirmed as men; a culture of male entitlement to women's bodies, and opportunistic interpretations of culture.<sup>1</sup>

An annual national reported figure of 55 000 incidents of sexual violence were identified by SAPS (2007), with 20% of these incidents occurring in KZN province. Furthermore the reported rate of reporting was 94-100 per 100 000 population,<sup>1</sup> whilst national figures were between 113-121 per 100 000 population. In KwaZulu

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<sup>1</sup> KZN Department of Community Safety and Liaison. (2010). Preventing sexual violence in KZN.

Natal townships of Kwa Mashu, Inanda and Umlazi; over 400 rapes are reported annually. It is also recognized that most incidents of rape go unreported due to the stigma of the crime.

### 1.3 Tearfund's commitment to survivors

Tearfund SA is a Durban based organization (NPO), which is a branch of Tearfund UK; a UK based international NGO working across 60 countries globally. Tearfund SA is a relatively new organization, set up to accompany and strengthen local partnerships and collaborations in South Africa, with a specific focus on mobilizing the church. Tearfund UK has a long-term commitment to working with Churches globally with a vision to empower and enable them to address issues to poverty and justice. Since 2010, Tearfund UK has been involved in building national and global movements of faith that have a vision to end sexual violence. In partnership with the Anglican Communion and UNAIDS, they have launched a coalition called 'We will speak out'. ([www.wewillspeakout.org](http://www.wewillspeakout.org)). To date, the coalition has 17 members.

South Africa, has the unfortunate reputation for being a nation where women and girls are extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual violence. The Government has a 365 National Action Plan to end gender-based violence. While there are many organizations working to address this issue, strong coalitions within the faith community are lacking. Over 80% of the population of South Africa professes a Christian faith, which makes churches a powerful force that can do something significant to realize the plans instituted by the government.

Tearfund SA is committed to ensuring that survivors of sexual violence are placed at the heart of the response to sexual violence. Through creating safe forums during the research, Tearfund allowed voices that have remained silent, to be heard and valued in the community. Tearfund envisages engaging survivors in a movement to strategize and express needs that will inform civil society to respond. The response of civil society to the knowledge and understanding gained through a survivor movement will allow for survivor sensitive and specific programmes or interventions. This research forms part of Phase one of Tearfund's strategy to engage with survivors to provide meaningful responses to their need.

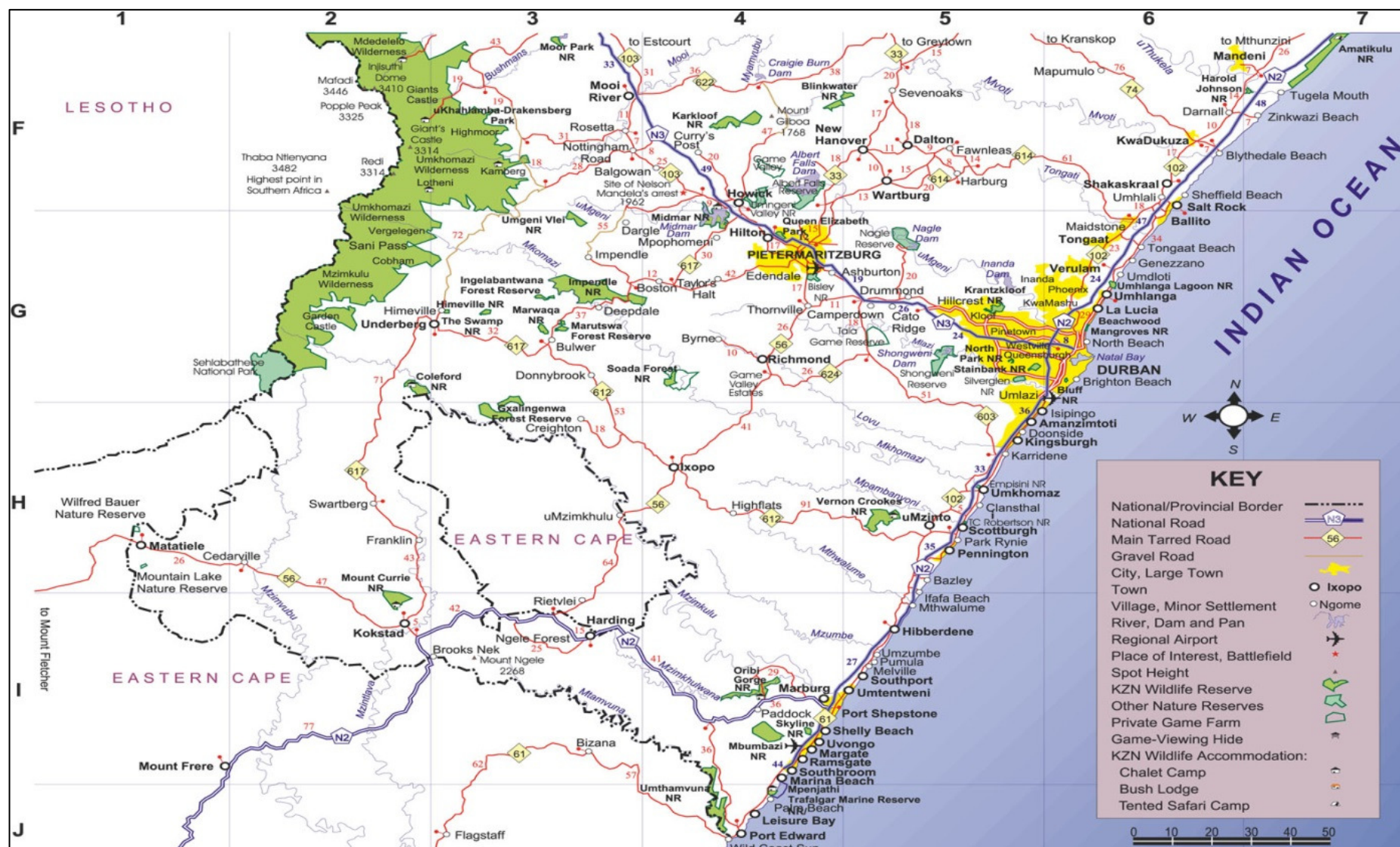
### 1.4 Tearfunds' partners

Tearfund's partners working with survivors of sexual violence include the following organizations:

- **Diakonia Council of Churches** support programmes working with survivors of sexual violence, based in township communities of Marion Ridge and Inanda on the outskirts of Durban.
- **Oasis Umlazi**, working in a township documented as having one of the highest prevalence of sexual violence.
- **KZNCC** based in Pietermaritzburg provides support services to people living with HIV as well as survivors of sexual violence.
- **LifeLine Durban's Ithuba Lethu** project works throughout Durban in providing emotional wellness to sex workers.



Figure 1: Study Setting



## 2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The thirty-seven participants in the study, were divided into five focus groups and two individual interviews; and represented the urban and rural communities in KZN. The diversity of individuals in each focus group, as well as their varied communities are depicted in the table below:

Community	Number	Ages	Race
Pietermaritzburg	5	20-50	African IsiZulu
Refugees, Durban	10	>20	Rwanda
Marion Ridge	1	40	Coloured
Inanda	1	>20	African IsiZulu
Marion Ridge	4	>35	Coloured
Sex workers	12	>20	African IsiZulu
Umlazi	4	>20	African IsiZulu

The transcripts from the focus group and one on one interviews were analyzed by employing thematic content analysis to identify common themes. The common themes represented in each FGD were compared and although differing in some cases, especially with regards to varying communities, such as refugees and sex workers; the general stance of survivors across the focus group's were similar.

### 2.1 Survivor's understanding of sexual violence

Most participants regarded sexual violence as a use of force by strangers, partners, husbands, managers, militants and clients in the case of sex workers. The majority of participants eluded that force was used, due to the survivor not consenting or giving permission for sexual acts. This resulted in use of force by the perpetrator and an act of sexual violence being committed.

*"I understand sexual violence, whenever, when a man wants to do sex with you by force, no consent. Even though he may consult you, you may not want it."*

*Esther, Refugee Community*

The role of power relations as a means of instituting force on a survivor was viewed by each focus group as a common occurrence. Many incidents of sexual violence reported by participants were by managers and people in authority such as police, and people of status. Abuse of power in these incidents resulted in perpetrators manipulating survivors in order to sexually violate them.

In addition, survivors in the majority of FGD regarded personal violation as central to their understanding of sexual violence. Rape or full penetration by their perpetrator was not necessarily defined as sexual violence alone, but any act that violated their personal boundaries, and was inappropriate qualified as sexual violence.



***"I certainly believe that in any form if it crosses your personal boundaries, it is sexual assault even it was attempted and it isn't full penetration or full rape."***

**Vicky, Durban**

Multiple incidents of sexual violence were reported by individual survivors; in the majority of participants' iterations. These experiences shaped survivors understanding of sexual violence as being cyclical in nature. The focus group comprising of sex workers expressed this overriding theme as a result of the risky nature of their work, which further impacts their children, due to community members taking advantage of their vulnerability.

***"Sexual violence doesn't only affect us, it affects our children as well. They see us as prostitutes, and they say see your mum is a prostitute you can have it as well."***

**Tandi, Lifeline Durban**

Loss of control, was expressed by survivors as another factor that was dominant in their understanding of sexual violence. In being unable to control emotions of anger, lust, greediness or power, the perpetrators would result in sexual violence. In their inability to control inbuilt emotion or desire, the perpetrator takes advantage of their victim's vulnerability. This vulnerability is evidenced as one of economic vulnerability in the case of sex workers, emotional vulnerability in marriage or vulnerability of refugees in conflict situations.

## **2.2 The reasons for survivors' silence**

The deafening silence of survivors, which is evident in the lack of reporting of sexual violence; is not without an explanation. Silence is an expected outcome described by survivors, due to multiple reasons. The threat of harm to oneself or family members was frequently referred to by participants as the reason for under reporting. The threat was described as a result of the position of authority or status of the perpetrator. In the case of the refugee community the perpetrators were the militants, sex workers face multiple threats in that some of the incidents of sexual violence are perpetrated by police who they should report to.

***“What was their motive behind the attack in the first place. So why put yourself in the situation where you will be hounded by these people now. Now not to rape you but to kill you, to silence you! Also that is a problem, sometimes you are raped by someone who is from a prominent family. And you are nobody, they have money and they have ways and means, others have police in the family.”***

**Nomsa, KZNCC**

Overwhelming fear rooted in judgment by family, friends and society; stigma due to the perceptions of society that survivors of sexual violence are “loose, uneducated” individuals and fear of the future were articulated by the majority of participants as the reason for silence. Judgmental attitudes by communities were iterated as the most common source of fear.

***“People take advantage of us working on the streets. If you report we get asked what were you looking for. Even if you were at a bar having a drink, the first question what were you looking for, what were you doing at that time of night. Judgment keeps survivors silent.”***

**Ntombi, Lifeline Durban**

Added to the threat and fear faced by survivors of sexual violence, is a sense of self-blame. Participants highlighted the impact of feeling that what was done to them was deserved, was significant and would prevent them from speaking out. The self-blame was often reported as a result of others enforcing their perceptions on them, as they got what and they wanted or deserved it; to individual survivors feeling that they deserved what they got. Many of the participants were sexually violated as children and survived harsh home environments, from abuse to living in areas of conflict. In such cases of vulnerability, such distorted views of self-blame are expected and further add to silencing survivors. The participants’ excerpts outline the theme of self-blame clearly:

***“Many people die silently because they are scared to tell as others blame them. That’s why I myself decided to keep quiet because I was thinking my parents, they would blame me. Why you went there. I decided to keep quiet for myself.”***

**Rebekah, Refugee Community**

***“Sometimes you blame yourself, you think maybe you are to blame. Sometimes people call us idiots, they don’t understand where we are coming from, they don’t understand the pressures that are making us prostitute. So it’s very hard as there is no understanding.”***

**Thembi, LifeLine Durban**

Inadequate, unsympathetic services and a lack of support after enduring sexual violence prevent survivors reporting. Participants stated that after being through the trauma of sexual violence, to go through the reporting system that currently exists is re-traumatizing. Further to this, participants highlighted the significant role that a failed history of convictions of perpetrators has on reporting multiple incidents. Many participants expressed that they lacked trust in the system and therefore preferred silence than being betrayed again.

*“People keep quiet because there are no systems in place. You will report and then you have to pay bribes and therefore there is no need. So there is power and money that keeps survivors silent. There is no support for survivors after reporting, you don’t know where to go”* Nokubonga, LifeLine Durban

*“Why survivors would keep quiet, is the way we get treated, when we go and report it. I feel authorities have let us down big time. They make you the victim, become like you are the criminal now, you committed the crime, and they are not sympathetic.”* Rose, Marion Ridge

Survivors of sexual violence identify the role of protecting their families as a primary reason for their silence. In cases where the perpetrators were family members or known to the family, the need to protect their family unit was a necessity, as well as in cases where the husband was a perpetrator and the breadwinner. The following excerpts outline the emerged theme of protection as the reason for the silence of survivors:

*“Why some people are quiet or silent about something is because sometimes sexual violence happen to some in the family, it happened to me by my uncle.”* Amy, Refugee community

*“Sometimes we are protecting those we love. Like my mother, I was protecting her, I kept quiet for her.”* Angel, LifeLine Durban

## **2.3 The effects of sexual violence on the lives of survivors**

Effects of sexual violence on the lives of individual survivors were predominantly seen as multi-faceted and crippling. However despite these effects, many reported that they had emerged as stronger women, motivated to overcome their trauma and help others. Sexual violence was expressed by participants as affecting their lives in many aspects. For some the trauma has affected them physically, and for others they have noticed change in their characters; from being quite and subdued to wild and uncaring. A number of participants reported that they left school after being sexually violated due to being unable to concentrate, as well as in cases where they were ashamed of what had happened. As can be seen the effects of sexual violence are all encompassing and differ in the lives of individual survivors.

*“My body has broken down and I have been told by my doctors that is the main reason why I got sick, the trauma has manifested physically. I had to drop out of school when I was 14.”* Vicky, Durban

*“I have had multiple rapes, about 20, it has numbed me, I do not have feelings, I do not see myself in a relationship now, I can’t trust anyone, and it has broken me inside. I don’t want to be in a relationship.”* Nelisiwe, LifeLine Durban

The scarring caused by sexual violence emerged in each focus group discussion as a key effect. Survivors’ experiences of sexual violence were depicted as a memory that they would never forget. The effect of this scarring instilled a fear of men in many survivors, and confirmed the lifelong scar they attested to carry. Many survivors shared that they find it difficult to trust any man, or enter into relationships

with men due to the distrust entrenched in them due to sexual violence. Interestingly participants shared that the scar is often seen by other men and makes them vulnerable to repeated sexual violence.

***“But rape stays with you it becomes part of you, you have to learn to relate to it, its like a soar, like when a dog bites you it leaves a scar, you can walk tall and that but when you look at the scar you are reminded of it. The scar will always be there.”***

***Nelisiwe, Lifeline Durban***

Resilience emerged as a common effect of the painful trauma of survivors. This resilience was seen with a positive as well as a negative connotation. In a positive light, the resilience enabled survivors to cope with their trauma and act as an encouragement and motivation to other survivors. Some participants even reported following different career pathways in order to help other survivors. In a negative light, the trauma of sexual violence has created a resilience that is rooted in a hard heart, where survivors have numbed themselves to the world and in that way built up walls, resulting in distrust and a “Don’t care” attitude. In the case of sex workers, resilience enables them to be able to sell their bodies to survive, despite the pain they endure on a daily basis.

*“For me I was a quiet person, but now I am a wild person. I have become like a devil, I don’t care about anybody. I don’t give a damn of whatever. Sometimes I will stay out the whole night and I don’t have money to go back home. I will wait. I will wait..even though nobody comes, I won’t care. My heart is so hard. ”* Philile, LifeLine Durban

*“I turned this incident into something that can be able to help others, because I did not have anyone to help me. So I would say, my life was changed into a more focused and positive. ”* Lulama, KZNCC

Addictions as a way to numb the pain of sexual violence in survivors’ lives are reported to be significant. Some survivors reported never using alcohol or drugs prior to their sexual violence, but turned to abusing substances in order to deal with their pain. Addictions were expressed as being that of drugs and alcohol.

***“I turned to alcohol and I started drinking, and it was my first time ever touching alcohol at all. I remember the first shock of alcohol going down, the sting, and I thought how could people do this, but after the stinging and coughing it just sort of made me forget. I became dependent on alcohol to drown out my sorrows, that’s how I survived at that time.”***

***Rose, Marion Ridge***

Considering that many cases of sexual violence are within families or perpetrated by persons close to the family; the effect is not only on the individual but also the family

unit. Family disintegration thus emerged as a common theme. This was described as a result of survivors withdrawing from the family in order to protect them and often leaving the home; or cases where the survivor spoke up and caused hatred or disunity within the family.

*"I was raped by my stepfather and because of that it messed up my life, I spoke up and my life changed. I hate my younger sister who is my stepfather's daughter, because she reminds me of him."*

***Khethiwe, Lifeline Durban***

## **2.4 What survivors need to heal from sexual violence**

The multi-faceted impact of sexual violence on the lives of individual survivors compounded by societal judgment and failing support systems; places the survivor in a vulnerable position that limits healing. Although efforts have been made to create an environment that fosters healing, through placing those who have experienced the trauma of sexual violence at the heart of the response, informs and guides current programs to implement that which survivors express as vital for their restoration.

### ***2.4.1 Safe Forum***

The need for a safe space, where survivors could share their experiences, learn from each other, learn to forgive and heal was voiced by participants in the study. Many participants reported that the focus groups for the study were the first forum they had attended. Participants mentioned that a safe forum was one of the necessary steps for healing and restoration from the trauma of sexual violence. A safe space with other survivors where there was an understanding of the trauma created an avenue for many to express themselves and simultaneously heal.

### ***2.4.2. Acknowledgement***

The power of having their voices heard is considered by survivors as essential for healing. Currently, the judgment and stigma that is a hallmark in communities prevents survivors from speaking. Participants however expressed that if what they had to say was valued and believed by societies, this would enable healing. Acknowledgement also includes ensuring that justice takes place and that society as a whole recognizes the pain of survivors and that they are the victims. Further to this, survivors mention that perpetrators need to be aware of the effects sexual violence has on individual lives. In making perpetrators aware of the trauma of sexual violence and its ramifications, would foster their healing.

### ***2.4.3 Supportive systems***

The value of support as an integral need for healing was shared by participants. Due to lack of support, many prefer to remain silent, however with sympathetic, non-judgmental support systems in place; survivors felt healing would be the outcome. The supportive systems should commence from immediate reporting, where police are sympathetic and non-judgmental in dealing with survivors to ensuring ongoing psychosocial support post-trauma. Some participants expressed that appointed people that are either survivors themselves or individuals equipped to handle

survivors of sexual violence should be deployed. This would curb re-traumatization that so often is evidenced in reporting. In addition, survivors reported that supportive systems in healing also include the church and their relationship with God.

#### **2.4.4 Empowerment**

Many survivors echoed that sexual violence was often due to their vulnerability. For some it was their intimate partner who was the breadwinner, forcing the survivor to remain silent due to her dependence on him. For others, such as sex workers, sexual violence is a result of economic vulnerability where women are forced to sell their bodies to feed their families. Daily they are faced with sexual violence, and are required to do things that are painful for them, yet they persevere in order to survive. The need for empowerment in order to heal was exclaimed by participants. Empowerment for them included having alternative earning opportunities in the case of sex workers, as well helping one another as a form of being empowered.

### **2.5 Benefits of a survivor movement**

At the outset of the focus group, the concept of a survivor movement was described to participants as a safe forum, similar to those created in response to HIV. It would place survivors of sexual violence at the heart of response, where survivors would meet fellow survivors and express their needs and requirements, that would effect and advocate informed change within communities.

Participants verbally expressed that a survivor movement would be beneficial for them individually. The benefits expressed by survivors included the following:

- **Facilitate healing**

The benefits of a survivor movement were that it would facilitate individual healing, by walking alongside each other in community. This was seen to be due to hearing one another's stories and supporting each other through the process of healing.

- **Foster Solidarity**

A survivor movement is conceptualized by participants as a means of fostering solidarity and therefore benefiting not only individuals, but also the community of survivors. Participants recognize the power of standing together as one and being a voice for each other in order to implement change in society.

- **Stop Silence**

The value of a survivor movement in providing an environment where people are free to speak and voice their trauma, was mentioned by participants. A survivor movement could benefit reporting of sexual violence as people gain the courage to speak out and know that they will be supported. In some cases, survivors only realized in the forum of speaking about sexual violence that they were violated as children. Thus in creating survivor movements, participants felt that many unreported cases may be identified.



### **3. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

In hearing the voice of survivors, the stark reality for their silence and their needs for healing were clearly expressed. The following recommendations summarize the change that was voiced to the researchers, as crucial in order to eliminate the barriers to speaking out, as well as what is required to facilitate healing:

#### **3.1 Community**

- Eliminate the stigma and judgment that evidently surrounds survivors of sexual violence in communities through education and awareness of the causes of sexual violence.
- Ensure public awareness of reporting of sexual violence: who, what and where.
- Educate perpetrators and men in general on the effects of sexual violence on survivors' lives.

#### **3.2 Leaders**

- Current reporting systems and aftercare of survivors is inadequate and requires strengthening.
- Better follow up and support for victims post reporting is required.
- Create safe forums (survivor movements) in local communities that are networked and provide a means for voices to be heard and valued.
- Within safe forums, survivors should share and learn from one another, as well as exchange skills to reduce vulnerability.
- Allow survivors to be at the heart of the response, to advocate for change and simultaneously be empowered, thus facilitating their healing.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

From survivors understanding of sexual violence, to reasons for silence and the ramifications of this human atrocity; survivor's voices echo a cry for help. This echo filtered through the similar, as well as differing experiences of sexual violence; those faced by refugees in conflict situations in Rwanda, to that of sex workers fighting to survive the streets of Durban. Every participant in the study agreed that a survivor movement would be beneficial to individual survivors in multiple ways. The possibility of a survivor movement filled participants with hope and proved to be a response that was required for healing for survivors of sexual violence.