

# STORIES OF CHANGE, MESSAGES OF HOPE



October 2017

Exploring the value of faith-based support groups for sexual and gender based violence

Contents

**1. INTRODUCTION ..... 3**

**2. AIMS OF THE STUDY ..... 3**

**3. METHODOLOGY ..... 4**

3.1. Most Significant Change Technique..... 4

3.2. Strength of MSC as method ..... 4

3.3. Champions ..... 5

3.4. Adaptation of MSC technique for SGBV ..... 5

3.5. Sample ..... 7

**4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS ..... 7**

4.1. First stage story collection – Champions..... 7

4.2. Second stage story collection – Women in support groups ..... 7

**5. LIMITATIONS OF MSC TECHNIQUE ..... 8**

**6. ETHICS AND SAFETY ..... 8**

**7. STORIES OF CHANGE ..... 9**

Story 1: Ntombi ..... 9

Story 2: Amara ..... 10

Story 3: Ada ..... 11

Story 4: Lu..... 12

Story 5: Siyanda ..... 12

Story 6: Stella ..... 13

Story 7: Mary ..... 15

Story 8: Heather..... 15

Story 9: Lesedi..... 16

Story 10: Dana ..... 17

**8. LESSONS LEARNED ..... 18**

8.1. The power of support..... 18

8.2. Potential downfalls ..... 19

**9. CONCLUSION ..... 19**

**10. REFERENCES ..... 19**

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## *Acknowledgements:*

A special thank you to Zoë-Life, and especially John Nyamayaro for your unquestioning support to all involved in the MSC story-writing. Solange Mukamana from Tearfund, thank you for your journey with women in support groups not only during the MSC story-writing, but also throughout the years preceding the study. You have instilled strength and confidence in each and every woman you have worked with and bonded groups together for a lifetime of support and healing. Thank you to AmplifyChange for making this process possible, and for us to listen to women's voices. Finally, thank you to all the women who told their stories and shared their lives with us. This document is a testimony of your strength and your ability to rise above adversity and impact the lives of many other women who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence.

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*Suggested citation:* Loots L, Maramuke B.E, Gcwensa N, Mdunge M, Cwinyai C.T, Sithole S.E, Mhlongo S.S, Niyonzima Y, Zondi T and Buka C. (2017). Stories of Change, Messages of Hop: Exploring the value of faith-based support groups for sexual and gender based violence. Pretoria: WWSOSA

## 1. Introduction

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in South Africa is a highly gendered and persistent public health issue which has a profound impact on the overall health and well-being of women who experience such violence<sup>1</sup>. Psycho-social care is a defining factor in women's long-term healing and although care services are in place, gaps remain in the delivery and standardisation of psychosocial care<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, psycho-social services provided by government and NGOs are generally short-term (due to cost and sustainability) and rarely provides the opportunity for bonding experiences between women, developing income generating activities, and working together on healing of memories and raising community awareness.

Faith has been identified as central to much of Africa's community life, and can play a valuable role in the overall SGBV response<sup>3</sup>. For example, a recent study in the Democratic Republic of Congo found that men and women who were actively engaged in faith and faith institutions, had more empowering attitudes and were more protected in terms of women's experience of intimate partner violence<sup>4</sup>. Although studies linking faith engagement with the experience of sexual and intimate partner violence has not yet been undertaken in South Africa, levels of violence in the country are unprecedented and tapping into the potential of faith groups to provide care and support and address harmful attitudes – especially relating to Scripture – is an important step nonetheless.

Tearfund, in its commitment to women who have experienced SGBV, have been establishing psycho-social support groups in Kwa-Zulu Natal since 2013, placing women right at the heart of the SGBV response. Support groups offer women a meeting place to express their concerns and needs, to develop plans of action for their lives, and advocate for change in their communities. It is from these support groups that stories of change were collected.

This study forms part of the We Will Speak Out Coalition SA "Movement for Change" project, supported by AmplifyChange. The We Will Speak Out Coalition in South Africa actively advocates and engages faith institutions and faith leaders to galvanise support for women affected by violence, to provide a safe space to speak out, and to start addressing harmful social norms and stigma which perpetuate SGBV. Through this vibrant Coalition, the project aims to mobilise faith leaders and their communities to address the root causes of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Gauteng provinces of South Africa.

Supporting women who have experienced SGBV through formalised structures, in this case faith-based support groups, and documenting their stories of change is integral to this project. It is hoped that this report will not only contribute to the sustainability of such support groups by documenting their impact, but that it will also be used as a tool to encourage and inspire women from across South Africa to take the first step towards healing in their own lives.

## 2. Aims of the study

The aims of this study is intended to complement to broader objectives of the "Movement for Change" Project and links to the WWSOSA Theory of Change. Three aims have been identified:

- 1) To determine the impact and effectiveness of faith-based SGBV support groups.
- 2) To explore the effectiveness of the MSC method in measuring effectiveness of faith-based SGBV support groups
- 3) To establish the value of potential expansion of (Champion-led) faith-based SGBV support groups across South Africa.

### 3. Methodology

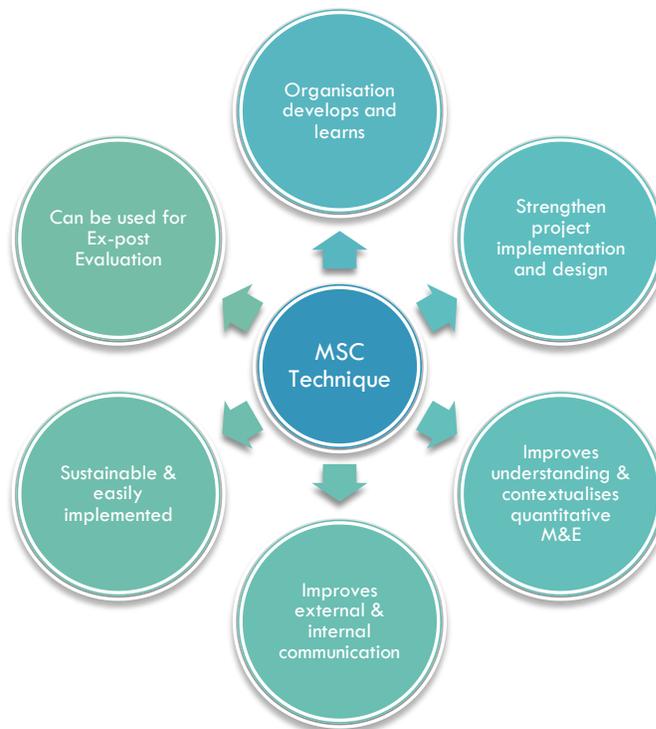
This study used an adaptation of the Most Significant Change methodology to capture stories of most significant change resulting from women’s belonging to faith-based SGBV support groups in Kwazulu Natal and Gauteng provinces.

#### 3.1. Most Significant Change Technique

The Most Significant Change technique is a qualitative, indicator-free and highly participatory form of monitoring and evaluation which engages stakeholders and beneficiaries in the process of evaluation<sup>5</sup>. Its inductive nature makes it relatively easy to identify changes that are difficult to quantify, and makes it possible to implement across cultures, languages and professional skills<sup>5,6</sup>. MSC involves broad questions about change to guide stories which mainly includes the “who did what, when and why”<sup>7</sup>. Emphasis is placed on why people consider a particular change to be significant<sup>7</sup>. Once the stories are compiled, the most striking are selected by project staff and/or stakeholders for reporting<sup>7</sup>.

#### 3.2. Strength of MSC as method

IFAD (2013) identified the following strengths of using the MSC methodology:



### 3.3. Champions

At the start of the project, SGBV support groups were already in place as result of Tearfund South Africa's work with women who have experienced violence. It was decided that Champions - women who have either established or are running these support groups, and who are involved in advocacy activities – will play a key role in story-telling and story collection. Champions were trained on MSC and were confident to explain the process to their own support groups. Champions are also involved in advocacy at community, provincial, national, and some at the international level, which provides great leverage to advocate for potential funding and sustainability of support groups led by Champions in South Africa.

### 3.4. Adaptation of MSC technique for SGBV

Working with women who have experienced SGBV requires a different approach than general development work where the MSC method is used. Certain aspects of the method would not be appropriate, such as visiting sites in which stories are situated for verification. Below are the 6 adapted steps of the MSC method for this study.

1

#### *Starting and raising interest*

MSC as a technique needs to be systematic and those using it must understand its value and be willing to contribute their time and efforts to make it effective. For this reason, the lead researcher trained champions to understand the method but was involved in the collection of stories as well and able to answer any questions from champions to ensure the effective implementation of the method.

2

#### *Defining domains of change*

This step links to the objectives of the study and the type of stories to be collected. The following domains of changes were established with Champions during the MSC training week. The domains defined are deliberately broad to ensure that it can be defined by those telling the story:

- 1) Women's journeys of personal growth and empowerment
- 2) Improved emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of women
- 3) Changes in knowledge and awareness
- 4) Any other change ('open window' domain)

3

#### *Defining the reporting period*

Before the MSC technique is implemented, the reporting period should be defined. For the design of this study, each Champion was asked to collect three stories from her support group over a 4-month period, rather than monthly reporting of stories as some Champions often travelled and others had alternative employment.

4

***Collecting stories of significant change***

Stories of change were collected by the lead researcher and by female Champions who lead support groups in their areas of residence. Open-ended questions were asked keeping the four domains of change in mind. The following broad questions guided stories of significant change (SC).

- 1) What were the circumstances prior to change?
- 2) What kind of change took place?
- 3) Why is the story significant?
- 4) Any further reflection?

5

***Selecting the most significant change stories***

Stories were selected collectively by the lead researcher, the support group coordinator and the Champions. The section on data collection in this report will provide more information on story selection and process. Stories were collected in two stages: 1) personal stories of Champions and their growth as part of support groups; 2) stories from women who belong to support groups either established or run by Champions.

In the first stage, story selection was less complicated and group discussions could be held as all Champions have reached a stage in their healing where speaking out was easier and they trusted their peers. In the second stage story collection, it was not always possible for Champions to have group discussions with the support groups they ran as women were in different stages of healing and some were not willing to have an open discussion about their story. For this reason, each Champion could choose three stories from their support groups to send to the lead researcher and further discussion took place between the researcher and the Champion.

6

***Reporting on MSC stories and selection***

Stories chosen are written up through with the domains of change in mind. The reason for selecting each story clearly explained, each story is also linked to the WWSOSA [theory of change](#).

### 3.5. Sample

Twenty stories of change were selected through purposive sampling. For the purpose of this report, ten of the stories of Most Significant Change was selected to showcase. All twenty stories can be accessed on the We Will Speak Out SA web site at: <https://www.wewillsspeakout.org/countries/south-africa/>.

MSC typically has a bias in favour of success but within stories issues do arise that women are grappling with. Eighteen stories were selected from support groups run by Tearfund in Kwa-Zulu Natal (eight support groups existed prior to WWSOSA project implementation and a subsequent twelve support groups have been created) and two stories were selected from a newly established support group in Gauteng province.

## 4. Data collection and analysis

### 4.1. First stage story collection – Champions

Data were collected by various means. As the MSC process is highly participatory, stories were also collected from Champions to document the role that faith-based support groups have played in their own lives. Collection of Champion stories were done by the lead researcher and Champions collectively at a retreat in Kwa-Zulu Natal. This location was chosen as it offered the opportunity to reflect on healing and find stillness of mind while having access to the support of their group. It is important to state that all Champions were well acquainted with each other and had built strong bonds long before the retreat. Champions were open to share stories with each other in a space where they felt supported with trusted friends.

Upon data collection, Champions were divided into small groups and were asked to share their stories of significant change (SC). Each group collectively decided on two stories to share with the broader group of Champions. Stories shared were inspirational but also deeply painful. For some Champions, the process of writing down their stories (some for the first time) was profound and overwhelming, and friends were asked to read stories to the group.

#### *Safety of, and support for Champions during story-telling*

Song and praise were women's preferred tools of containment throughout the process. Debriefing sessions with the group were led by the Tearfund South Africa programme officer who has a dedicated role in supporting Champions and developing the support groups.

### 4.2. Second stage story collection – Women in support groups

In the months following MSC training and the story collection process, Champions were asked to collect up to three stories from women in support groups which they established or led. All support groups but one was in different areas of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The Gauteng-based support group is located in an informal settlement and was established during this study. For this reason, only two stories were selected from this province.

Collection of stories included the use of mobile phones. A WhatsApp group was created where Champions could share stories and photographs with the lead researcher. This group also served as a general chat room for Champions to send words of inspiration and support. Where Champions did not feel comfortable with WhatsApp, stories were sent via Facebook Messenger or e-mail, depending on ease of accessibility for Champions.

## 5. Limitations of MSC Technique

MSC, as with many other evaluation methods, has certain limitations. Equal Access (2011) identified biases associated with MSC which should be kept in mind when reading this report. These include:

- Biases towards stories of success – to minimize this, an “open window” domain has been created to capture any negative stories
- Biases towards the views of good-story tellers – to minimize this bias, each champion were asked to provide three stories
- Subjectivity in the story selection process – reasons for selecting stories are discussed

## 6. Ethics and safety

Women’s safety was central to this study and Champions were trained on ethical considerations in accordance with international guidelines codes<sup>1</sup>.

Guiding principles for the MSC process included:

1. Obtaining informed consent
2. Do no harm
3. Protecting confidentiality
4. Avoiding deceptive practice
5. Providing the right to withdraw
6. Providing support services such as debriefing and counselling

Women’s stories were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. For this study, data collection was done in established support groups and women were asked for verbal consent to share their stories. Women could ask for their stories to be removed from the final report if they were not comfortable with them being published.

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<sup>1</sup> Protocols and standards guiding the MSC process included the WHO Ethical standards and procedures for research with human beings; and WHO Putting women first: Ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women.

## 7. Stories of change

### Story 1: Ntombi

*“Change lies in wisdom, wisdom lies in listening, and listening is my tool”*

There is nothing better than the opportunity to reflect on your own journey. It gives you the pleasure of seeing God’s work in your life and the grace that one takes for granted. I remember - four years ago - I was a bitter young lady who was angry with the world. I had questions but sadly enough, I had no one to ask. I was raped on my way

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF NTOMBI’S STORY

This story was selected as it speaks to the different needs after experiencing sexual violence. Although counselling was available, Ntombi could not connect with the method, and found being in a support group with others who have experienced similar pain more constructive. She could work on rebuilding her self-confidence and she completed her studies. In addition, support group provided her with a platform from which she could start advocating for other women who have experienced rape.

home from the library by a stranger. It was during my exams and after it happened I couldn’t concentrate, so I decided to drop out of school.

I was given six sessions with the social worker but couldn’t finish them because to me it made no sense, going to someone who have a pile of work where I’m just one of manys I wanted someone who will at least understand my life. I joined *Abanqobi*, a support group which is under the *Phephisa* movement. When I joined, I thought it was one of those organisations who will just come and take your stories, but to my surprise they listened to me and did follow-ups.

We had healing sessions which helped me a lot, we shared and listened to other stories which I could relate to. Having people who make time just to listen to you and encourage you is the best. The group motivated me so much and I went back and completed my studies. I am now able to talk about my story without feeling angry or crying. The fact that I survived encouraged me to reach out to more survivors and encourage

those who do not believe that there is life after such pain. Our hope as a group is to live in a community that doesn’t believe in one person’s power over another - but a community that is peaceful and is non-violent. We meet the on last Sunday of each month as a group, just to build our relationships with each other and do activities, which is mostly awareness. The workshops that TEARFUND and WE WILL SPEAK OUT has been providing us played a major role in my life, and also to us as a group. We have learned more and applied what we have learned in our community. I am convinced that where there is love and where women are empowered there is a way. Being with the ladies transformed my anger into empowerment. I am a powerful young lady. I hope that my efforts and my abilities will reach out to every survivor in this country. Change lies in wisdom, wisdom lies in listening and listening is my tool. I am a human made in God’s image, my purpose is to is to be available to serve others and my responsibility is to love.

## Story 2: Amara

*“Not only poor women are raped”*

I am 28 years old and live in Umlazi and hold a diploma in travel and tourism. I was raped when I was 17 years old just a few days after Valentine’s Day by a boy who I thought was my friend. On my way back home from church he invited me to come and have lunch. It was a friendly lunch until he forced himself on me. I did not tell anyone about the incident, I went home took a shower and carried on with my daily duties.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF AMARA’S STORY

This story was selected relates to women’s difficulty of sharing experiences of abuse with loved ones for fear of being judged and blamed. For Amara, belonging to a group helped her create a sense of family which lifted the burden of her pain by having women she trusted to talk to.

Amara also addresses the impact of research language on survivors of rape. Although it is generally understood that women from poorer backgrounds are more vulnerable to victimisation, care needs to be taken in how research messages are communicated.

To this day I've never shared it with anyone from my family. Somehow, I feel that they will judge me and see it as my fault. I feel safe and comfortable sharing it with other fellow survivors because they can understand how I feel.

Being a victim is very hard because you feel that it’s the end of the world and it changes your life a lot. You feel used and feel that you can never trust anyone, it changes the way of you think and how you carry yourself. Of course, to this day I'm not a fan of Valentine’s Day as it reminds of the days that followed my rape. Since joining Tearfund, I've recovered drastically because I've found myself after so many years. It has brought me so much healing and made me aware that rape is everywhere and not reporting your case is a big mistake. I've also learnt that sharing brings healing.

The things that I gave up on a few years ago, I now believe I can conquer, because the ladies have given me so much support and strength to go on. I'm currently studying a teaching degree - I have passion for kids. In the beginning, I

wanted to be an air-hostess, because after the rape, I believed that flying away would heal all my wounds only to find that I was just chasing a destiny that is not mine.

Finally, I can say I'm in a better space and happy to work with kids and other women who have gone through the same pain. I've been a champion/survivor with Tearfund for four years and I have six other women that I lead in my group. Most of us have experienced rape. All the ladies in my group have diplomas and degrees that they have obtained after their healing sessions with our group. It motivated them to go back and study and finish what they started. It is safe to say that not only uneducated and poor people get raped. We all do, not matter our background. As a group, we support each other by being there for each other emotionally and physically. We are more like a family now than people who met in church. The meetings and activities that we engage in show that healing can improve your life.

### Story 3: Ada

*“I couldn’t feel love because I hated men”*

After my mother died I went to stay with my uncle who is a police man. At 12 years old, I was in boarding school. My uncle took me from boarding school and treated me as his own daughter, and he was a father to me, we would always eat together. I trusted him, because he was my father.

One day, during lunch time, I was eating and drinking Fanta and started feeling drowsy. I fell asleep and later woke up in hospital where I was given medicine. My uncle came to see me and told me that if I speak of what happened he will shoot me, he then showed me his gun. I did not go back to school after that and I didn’t go back to live with my uncle. I fled to Burundi from my home in Rwanda. There I found family – my sister’s friend took me to their home but couldn’t afford to send me to school. Only later I managed to go to school in Burundi and I made friends. I was influenced by friends to get a boyfriend who can pay for what I needed. I started having problems at school. Male teachers tried to convince me to sleep with them in exchange to pass my grade. Because I refused they gave me low marks and I started to fail. I felt like I was losing. My boyfriend who was paying for my school fees at the time left me after hearing rumours about the teachers. He thought that I had slept with them.

One day, my sister phoned to tell me she was selling my mother’s house in Rwanda. I left for Rwanda and we shared the money from the sale. I was 18 years old by that time. I went back to Burundi where I met a friend of mine who was staying here in South Africa. During that time, the war in Burundi broke out. We planned and travelled from Burundi to South Africa together. In South Africa I started to survive. I met my husband who is a Christian. He introduced me to his church and I became a born-again Christian. I was Baptised and my life started to change. But I couldn’t feel love because I hated men. I had no feelings for men, they were only financial security for me.

At church one day, there was an announcement that they were looking for women who would like to talk about their challenges. I was curious. I had no idea why we were being called. We were given the day to meet and I will never forget it – 2013. We were 12 women and I was waiting to see what they were going to say. They spoke about rape. I was confused...how am I going to share my story?

We continued the group meetings and it was always about talking, every time. The day I finished talking, I felt like the heaviness I have carried in my heart was now empty. That night I couldn’t sleep and thought of what happened, worried that people will take it outside the group or even tell my husband. He didn’t know.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF ADA’S STORY

This story was selected as it takes the reader on a journey of deep suffering and dependence to a place where Ada feels that she can stand independently and build a life for herself. She speaks of the inability to love men and how they served only a purpose security for her. Her perspective started to change once she joined the support group.

This story, once again, highlights the silence and fear of speaking out as Ada was initially afraid that confidentiality might be broken in the group. She has never told her husband and feared that he would find out. For Ada, belonging to the support group not only empowered her economically, but also spurred her advocacy work in her community. She has regained her self-confidence and found strength within her own story to move her life forward.

## Stories of change, messages of hope

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But the women I shared my story with kept the secret. The more meeting days came the more I changed. I became stronger and able to teach other new members. Having my own group teaches me how to recognise problems other women or friends may have and how to talk to them about it. Through the group, I started to find a way to survive by myself. I work now, running my own business. My business is going well. Before this, I was unable to do anything because of self-doubt. Now I have taken the responsibility of helping other women who have similar problems.

### Story 4: Lu

#### *“A photograph for my husband”*

Coming into a new relationship, I didn't know I was bringing my hurt into the marriage, but my support group has helped me in a huge way. As a Champion, you speak to someone but then realise you are speaking to yourself as well and not only the group in your community. Most of all, the Champion group has played a huge role in helping me, the Champions may not realise this, but they have helped me rebuild my marriage and be open and loving to my husband – I was abused in previous relationships so when my husband tries to come close to me I would push him away.

He would buy me things, but I wouldn't accept it because I will feel that he thinks he owns me. Even our sexual relationship was bad. By the time we have been married for 6 years he hasn't seen my body because I was always told in the past how ugly I was.

I was so used to be beaten badly, and even when the blood was dripping from beatings I was forced to have sex. I am grateful for the support group, and mostly for the group of Champions. Now, I have even taken a picture and sent it to my husband, he now has seen my body and our relationship is better. He told me he was giving up but now he has his beautiful wife and he loves me. I really didn't know love, because all my life I had to fight. I was abused, but now I can laugh.

### Story 5: Siyanda

#### *“Defining a new life”*

I am a 23-year-old lady born and raised by a single mom in a township of Umlazi. I matriculated in 2012 and I was very passionate about travelling and exploring nature. My mother is a hard worker, a good hearted strong woman. She was my role model growing up. I'm the oldest daughter of her three children.

In 2013, my mother had a fight with her sister (my aunt). My aunt, out of anger, told my mom to tell me where I came from and why I don't have a father. I was very confused because my mom told me my father passed away

## SIGNIFICANCE OF LU'S STORY

This story was selected as it provoked a strong emotional response from the group it was shared with. The story is particularly relatable as Lu speaks honestly about the repeated cycle of abuse and how this impacts on feelings of self-worth, negative body image and low self-esteem. Through the support of women in her group, Lu has learned self-love and the value that she has not only in her own life but also that of others. She has managed to rebuild what she calls 'a broken romantic relationship' and took the bold step of sending her husband a photograph of her body – a liberating and life-changing action from her side. She now feels loved, connected, at peace and says she can laugh again.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF SIYANDA'S STORY

This story was selected as it brought a different perspective. Although Siyanda did not experience violence herself, she was a child born from rape. For her, dealing with the complexity of this is an ongoing journey, a work in progress as she tries to forgive her father. Joining the support group has provided Siyanda ways to calm herself and deal with feelings of betrayal, discomfort and hurt at home. Her relationship with her mother has fundamentally changed and she is working within her group to find ways of defining the new relationship in a way that would be healthy for her.

while she was pregnant. That evening, my mother called me and told me who my father was. She said that he had raped her and as result, she fell pregnant with me. I have never felt so betrayed and upset in my life. I ran away from home and stayed with my friends for a week. I could not understand how a woman I love so much can lie to me and I was upset that I'm a product of rape. Eventually I went back home but nothing was the same again.

One morning I woke up and decided to go see my "father". I was not sure what I wanted to hear from him, but I just wanted to confront him. When I confronted him, he said that he was sorry for what he did to my mom and he had been trying all his life to be a father to me, but my mom blocked him. This was more confusing to me and complicated things even more for me.

In church I heard about the support group, so I went and shared my story. We then started counselling with my mom and we are still finding a way to normalise the situation. I enjoy the time we share as a group and the activities we do together. My

mother has forgiven my father. I pray to God that one day I can be able to see him as a father and not as a rapist.

### Story 6: Stella

*"Yep, that's me. I'm alive again"*

I was sexually abused twice. I was abused, first by my uncle at the age of eight and then a second time, when I was 23 years old, by my brother in-law while my sister was on night duty and I was visiting at their home.

After the second attack I was even more traumatised because I fell pregnant. I had been in a three-year relationship, but my boyfriend rejected me and hated me when he discovered that I had been impregnated by my brother-in-law. My family was confused and divided. They found it very difficult to believe what had happened. In desperation, I turned to the survivor support group and I also began regular attendance at their meetings. Now I had received total comfort and healing from my trauma through listening to other survivors. I was listened to and supported by other survivors and the Tearfund team. I developed a close relationship with my son born from this.

Before I joined the survivors group, I was dominated by feelings of worthlessness. I just had no self- image left and a part of me was lost. When I look in the mirror, I used to see a worthless person. My life not worth living. When

## Stories of change, messages of hope

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walking along the street, it's as if all eyes were on me, blaming me and seeing me as worthless, while my brother-in-law is walking tall and free.

I felt as if every person was talking about me. There were many sounds in my ear, like many people talking loudly at the same time; blaming me. When the noise started, I would run and lock myself in my room, close the curtains and sit in the dark. Then I would cry and bang on the wall. I cried in the bath, I cried when I woke up... I was alone and most of my family members felt pity for my sister, but not for me. For the first three months I could not sleep during the night because I had a recurrent dream of a mob coming to kill me, blaming me for sleeping with my brother in law. I was so scared of the night, that the situation was torturing me. When my tummy started to show, things really started falling apart. I remember sitting on my bed holding a rope, intending to hang myself; just waiting for the right time. My mum came in, took the rope and took me to a traditional healer to remove the spell; but all in vain I still wanted to kill myself. I could not cope with the body demands of pregnancy and the feeling of negativity. To me, the easy way to avoid that was to die. If I died I wouldn't hear the voices of people blaming me.

Joining the support group was like finding new family. If you have never been raped, then I don't think that you'd understand. Sometimes you get the feeling of losing control. It's a horrible, horrible feeling because you no longer control yourself and your thoughts go around in circles. I was so confused, I didn't know what to do, but clearly, I was not going to be me anymore. I was just going to disappear. Before the incident I was envied by all family members for my respect and good behavior. After the rape it was just the opposite. The family knew that I was once raped by my uncle, but that topic was a 'No go' discussion; nobody wanted to talk about it. If I ever mentioned it, my mother would get angry and shout at me to keep quiet. But this time the family could not hide the disgrace as I was pregnant so, unfortunately, I had to deal with it alone. I had no energy. I just needed someone to listen to me and guide me because I was so confused and desperate for help and guidance.

After six months of attending my support group my life changed. Before, I didn't like walking into a place alone but now I go anywhere I want to go, and talk to anybody I want to. I'm one hundred percent healed! I'm what I used to be – very good (loud), Yep, that's me! I'm alive again. With the support of our lead champion, I managed to forgive the two family members who raped me. Through forgiveness, the burden of pain left me, and I am healed. I no longer hear voices of judgement in my mind. With the power and love I gained in my survivors group, I am able to attend family gatherings and rituals without being afraid of gossip or coming face to face with my brother-in-law. I have forgiven them and love my son without condition. I have learned to find meaning, even in very difficult situations and the answers are always there, in other survivors' stories.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF STELLA'S STORY

Stella's story was selected to highlight multiple victimization and falling pregnant from rape. She speaks about stigma and being rejected by her significant other. Her rape divided her family which brought feelings of low self-worth, suicidality, blame and insecurity.

Stella built a relationship with her son born from the rape which served as an anchor in her life, despite complications she experienced during and after the pregnancy. After joining her support group, she could work through rejection she has experienced from her family and could forgive her perpetrators. She has gained confidence to join family meetings again despite her perpetrators being at the meetings. She has dealt with feelings of extreme insecurity. This story captures complexity of rape and triumph within her group despite her hardships.

## Story 7: Mary

### *“Breaking through taboos”*

My childhood home was a warm home. We were good hearted people who were welcoming to everyone with a problem or who didn't have a place to stay. We would take people in as a brother or sister like real family members.

One day my mother wasn't at home and left us children at home. She wasn't worried as she knew there were older people to look after us. A man at home came to me and forced himself on me and raped me. I was a child. I was so confused, and I didn't know who to tell or what to do. As I was young, it was physically painful for me and I struggled to walk. When my mom came back she asked what has happened to me. She started crying because the man said if she reports him he will kill us – my mom and her family. My mother cleaned me and told me to have a rest. She went to confront the man again and chased him away from our home.

I am an older woman now. I joined the support group and realised more girls and women are experiencing rape every day and not speaking out because they fear being blamed or judged for it.

I saw the importance of sharing and showing that even an old lady like me was raped. But it is important to speak out, report the incident and get help as soon as possible. For me, I took time to accept or report as it was back in the days where it was hard to speak about sex.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY'S STORY

This story was selected to highlight the plight of women who were sexually abused as girls. In this story, Mary, who is now in her 50s, speaks about the confusion and fear that children experience when rape is perpetrated against them. The story is significant in that she, many years later, found her support group and realized that there were many others like her who never reported the abuse. Mary has found a voice for women of all ages who have experienced abuse and is actively breaking through taboos around speaking about sex.

## Story 8: Heather

### *“Living in Hell with the Devil himself”*

Whenever I see my group members going or coming back from the meetings my eyes get filled with tears, but even worse when they come to visit me and tell me who is healed and got helped during the meeting. I just see myself as a person serving a death sentence in the women's jail where men are “God”. It kills me inside because I once was a woman who belonged to the group and participated until the devil found out. I was very happy to be part of the group and every time I was in the meeting I would gain lots of confidence and tell myself that I'm going to get out of this crazy marriage and run away with my kids. Start over somewhere and live happily ever after like other women. The sad part is that every time after the meeting I still have to go back to that crazy selfish husband always putting himself first and making me his sex slave. I am a person that can say I live in hell because my husband rapes me every time he has to buy groceries or to support us as a family. He uses his responsibility in a bad way. Everything the kids and I need or want I know that after asking for it I will only get it if I give him sex and after that I can get what I need. He does all of this because he knows my background. Where I come from, my family don't have much and they can't afford extra mouths to feed as there is no-one working.

## Stories of change, messages of hope

They depend on a social grant that isn't enough to get by. Also, I am a housewife who looks after the kids and do the chores around here as he told me that he will provide for us but now it is like he was forced by someone to not want me to work. This was to make sure that he will always find me at home. I want to be able to chat to people but he said I'm not allowed to have friends. I used to sneak out even going to the support meetings as my sister was the one who is a member and knows my story – she was able to come to my house.

It was the end of the world when he came home one day. He was very angry not knowing what's going on. He went straight to the bedroom, took out his stick and beat the hell out of me asking who told me I could go out and spend two hours in meetings with people he doesn't know to speak about our love life. He asked if is he not man enough for me, and whether I wanted the ladies in the group to get me another man because I am not satisfied with him anymore. He said that he was disappointed as he does everything for me, and the thank you he gets from me is to spread rumours about him saying that he rapes me. I tried by all means to get him to listen to me, but this guy doesn't listen to any woman and his word is the final one. So, when he was done beating me, he told me to choose between him and the group. My tears were rolling, I just looked up to him as I was down on the floor begging for mercy. I was bleeding. He said how I could ask such a thing, it is a silly question and shook his head. He said that if I knew what was good for me, I would stay away from that group or else end up dead. So, I guess good things are not meant for me because that was the last time I attended. Up until today my sister came to get my story. I keep telling myself everything happens for a reason. I'm still living my hell with the devil himself.

### Story 9: Lesedi

#### *"Today is Monday"*

Today is Monday. I'll be nursing my face and wherever it hurts after I have been beaten up during the weekend. The thought of him makes me cry, even if I sense his smell. His behaviour really scares me because I know that this guy is supposed to be my everything, my shoulder to cry on, my hero. That's what my uncle does to me. He will beat me up whenever it is weekend and he is so drunk that he thinks I am his wife. Because every fight will start when I ask for food and noticing that there is no meat. Sometimes there is meat, but he will say it is too little for him and he is a man, he deserves better. It started with my mother, she is so soft she just does anything for him. I came to a point where I was sick and tired of this violence. He had beaten me while I had a baby on my back and

## SIGNIFICANCE OF HEATHER'S STORY

This story was selected as it was an unexpected change which can be classed under the 'open window' domain. It is significant in that it highlights the dangers for women in support groups who find themselves in abusive relationships. It also raises questions around issues of confidentiality in support groups. Heather continues to experience brutal violence and was prohibited by her husband to attend the support groups. Her husband mentions a 'rumour of him raping her'. This suggests there was a possible violation of Sarah's right to safety and confidentiality within the support group. This is a crucial consideration in establishing groups and ensuring that experienced Champions lead and train the groups on the impact of breaching such trust.

Heather, despite being isolated, wanted her story to be told and has access to support from women in the group who she trusts. Her group Champion continues to monitor her safety and well-being.

he broke my nose. My face was like a car going for panel-beating that was a write off. He also hit the baby on my back. I saw myself as a nobody. He always said I can't seem to achieve or do something good in my life, just like my mother.

I was unemployed and depended on him for food and other things. So, I had to put up with his violence as there is nowhere we can go, and we are useless people. I then heard of the support group in my community for women and the group deals with SGBV. At first, I thought I couldn't cope or fit in as I thought the group was all about women who were sexually abused as per the first explanation that I got. But you know I wanted to get out of the house and have some fresh air and meet new people. I am very curious and couldn't stop myself from going. I joined the group and became a member as I didn't miss any of the meetings held. I now have a full understanding of the group and what it is for.

Joining the group really helped me realise there is a lot going around my community, there is too much violence and you hardly find people reporting it to the police or anyone for that matter. It taught me the importance of knowing the right channels of reporting violence and attending support groups can help you heal and build your self-esteem. Today I have self-confidence, I'm the one doing SGBV awareness in my community, I'm a community volunteer helping people and working with them. I have a certificate in SGBV so I'm walking proud and I say, "Silence no more" because I know how it feels when you are beaten up and can't do anything about it. I want to thank the lady who told me about the support group because now I have been in trainings and I understand SGBV. Now I am responsible for every woman and child around me not to experience abuse under my watch.

So today is Monday again, and I'm not in pain or nursing any wounds because I've become a better person who stands her ground and also knows better.

## Story 10: Dana

*"A silent observer"*

I work with vulnerable girls. I pushed my own story of abuse away but working with these girls...it came back to haunt me. In actual fact, it hunts me. I was sexually abused as a little girl. I never, ever told anyone about it. Not even my mother. The guilt was tearing me apart and my mother went to her grave not knowing what happened to me when I was just a child. My abuser was known to me and I feared him. He threatened to kill me.

Now, 20 years later, I heard of the support group meeting and decided to attend. I disclosed my story to only one person there. I am not ready to talk. I'm scared that someone in the group may talk about my experience outside in the community. I can't risk that as my partner doesn't know. I struggle to be intimate with him. I don't like being touched or when he initiates sex. It takes me back to my experience as a child and I don't know how to deal with this in my relationship. I am not ready to disclose to him.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF LESEDI'S STORY

This story was selected as it depicts the life of Lesedi, who was dependent on her abuser but could rise above the abuse to become an advocate for other women and children in her community. It shows the diversity of support groups, in that it offers a space for women to heal from various, and interlinked forms of violence against them.

Although groups were initially established for women who have experienced sexual violence, it has evolved to include women who have multiple forms of violence, for example emotional and physical violence.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF DANA'S STORY

This story was selected as it belongs to a newly established support group in Gauteng. Dana's story highlights the issues raised in joining new groups, such as trust and privacy, how stories would be received by the group and how people will react – especially if the rape has been kept secret for many years. There needs to be an understanding in groups that some people will take a very long time to disclose and might be silent observers at the start. Support groups should create an understanding space for those who take longer to disclose.

Maybe in time I'll be able to talk to the group. For now, I am feeling like a weight has been taken off my shoulders. I feel lighter because I could speak out, even if only to one person. I don't carry my burden alone and am not ashamed anymore.

I am thinking of taking a different approach with the girls I work with. As I go through my own journey of healing, maybe I can support them in a more loving way, maybe I can do activities with them that will help build them up. I'll think about what I can do. For now, I am just thankful that I can finally start to heal myself.

## 8. Lessons learned

### 8.1. The power of support

The MSC tool is valuable for contextualizing the successes and negative aspects of support groups through stories rather than numbers. The most significant stories can be used to inspire Champions in expanding their groups, to advocate for the establishment of groups in other provinces and fundraise for groups and specific needs they may have. It also serves as a tool for survivors of SGBV to connect to stories and rise above their own circumstances to become the women they have set out to be. Support groups for survivors of SGBV, through this evaluation proves effective in empowering women and building self-esteem to be able to heal and reach out to others. Some key lessons from the MSC process:

Writing down stories in support groups are cathartic to some and women can find or re-assert strength and empowerment within them

Support groups are a tool to help build confidence and self-esteem to achieve career and educational aspirations

Support groups are a tool for active advocacy in communities to raise awareness on SGBV

Support groups offer deep bonding and trust which are used as the foundation to rebuild shattered lives

Support groups provide a space where women can find peace to practice their faith and pray with other women

Support groups are a catalyst for some women to work towards forgiveness and rebuild intimate relationships

## 8.2. Potential downfalls

Although support groups in this study document the most positive aspects about them, the downfalls of such groups cannot be excluded. Through the story-telling process, one overarching theme was that of confidentiality and privacy. More stringent commitments should be set in place around confidentiality of women's stories within support groups. Speaking outside of support groups may endanger many women's lives and alienate them from the group. Champions and their groups have to address this on a regular basis as it is a weakness which may have detrimental consequences for women involved and the group as a whole.

Another important consideration is meeting survivors 'where they are' in their process of healing. Through the MSC process, stories tell us that women are at different stages of healing, and that all groups should consider this sensitivity and approach members with acceptance and empathy. Survivors may choose to disclose at different stages of their healing and this should not be met with apprehension or suspicion.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, MSC proved to be an effective method which can be implemented by a range of stakeholders across different settings and circumstances to evaluate the effectiveness of support groups for women who have experienced sexual and gender based violence. It places the survivor at the centre of the evaluation and amplifies her voice. This method also assists Champions in strengthening their groups and structuring activities to best support survivors. MSC can be recommended as a key tool in project toolboxes, as it gives insight and challenges the traditional top-down model of evaluation.

## 10. References

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