

Supporting survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse:

A how-to guide for creating
support resources



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Credits:

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Introduction

Digna, the Canadian Centre of Expertise on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), supports organizations to fulfill their duty of care towards their program participants, as it is each organization's obligation to support survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in their own operations and contexts. Digna's mandate is to support organizations to implement gender-responsive, survivor-centered, and trauma-informed policies, procedures, and resources in the case that someone comes to an organization for support following an incident of SEA. Digna encourages organizations to think through all policies, procedures, and resources with an intersectional and intercultural lens, and consider the different needs and realities of survivors.

The goal of this guide is to support organizations in preparing to support survivors of SEA, before an incident occurs. Pre-positioning the proper protocols, standard operating procedures, resources, and staff/volunteers with the skills to support survivors **in each country or context of operation** is key to ensuring the protection of the survivor.

It is important to note that there may be financial and human resource costs associated with some recommendations below. However, if a survivor does not receive the proper support, the cost to their

recovery and well-being is even greater. Digna urges organizations to consider prioritizing the up-front costs of proper survivor support, to avoid potentially creating more emotional work and triggering situations for survivors who do choose to come forward.

The risk of SEA to program participants is never zero. Digna aims to help organizations reduce that risk, but also address the risk of doing more harm to survivors. This guide aims to close the gap on implementing actual survivor-centered and trauma-informed policies and procedures. By using this guide, your organization will have a solid foundation for in-country support for survivors.

Disclaimer:

This is first and foremost a guide for SEA survivors, who are program participants and affected communities with whom international cooperation organizations work, and for organizations that support them. However, many guiding principles are transferable and can also be used to support staff and volunteers who experience sexual violence in the different contexts in which organizations work.

Key considerations for survivor support

Everyone in your organization should have a grasp on what to do when someone comes forward with an allegation or seeking support following an act of sexual violence. Survivors may go to anyone in the organization, so ensuring a consistent, safe and supportive reaction and reception is key.

What is basic survivor support?

Organizations have a duty of care to ensure that those who were harmed by alleged SEA have access to basic support services.

Basic survivor support services include responding to immediate needs such as medical care, material care such as food, clothing, shelter, as well as counselling, legal and law enforcement services. They can also involve services for potential long-term consequences resulting from SEA; for example, if a survivor must drop out of school due to SEA, organizations may provide access to vocational training, or if a woman has a child because of SEA, some organizations provide support for mother and child.¹

Basic support should be provided regardless of whether an SEA report is reviewed, investigated, or corroborated.

It is important to note that others who report alleged SEA such as witnesses, whistleblowers or bystanders may also need support and protection from the organization.²

Good practices for basic survivor support

Listening skills are essential for staff to be able to react appropriately such as: active listening,

confidentiality, empathy, communication, problem solving, and adaptability. These are critical when responding to a survivor, especially in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and all staff should be trained on how to respond to situations appropriately.

Survivor centered approaches ensure a supportive and conducive environment in which the survivor's wishes are respected, their safety is ensured, and they are treated with respect and dignity. The core principles are: (1) Safety, (2) Confidentiality, (3) Respect, and (4) Non-discrimination.

Safety means that the survivor is safe in coming to an organization and their staff/volunteers, using their resources, and in making decisions for themselves.

Confidentiality means that organizations will establish a circle of trust that ensures only people who absolutely need to know will be included, the survivor will be consulted before any new person is added to the circle, and they should know what information is being given to whom and the reason. **Respect** means that their choices and autonomy are listened to and acted upon; after an incident survivors want to make their own decisions on their own time, as this can be a key part of their healing and should be taken seriously by whoever is interacting with them in your organization. **Non-discrimination** is key in supporting survivors as it is never your place to make judgements or make survivors feel uncomfortable for having reached out.

Trauma-informed approaches focus on actionable steps to minimize potential for re-traumatization in our response. Below are examples of acts that can cause re-traumatization.³













1. For example, Oxfam GB may provide reasonable ongoing support for the mother and child born as a result of SEA, see: https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/50/OGB_survivor_policy_2020.pdf and the United Nations may facilitate pursuit of paternity and child support claims for victims see: https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/UN%20Victim%20Assistance%20Protocol_English_Final.pdf

2. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-03/Best%20Practice%20Guide%20Inter%20Agency%20Community%20Based%20Complaint%20Mechanisms.pdf>

3. <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html>

Retraumatization

What hurts?

System (policies, procedures, “the way things are done”)	Relationship (power, control, subversiveness)
 Having to continually retell their story	Not being seen / heard 
 Being treated as a number	Violating trust 
 Procedures that require disrobing	Failure to ensure emotional safety 
 Being seen as their label (i.e addict, schizophrenic)	Noncollaborative 
 No choice in service or treatment	Does things <i>for</i> rather than <i>with</i> 
 No opportunity to give feedback about their experience with the service delivery	Use of punitive treatment, coercive practices and oppressive language 

The difference?

Survivor-centered approaches aim to support survivors directly, while trauma-informed approaches aim to strengthen systems to accommodate and support all who may experience trauma.

Both are important to ensuring effective and safe responses to SEA.

Intersectionality and intercultural lens

Taking an intersectional approach enables organizations to understand the range of risks and realities faced by survivors in all their diversity.

Intersectionality is an approach that can be used to understand the ways in which people experience overlapping – or intersecting – forms of oppression, discrimination and marginalization based on different aspects of their identity.

The root cause of SEA incidents is the abuse of power by the perpetrator over the survivor. Organizations can maintain, reinforce, and replicate structural inequalities which enable the abuse of power to take place. International cooperation organizations must understand how they are maintaining structural inequalities and the differences in power and privilege amongst the people they are working on behalf of. Taking an intersectional approach to PSEA will enable organizations to better understand the range of risks faced by program participants in their full diversity and can help survivors feel more supported.⁴

4. <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/documents/intersectionality-and-safeguarding>

Identities that organizations need to be considering in this work include age, race, disability, economic status, mental health, legal status (citizenship status: refugees, immigrants, and IDPs), sexual orientation and gender identity, and religion or culture. Engaging with experienced individuals working within the communities served may help organizations with how to engage and put in place PSEA measures without putting individuals and communities at risk.

It is also crucial for organizations to ensure accessibility of support and services for all members of a community and staff and identify services for different population groups, e.g., services for people with certain disabilities, projects for women only, services for people of a specific ethnic group etc. Organizations should disseminate information on reporting mechanisms to staff and communities in a way that considers diverse backgrounds and needs (e.g., language, age, etc.)⁵

Some concrete examples: *these are just a few of the things to consider when using an intersectional approach, each context should be examined based on the present reality.*

Gender identity and sexual orientation: If a case of SEA involves a perpetrator and survivor of the same gender identity, the survivor may be criminalized or face community or family ostracism if they seek support.

Children: If your program participants are under the age of 18, that may change how they can access resources and they would likely need a parent present. That said, they may not want to share what has happened with their parents. Please consult child protection resources such as these to prepare your organization's policies and procedures:

[Safeguarding Children in Emergencies – Keeping Children Safe \(KCS\)](#)

[Developing Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures: A Facilitator's Guide – Keeping Children Safe](#)

[Child Safeguarding Standards and How to Implement Them – Keeping Children Safe](#)

Disability: Medical systems may be inaccessible to people with disabilities, including invisible disabilities and mental health needs. For example, someone living with PTSD or ADHD could face additional barriers in accessing the support they need, physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Culture: A barrier that is often overlooked is religious or cultural stigmas that may be present in each context. By understanding how people of different racial, ethnic, religious or cultural identities may be further stigmatized when seeking care prior to a crisis, an organization can make sure supports are appropriate for the context.

Legal status: Citizenship status can change what resources are accessible and what support is available. If your organization works with refugees, immigrants, IDPs, or expats, you should be aware of the rules of their status, and what they will or won't be able to access.

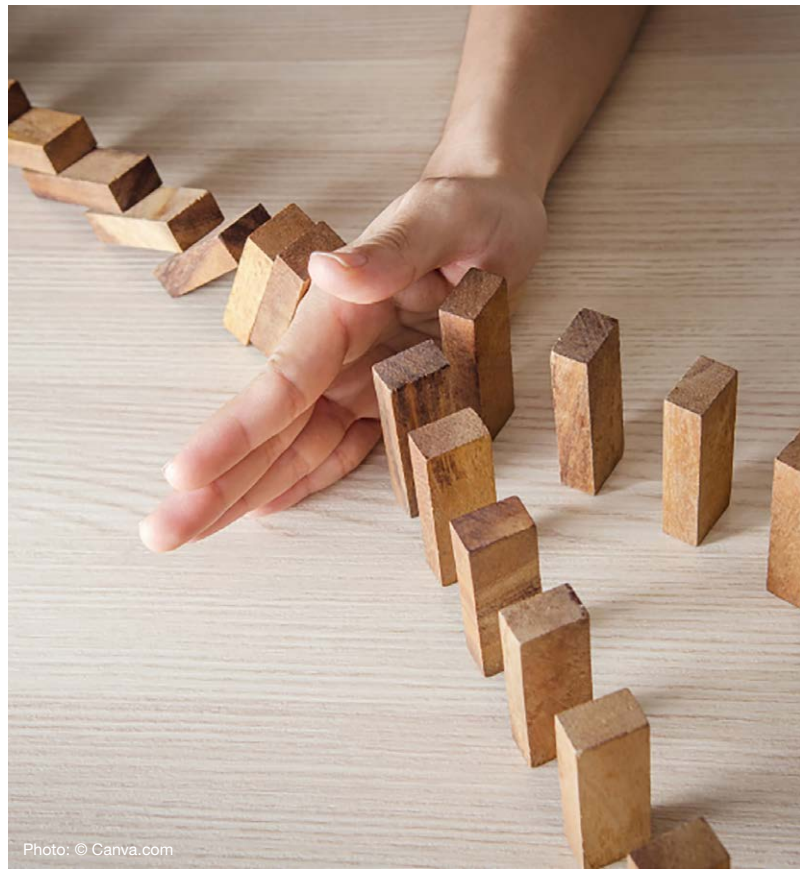


Photo: © Canva.com

5. <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/documents/intersectionality-and-safeguarding>

How to develop an in-country survivor support guide

A guide like this is critical as there are few resources in the PSEA space that provide survivors with tools to make context-specific, informed and timely decisions. It is highly recommended to work on this guide before a crisis occurs. If survivor support is thoughtfully and proactively planned out, your organization will be better prepared for anything that could happen, and in a better position to provide support for all stakeholders.

Before you develop your survivor-support guide:

- a. Appoint at least one PSEA focal point in each country of operation and ensure they have adequate time and resources to dedicate to this work.
- b. Reach out to women's rights organizations that are working in sexual violence response or are known for their advocacy work around sexual violence in the country.
 - i. They can provide critical on the ground insight on the entire guide. By collaborating with them, you also have a link to ensure the guide can be easily disseminated to the right audiences.
 - ii. Ensure that they are paid for the time they invest in supporting your organization.
- c. Do a context, vulnerability, and SEA risk assessment. This can be either as a standalone SEA risk assessment or integrated into broader risk assessments.⁶ In your mapping, take stock of community attitudes and norms around sexual relations, in particular outside of marriage, as some SEA survivors face the risk of being blamed by their communities/family members.
- d. Conduct a mapping of available survivor support services. Make sure to consider geographical accessibility and access to transportation to services and identify gaps where local standards may not reflect international standards. Internationally accepted criteria for determining the quality of gender-based violence survivor support services can be found in [Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence Core Elements and Quality Guidelines, Module 1](#).
- e. Adaptability: Clearly lay out your objectives and where and in what settings the guide should be used and adapted.
- f. If the organization already has a code of conduct or policies and procedures that relate to staff conduct and follow-up procedures:
 - i. A survivor (or organizations that support survivors) should review them to leverage their lived experiences.
- g. If you do not have a code of conduct that explicitly prohibits SEA, develop this alongside the survivor support guide.

Once your guide is developed:

- a. Ensure all stakeholders (inside the organization and program participants) have access to these without having to ask someone for them.
 - i. This ensures that if a survivor does not want to disclose what has happened, they can still get support.
 - ii. It also ensures that someone who could be a source of support is ready in the immediate aftermath of an emergency without having to search for information.

6. <https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/pseah-index/>

The survivor-support guide: suggested sections

Below is a draft outline of your survivor-support guide, and instructions on how to build a comprehensive guide. See Annex 1 for a modifiable template.

Steps to take

Clearly lay out all the options a survivor can take following an act of sexual violence. This section should be completed in clear step-by-step language so the survivor can make informed decisions and understand what options are available to them. In an instance of sexual violence, a survivor has had agency taken from them, and they should be empowered with information to choose next steps in an informed way.

Key questions:

1. What steps can a survivor take? E.g., seeking medical care, seeking psychosocial support, reporting the alleged perpetrator to the organization/local authorities.
2. What steps can a staff member supporting the survivor take? e.g., accompanying the survivor in the steps they have chosen, providing financial or other support as needed, reporting misconduct through the organization's reporting mechanisms.

Available support

In this section you should highlight the local context around supporting survivors of sexual violence. This should include:

- a. Safety and protection: Safety or protection plan to address risk of retaliation, breaches of confidentiality or further violence against the survivor.
- b. Contact information/locations
- c. Availability of services

- d. Cost of services: by clearly understanding financial implications, an organization can decide if they can help the survivor pay for these services.

Organizational policies

In this section, you should lay out your organizational policy regarding survivor support. Some organizations, such as Crossroads International⁷ and Oxfam GB have survivor support policies that lay out what support is available from the organization, including through the insurance plan or employee assistance program, and whether the organization has staff who are trained to provide psychosocial support or other care.

Safety and protection

In this section you should clearly lay out an immediate safety or protection plan to address the risk of retaliation, possible breaches of confidentiality or other further violence against the survivor. The roles and responsibilities should be clearly laid out.

The safety or protection plan may include relocation support upon consent of the survivor, and where necessary and appropriate.⁸

Medical services

In this section you should clearly lay out what the survivor can expect if they seek medical attention, including how to do so. This should include consideration of the kind of health care available, the availability and cost of services, as well as access to transportation and accessibility based on citizenship. You should also note whether there is staff who are trained to work with sexual violence survivors. It is recommended to create a list of what survivors could request, which could include:

7. This guide was developed by Adriana Leigh G – ALG Consulting, in close collaboration with Crossroads International leaders and staff.
8. Please read the UN's Victim Assistance Protocol https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/UN%20Victim%20Assistance%20Protocol_English_Final.pdf

1. Rape kits⁹
 - a. Which hospitals administer rape kits (and which don't)?
2. Blood work
3. Medications available in the country, where are they available, and their cost. These medications include:
 - a. Emergency contraceptives
 - i. Some countries do not have any emergency contraceptives available. Some organizations have them available in their country offices or ask staff to travel with them in case of emergency, while other organizations carry this medication in their vehicles.
 - b. Medication to treat injuries, and sexually transmitted infections, including antibiotics
 - c. Post-exposure for HIV
 - i. The first tablet must be taken within 48 hours of exposure. Some organizations have staff travel with one dose of post-exposure medication.
4. Ultrasound (depending on the extent of injuries and type of trauma)
5. Pregnancy options including safe abortion access*

**It is crucial to know the legal status of abortion in the country, in addition to the traditional and religious norms to understand where some survivors may face pressure to abort or a denial of abortion.¹⁰ "Emotional support and clear information, regardless of your individual beliefs [...], are needed to ensure that they understand the choices available to them if they become pregnant."¹¹ It is recommended that organizations consult with their legal counsel about the laws on abortion in the country of incident.*

You should also use this section to highlight what the hospital will do with the information once a survivor statement has been provided and tests have been completed.

Psychosocial services

Psychosocial services generally relate to survivor recovery, appropriate referrals, and reintegration (into community, workforce, family etc.).

In this section you will want to include what psychosocial services are available in the country, which organizations provide support, and what kind of support is provided. It is also important to note whether there may be cultural or financial barriers to accessing counselling services.

Local legal/cultural context

Sexual violence is defined differently, and different offences have varied consequences in the legal system or within local culture. It is important that the survivor knows this. Survivors specifically should know if any of the steps they take may impact future decisions.

The guide should clearly state what the following terms mean/laws in the local and legal context:

1. Rape
2. Sexual assault
3. Sexual violence
4. Age of consent
5. Intimate partner violence
6. Consent
7. Laws on abortion
8. Laws on sex work

It is important for survivors to know what the steps will be after they pursue legal action or other forms of justice. For example, in some contexts a survivor must stay in the country if they want to ensure legal proceedings take place. The organization will also want to outline the context for their organization, specifically if staff are alleged perpetrators.

It is also important to include laws around mandatory reporting in the country and which offenses require reporting to law enforcement, for example when a minor is involved.

In this section, it will be useful to include a list of security actors as well as organizations that build sexual violence

9. A "rape kit" sometimes also called a "sexual assault forensic exam" is when a medical specialist collects DNA evidence that can help identify the perpetrator. In most cases, DNA evidence needs to be collected within 72 hours following the assault in order to be analyzed. See: https://rainn.org/articles/receiving-medical-attention?_ga=2.160197949.1442887487.1621274966-1195814273.1620841064

10. <https://pseataforce.org/uploads/tools/1505891747.pdf>

11. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cmr_protocol_final_en.pdf

prevention and response capacity and information on police procedures for reporting sexual violence.

In this section you can also include information on security options to prevent further harm, procedures and timelines, and available support if survivors opt for legal recourse (e.g., accompaniment, legal assistance, transportation to court).

You should also include a list of legal services available which can include lawyers, legal aid, paralegals and traditional justice actors like elders or community leaders and include where possible, steps involved in national justice and traditional justice.¹²

Legal systems, including formal and traditional systems may or may not always reflect human rights principles. It is important to respect the survivor's preferences while being aware of practices or processes that may go against the survivor's best interest. Where possible, collaborate with actors in the legal and justice systems to reinforce human rights-based approaches.¹³

Legal and cultural contexts around transactional sex, and how this is defined by your organization's code of conduct are also important to include because the victim/survivor may be a sex worker. You can use the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) [Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws](#) to understand sex work laws in each country. The analysis should contextualize the sexist nature of these laws and standards in the sector around PSEA and sex work. It is important to acknowledge that people engage in sex work for many reasons, and look at reasons women, men and gender diverse people engage in sex work and the power relationships behind it. Individuals may base their livelihoods on the exchange of money or other services for sex, and the engagement by staff and volunteers in consensual sex work is not inherently SEA. That said, power imbalances exist in the context of development work that must be considered when enforcing PSEA codes of conduct.

When services are unavailable

Where services are not locally available, organizations are still responsible to ensure access to basic survivor support. In the absence of services, the organization should still act to ensure:

- Safety: This may include transportation/relocation to a safe place
- Medical care: Referrals
- Mental health and psychosocial support: Look for community structures/services
- Legal services: Identify organizations that provide legal support
- Basic material assistance: The organization may buy items for the survivor that they need immediately such as food, clothing, dignity kits, medication
- Identification of programs or services that operate remotely, or transportation to appropriate care as required
- Collaboration with local communities.¹⁴

In terms of funding, organizational budgets can be activated to provide this type of assistance where services are not available.¹⁵

For example, the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) supports UN and non-UN entities and organizations that provide victim and survivor assistance and support services. The Trust Fund provides funding to: specialized services which provide assistance and support required by survivors and children born as a result of SEA, including medical care, legal services, and psychosocial support, to address service gaps in the provision of assistance and support as well as support and communications for complainants, survivors and children born as a result of SEA.

The Trust Fund is not a financial compensation program and does not disburse funds directly to individual survivors and/or children born because of SEA.

12. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/establishing-gender-based-violence-standard-operating-procedures-sops-multisectoral-and>
13. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-03/Best%20Practice%20Guide%20Inter%20Agency%20Community%20Based%20Complaint%20Mechanisms.pdf> <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/establishing-gender-based-violence-standard-operating-procedures-sops-multisectoral-and/>
14. https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/sites/www.un.org.preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/files/technical_note_on_the_implementation_of_the_un_protocol_on_the_provision_of_assistance_to_victims_of_sea_eng.pdf
15. https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/sites/www.un.org.preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/files/technical_note_on_the_implementation_of_the_un_protocol_on_the_provision_of_assistance_to_victims_of_sea_eng.pdf

Operationalizing your survivor support guide

Once you have created your guide, it is important to think about how you will implement and communicate it to staff to make it a living document. Key considerations when operationalizing your guide include:

- Knowledge of Global Affairs Canada requirements regarding PSEA.¹⁶
- Training: Integrate training on your guide into regular staff training/staff orientation.
- Updates: Ensure you regularly update the services information in your guide as organizations may change their addresses or may have closed.
- Budget: It is recommended to integrate the creation of this guide and survivor support into your annual planning and project budgets. Specialized services, including PSEA should be proactively included in budget lines and proposals. Focal points and others working on PSEA are

often doing this in addition to their full-time jobs and should have hours included in their annual plans for this work.

- Consider developing job aids to assist staff to support survivors.
- Consider how you will safely collect data confidentially.¹⁷

Other resources related to survivor support

1. [Brief on accompanying survivors](#)
2. [Effective complaint mechanism](#) (Page 85)
3. [Feedback and complaint flow chart](#) (Page 3)
4. [Save the Children's overall principles for a survivor-focused, trauma-informed approach](#) (Page 30), Do's and Don't (Page 31)
5. [Caring for yourself after sexual violence](#)

16. Organizations that receive funding under Canada's International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Envelope are required to: 1) develop, publicize and enforce a code of conduct for all the organization's staff (volunteer or paid) that explicitly prohibits sexual exploitation and abuse before receiving funding, or no later than six months after signing a contribution agreement, and: 2) report any allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse received linked to a project funded by the Canadian government. <https://www.digna.ca/gac-requirements/>

17. For more on PSEA data collection see: https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2021/12/Increasing_Transparency_on_SEA_in_the_Aid_Sector_GCPS-Consulting-122021.pdf

18. <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/resources/country-focal-point-generic-terms-reference-tors>

Definitions

Focal point: A PSEA Focal Point is a staff member tasked with supporting implementation of PSEA within the organization, such as receiving reports of SEA. The focal point designation is a role or “hat” assigned to existing personnel and not generally a full-time position. Specific duties for focal points will depend on the organization and Terms of Reference.¹⁸

Community-Based Complaints Mechanism: A system blending both formal and informal community structures, by which individuals are able and encouraged to safely report incidents of SEA. Local communities participate in developing the system so that the structure is both culturally and gender sensitive. The selection of different mechanisms and multiple entry points will allow both staff and community participants opportunities to report at the organizational or community level in ways which are both convenient and familiar to them.

Safeguarding: Preventing acts of sexual misconduct from being perpetrated by members of the aid world, whether against members of the local community or actors delivering aid.

Sexual Abuse: Actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.

Sexual Assault: Sexual activity with another person who does not consent. This definition also includes sexual touching. Keep in mind that minors at law do not have legal capacity to consent to sexual activity with anyone who is the age of majority.

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: SEA is any actual or attempted abuse against a person who is in a position of vulnerability, and of differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.

Sexual Harassment: Prohibited conduct in the community and in the work, context committed against staff, interns, volunteers, project participants, service providers and any other related stakeholders. Involves any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behavior of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another.

Sexual Violence: Acts of a sexual nature against a person without their consent and that cause such a person to engage in an act of a sexual nature by force, by threat of force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment or such a person’s incapacity to give genuine consent.

Survivor-Centred Approach: An approach that creates a supportive and conducive environment in which the survivor’s wishes are respected, their safety ensured, and they are treated with respect and dignity.

Trauma-Informed Approaches: Trauma-Informed care understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize. Focuses on actionable steps to minimize potential for re-traumatization in our response.

Whistle-Blower: A staff member, intern, volunteer, or anyone who reports misconduct, including sexual exploitation or abuse, may be entitled to protection under specified agency terms.

Annex:

Template for a survivor support guide *Download the Word version [here](#)*

This guide provides instructions on how to seek or provide support to survivors of sexual violence, specifically exploitation and abuse. It is available for staff, volunteers, program participants and affected communities, and should be disseminated and made available as widely as possible.

Country	
City/region (if applicable)	
Date of last update	
PSEA/SGBV focal point(s) in-country: Name	
Contact information	
Organizational reporting mechanism (i.e., phone number, email address)	

Steps to take

Available support

Organizational policies

Safety and protection

Medical services

Psychosocial services

Local legal/cultural context

Local organization that can provide support



Digna, the Canadian Centre of Expertise on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), is a program of Cooperation Canada



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