



Screaming Underwater: Survivor Activism, Co-production and the Limits of Formal Engagement in Gender-Based Violence Policy

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Abstract

Survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) are increasingly engaged in the co-production of public policies and services, yet marginalised survivors remain largely excluded from shaping the decisions that affect them most. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 11 survivor advocates and activists from First Nations, culturally and racially marginalised, LGBTQI+ and disability communities in Australia, this article examines what works for survivors in terms of driving policy change. We find that collective activism outside state structures is more empowering and effective than formal co-production within state structures. Participants are clear about what needs to change, demanding self-determined community solutions, a fundamental shift from “victim-fixing” to perpetration prevention and genuine transfer of resources and authority to those most affected. These demands go well beyond what existing co-production frameworks are designed to deliver and reveal those frameworks as potentially reproducing the colonial and patriarchal power relations they purport to address.

Keywords: Gender-based violence; policy; survivors; victims; advocacy; collective action.

Introduction¹

The causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV)² are complex, dynamic and interrelated. GBV causes profound, often intergenerational harms to individuals, families and communities. It has significant consequences across multiple systems, including justice, police, housing, health, child protection, education and social services. Despite sustained policy attention and considerable investment in prevention over the past two decades, GBV remains a major global public health and human rights concern. Recent World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates indicate that global rates of intimate partner violence have declined by only approximately 0.2% each year over the past 20 years (WHO, 2025, p. 38). In the Australian context, the 2021–2022 Personal Safety Survey reported that an estimated 4.2 million Australian adults (around one in five) have experienced partner-perpetrated violence, emotional abuse or economic abuse, with women disproportionately affected (27% compared with 15% of men) (ABS, 2023). This entrenched prevalence has led public policy scholars to conceptualise GBV as a paradigmatic “wicked problem” (Kimball et al., 2024), characterised by multiple interacting causal factors, the absence of linear solutions and significant consequences if left unaddressed (Peters, 2017). Responding to wicked problems requires moving beyond traditional, siloed approaches and embracing innovative, cross-sectoral, collaborative approaches that reflect the complexity of the issue (Head & Alford, 2015).



One such approach, increasingly adopted across Australia and other nations, is the formal engagement of GBV survivors in the co-production of public policies and services. Co-production, while lacking a clear definition and frequently conflated with adjacent terms such as co-creation and co-design, is generally understood as an approach in which service users and communities actively contribute to the design, delivery and evaluation of public services. Co-production recognises the epistemic authority of lived experience and treats this knowledge as an essential input into the policy process (Steen et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). Within the field of GBV, co-production has taken various institutional forms. A notable example is the Victorian Government's Victim Survivors' Advisory Council (VSAC), established on the premise that those most affected by GBV hold knowledge that cannot be produced any other way (State Government of Victoria, 2020). Policies developed without this knowledge risk being ineffective and unresponsive, undermining their capacity to deliver meaningful public value.

Yet the relationship between survivor engagement and meaningful policy change remains uncertain and contested. Criminologists have described how victims of crime have become central but contested figures in criminal justice policy. Often, their voices have been co-opted to serve political agendas instead of their own interests (Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate, 2023; Garland, 2001; Hall, 2017; Walklate, 2007; Wheildon et al., 2021, 2023). Recently, scholars have begun to examine whose voices are heard in the co-production process, and what costs are borne by those who speak (Ahmed, 2021; O'Neill et al., 2025; Walklate et al., 2019; Wheildon et al., 2023). These issues are especially relevant in the context of GBV, where survivors face unique structural barriers to being heard. These barriers are rooted in the gendered nature of the violence. Central among these is the enduring influence of Christie's (1986) ideal victim construct, which has since been expanded by feminist and contemporary criminologists (Donovan & Barnes, 2018; Walklate, 2007). The ideal victim concept describes a gendered, socially and politically produced archetype. Such a claim to victimhood is readily recognised because it fits with normative expectations of innocence, vulnerability and culpability. This construct describes the dynamics of social recognition that also shape which knowledge is considered credible within participatory policy processes. For many GBV survivors, especially those from marginalised communities, this construct operates as a profound barrier to voice, legitimacy and institutional recognition. Efforts to incorporate lived experience within GBV policy must therefore grapple with these exclusionary dynamics and the uneven distribution of the risks associated with speaking. This article argues that for marginalised survivors, the limits of co-production are not failures of implementation, but expressions of structural constraints on whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate and whose demands are heard and acted upon within policy processes. It addresses a parallel gap in the victimological literature, which has attended more closely to the ways survivors are used, traumatised or excluded than to what enables them to advocate effectively for change (Ronel & Elisha, 2011).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 11 survivor advocates and activists from marginalised communities in Australia, including First Nations, culturally and racially marginalised, LGBTIQ+ and disability communities, we examine what has worked for these survivors in their efforts to drive change, and what structural conditions they argue must shift if that change is to be meaningful. The research was conducted in 2021 and 2022, during a period when formal survivor engagement structures in Australia were still emergent and largely experimental; however, the urgency of the findings has only intensified in subsequent years. As the Commissioner for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence reflected in the foreword to the Commission's annual report to parliament:

The most effective solutions come from those most affected by violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, people living with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ communities and multicultural communities have been developing sophisticated responses to violence for generations. Yet they remain largely excluded from decision-making at critical points. This is not about giving people a voice – they already have voices. It is about those in power learning to listen and respond in a systemic way. (Commission for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, 2025, p. 5)

As the Commission identifies, we focus particularly on survivors from marginalised communities because we believe they have important insights to offer from their vantage point outside mainstream systems and pedagogy. Further, we aim to address the imbalance, reflected in the ideal victim construct, whereby particular kinds of survivors are privileged in public discourse and research, namely those who are white, non-disabled, cisgender and whose experiences of violence conform to a narrow and socially acceptable script. Attending carefully to their perspectives is not only a matter of research ethics or representation; it is epistemologically essential to understanding the conditions under which policy change can occur.

We begin by tracing the history of the victims' rights movement and the ideal victim construct before examining the limits of storytelling and co-production. We then present findings, organised around two key themes – activism outside the state and collective action as power – before a discussion section drawing on participant voices to examine the structural shifts that survivors³ identify as necessary. The article concludes by identifying directions for future research.

Theoretical Framing

The Politicisation of Victims and Who Gets Heard

The history of the victims' rights movement provides important context for understanding the contemporary conditions under which survivor voices are authorised, marginalised or instrumentalised within advocacy and policy processes. Scholars trace the origins of the victims' rights movement to the mid-twentieth century, with significant growth during the 1940s and 1970s across the Global North (Daly & Holder, 2019; Hall, 2017; Walklate, 2007). The consolidation of neo-liberal governance in the 1980s and 1990s further reconfigured the place of victims within criminal justice systems, reframing them from complainants to consumers and intensifying the politicisation of victimhood (Hall, 2017; Walklate et al., 2019; Walklate, 2007, 2016). In this period, victims' experiences were increasingly mobilised to legitimise punitive law-and-order agendas, rather than survivor-centred reform (Garland, 2001).

More recently, scholars have observed a shift from collective advocacy towards the elevation of individual survivors or their relatives as emblematic public figures in reform campaigns (Garland, 2001; Walklate et al., 2019; Wheildon et al., 2021, 2023). In Australia, Rosie Batty exemplifies this dynamic, with her advocacy catalysing major policy reforms following the murder of her son by her ex-partner (Hawley et al., 2018; Wheildon et al., 2021, 2023).

However, public visibility has not consistently translated into substantive improvements in victims' rights or safety (Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate, 2023; Garland, 2001; Walklate, 2012; Wheildon et al., 2023). Adversarial legal systems remain poorly aligned with victims' needs (Walklate, 2012), and the political utility of victims' narratives often lies more in their emotional power than their policy substance (Tumarkin, 2014). This historical trajectory illuminates a persistent tension in survivor engagement: the gap between the appearance of inclusion and the reality of influence.

Central to understanding this gap is Christie's (1986) theorisation of the "ideal victim", which elucidates the social conditions under which some individuals are more readily recognised as legitimate victims of crime. According to Christie, ideal victim status is contingent upon intersecting criteria: the victim must be blameless, engaged in a respectable activity and, crucially, harmed by a stranger rather than someone known to them. Stranger violence aligns with dominant moral scripts of innocent victim and guilty outsider, whereas intimate partner violence disrupts the script through prior relationship, shared domestic space and normative expectations about privacy. Christie explicitly highlighted the patriarchal roots of this exclusion, observing that beaten wives fail to achieve ideal victim status because men "understand the phenomena so extraordinarily well, and because we can get our definition of the situation to be the valid one" (Christie, 1986, p. 14). Subsequent feminist and criminological scholarship has expanded Christie's framework to demonstrate how race, class, sexuality, disability and immigration status further structure access to ideal victimhood (Donovan & Barnes, 2018, p. 86).

For GBV survivors from marginalised communities, these dynamics intersect and intensify. As a significant proportion of GBV occurs within intimate or family relationships, most survivors are structurally precluded from ideal victim status at the outset. For those also navigating racial discrimination, poverty, disability or precarious immigration status, the barriers multiply. Crucially, these barriers are not only social or cultural, but are actively reproduced by the institutions to which survivors are expected to turn for redress. As Htun and Weldon (2017, p. 158) observe, the state functions simultaneously as "a cause of, and a remedy for, human suffering" – a tension particularly acute for communities whose engagements with state institutions have been shaped by colonisation, exclusion and systemic harm. For First Nations women in both Canada and Australia, state institutions – including police, courts and child protection services – are not neutral sites of redress, but are themselves implicated in ongoing colonial violence (Cripps, 2023; McQuire, 2022; Million, 2013). This context is not peripheral to questions of survivor advocacy or co-production; it is foundational to understanding both their possibilities and their limits.

Co-production, Storytelling and Their Limits

The power of stories to generate momentum for change has been well documented (e.g., Crow & Jones, 2018; Degl et al., 2019), and feminist scholars and writers have long foregrounded the fundamentally political nature of women speaking publicly about their experiences (e.g., Beard, 2015; Le Guin, 1989). Co-production frameworks have attempted to institutionalise this potential, positioning survivor narratives as inputs to the full policy process, from problem definition through to service design, implementation and evaluation (Crow & Jones, 2018). The potential benefits are significant: more responsive policy, greater legitimacy, and at least partial redistribution of decision-making authority to those most affected.

Yet co-production carries substantial risks, particularly for survivors of GBV (Wheildon et al., 2021, 2023). Without genuine power-sharing, co-production can reinforce rather than redistribute existing power imbalances, lend legitimacy to decisions already made or allow governments to transfer responsibility for service gaps without transferring the authority to address them

(Steen et al., 2018). These dynamics are shaped by who is seen as a credible and sympathetic voice and by the personal risk involved (O'Neill et al., 2025). Ahmed's (2021) analysis of institutional complaint processes offers a broader framework for understanding these dynamics: institutions frequently treat those who raise problems as the problem themselves.

These critiques are extended in First Nations and decolonial scholarship about the limits of storytelling as a political advocacy strategy. The pervasive assumption embedded in therapeutic, legal and advocacy frameworks alike is that when survivors speak their truth publicly, change will follow. Million (2013) challenges this directly, arguing that without simultaneous critique and transformation of the power relations that produce violence, testimony risks an individuating effect: it locates trauma in the person, rather than in the systems and institutions that generate it. The risk, in other words, is not only that survivor testimony becomes co-opted into existing agendas, but that the emotional force of testimony may redirect attention away from the institutional and colonial conditions that produce violence – conditions that are themselves a form of harm. Tumarkin (2022) extends this critique, arguing for the importance of resisting the “co-option into existing categories and schemata” (p. 332) that can occur when testimony and commemoration practices become routinised. Drawing on Dean's (2015) examination of how practices of bearing witness to the disappeared women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside can become calcified, Tumarkin argues for conceptual work that puts “on notice” concepts that “may seem settled or benign” (Tumarkin, 2022, p. 332).

Ahmed (2014) offers a complementary perspective on the relationship between personal experience and political struggle. Speaking out can be cathartic and genuinely valuable for individual survivors, but catharsis is not the same as justice, and personal healing is not the same as systemic change. Cautioning against conflating the two, Ahmed writes that for those whose lives have been “torn apart by violence”, feeling better “is not a sign that justice has been done, and nor should it be reified as the goal of political struggle” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 202). Survivors who engage in advocacy may experience this work very differently depending on whether the goal is personal testimony, institutional participation, structural transformation or a combination of these; a distinction that participants in this study reflect on with considerable sophistication.

Methodology

This article presents findings from a thematic analysis of 11 in-depth interviews conducted via online video conferencing with survivor advocates and activists between September 2021 and January 2022. Participants were identified through the lead author's professional networks and with the assistance of Domestic Violence Victoria (now Safe and Equal) and Engender Equality (Tasmania), both of which made initial contact with potential participants, providing an overview of the project before introducing them to the research team. This approach was adopted to reduce power imbalances and support genuinely informed consent.

We deliberately sought participants from marginalised communities, including First Nations, culturally and racially marginalised, LGBTQI+ and disability communities, many of whom experience multiple, intersecting forms of structural discrimination and disadvantage, and whose perspectives are rarely centred in policy processes or research. We purposively selected participants with experience of both insider advocacy and outside activism, so they could reflect on and compare these experiences. To minimise re-traumatisation, participants were required to have existing support networks and not be sharing their experiences with researchers for the first time.

All participants provided informed consent to be identified and named in the research. This decision was made intentionally to provide participants with agency over their own contributions and to honour their right to have their knowledge and advocacy work acknowledged. Many participants are established public advocates whose work is on the public record. Anonymising them would in many cases be both practically impossible and ethically at odds with the study's commitment to centring survivor agency. One participant, Nina, requested to be identified only by their first name. Participant profiles, including backgrounds, preferred terminology and advocacy experience at the time of interview, are provided in Table 1.

The interviews were analysed and coded in NVivo, using a two-stage coding process. An initial deductive coding framework, derived from the interview questions, provided the analytical scaffold, after which inductive coding was used to identify emergent, divergent, and context-specific themes. This approach was deliberately structured to guard against what one participant, Fiona, described as “genericising the black experience,” highlighting the risks of flattening diverse and situated forms of experience.

Ethics approval was received from the Monash University Human Ethics Advisory Committee (Project ID: 17865). Participants were provided with interview transcripts for approval and invited to provide feedback on the content of the paper, specifically related to them.

Table 1*Research Participants*

Name	Background	Preferred terminology	Advocacy/Activist experience (at time of interview)
Nicole Lee	"I'm a survivor of domestic and family violence that also involved sexual violence, a woman living with disability."	"I don't really use the term 'survivor advocate' so much anymore. I just say I'm an activist ."	*Past VSAC member *#LetHerSpeak/#LetUsSpeak campaign participant *Disability activist.
Russell Vickery	"I am a gay man. I have lived through family violence with an intimate partner."	"I'm a survivor , that's the reality. I was a victim of somebody else at one point in time, but I don't feel like a victim now."	*Current VSAC member *Cabaret performer/advocate *Voices for Change graduate.
Lula Dembele	"I am a survivor advocate who shares my experience of childhood sexual abuse, childhood domestic violence, and domestic violence and abuse ... in ... adult relationships to create systemic change."	"I'm an agitator ... a disrupter . I'm probably not an advocate in many ways; I'm actually an activist ."	*Founded Accountability Matters Project *Bravehearts' child protection, Ambassador *Voices for Change graduate. *Member of WEAVERS, University of Melbourne *Member of National Plan Advisory Group *Co-Founder of the Independent Collective of Survivors.
Nina	"I am a proud and unapologetic criminalised woman."	" Survivor is fine, but I don't like the term 'victim'. It makes me feel less than."	*Current VSAC member *Member of the Safe and Equal Expert Advisory Panel. *Women Transforming Justice Project, Fitzroy Legal Service Inc.
Ash Vishwanath	"I'm an immigrant woman of colour, and I speak Tamil primarily ... my experience of family violence has led me down this career path."	"I am a survivor advocate."	*Current VSAC member *Member of the Noor Family Violence Survivor-Advocates advisory group at InTouch Multicultural Centre against Family Violence. *Survivor advocate advisor at DV Vic (now Safe and Equal).
Luisa Fernanda Mejia	"I was born in Colombia and moved to Australia seven years ago ... I'm a victim survivor of family violence."	"I wouldn't refer to myself as victim survivor before, but ... I think that's the most appropriate thing ... it recognises the danger of family violence, but also our fight to be safe."	*Voices for Change graduate *Engender Equality Advocates for Change advocate.
Deborah Thomson	"I was a victim myself for 25 years ... I was born with a genetic disability ... I have an acquired brain injury, two aneurisms which resulted from abuse."	"I guess I prefer survivor ... enough of people realise that survivor, you were a victim, but now..."	*Voices for Change graduate *Engender Equality Advocates for Change advocate *Campaigned (successfully) for legislation against non-fatal strangulation in Tasmania.
Aleana Robins	"I am a trans woman." Aleana experienced family violence as a child and domestic violence as an adult. She also has autism and dyslexia.	"I'm always concerned about having people see me as a victim. I'm not a victim. I'm a survivor ."	*Voices for Change graduate *Engender Equality Advocates for Change advocate *Transgender advocate.

Name	Background	Preferred terminology	Advocacy/Activist experience (at time of interview)
Fiona Hamilton	“I am a Trawlwulwuy woman ... a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman from the northeast clans of Tasmania on Tebrakunna country ... I am a victim survivor advocate of family violence. I’ve also previously worked in the field of family violence. I am also a female Aboriginal heritage officer.”	“I don’t see always the same connect between those words of ‘ victim survivor advocate ’ ... I don’t know if I’m necessarily comfortable with that term, but I use it for want of anything better ... What I’d really like to see is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to be able to start to use language to describe our condition and our experience. “	*Advocate for inclusive domestic violence services for women with disability.
Tarang Chawla	“I like to say brother of Nikita Chawla first and foremost, because any – whether it’s Our Watch Ambassador or any campaigns I’ve won or things like that – they’re all secondary to me.”	“Initially [I preferred] the mantle of victim survivor because I was one of the inaugural Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council in Victoria ... Nowadays, and for a while, I’ve preferred activist .”	*Founder Not One More Niki *Past VSAC member. *Our Watch Ambassador *Senior Policy Advisor, Family Safety Victoria *Commissioner, Victorian Multicultural Commission.
Mahalia Handley	“I am Maori/Irish.” Mahalia has lived experience of domestic violence.	“I use activist , because ... activism requires somebody to be physically doing something.”	*Ambassador for the #LetHerSpeak/#LetUsSpeak campaign *Human rights activist.

As Table 1 indicates, most participants preferred the term “survivor” over “victim”, reflecting a sense of having moved beyond victimisation and a concern about the stigma and power imbalances the term creates, as Nina’s account illustrates. The term “survivor” is therefore used throughout the article except in specific theoretical contexts.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample of 11 participants is small and was recruited primarily through the lead author’s networks and two organisations, which may have introduced selection bias toward survivors with existing advocacy experience and established networks. The findings are therefore not generalisable and are not intended to represent all GBV survivor advocates in Australia or internationally.

The predominantly Victorian institutional context, particularly the significant presence of VSAC participants, reflects the policy landscape at the time of the research and may limit transferability to other jurisdictions. Additionally, while the article is framed around GBV, the tensions and challenges participants describe, particularly around inside versus outside advocacy, may have relevance beyond the GBV context, reflecting broader dynamics of lived experience advocacy in policy processes; this is explicitly acknowledged where relevant to the discussion. The research was conducted in 2021–2022, and the institutional landscape has since changed in some respects.

What Works for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Advocacy and Activism?

The interview data revealed two main themes important to positive experiences of survivor advocacy and activism: activism outside the state and collective action as power. Together, these findings illuminate not only what supports marginalised survivors in driving policy change, but also the conditions under which such advocacy is enabled or constrained.

Activism Outside the State

Questions of how and where survivors could make the most significant impact were central to participants’ accounts. Participants described navigating a fundamental tension between working “inside” the state, having direct access to decision-makers but constrained by expectations of compliance and deference, and acting “outside” the state, where they had greater freedom to critique but less formal influence over policy outcomes. This tension was experienced differently depending on participants’ backgrounds and the nature of the systemic change they sought. Those from marginalised communities whose demands were more radical – for example, requiring not incremental reform but fundamental redistribution of power – found

the constraints of insider advocacy most acutely limiting. In these accounts, the limitations of insider advocacy were not primarily about access, but rather about the terms on which participation was permitted. Lula, who had previously worked inside government, described the dilemma plainly:

When I talk to other women and other victims who want to do this [advocacy/activism] and be heard, I'm very clear to say that there's lots of ways to do this work and every one of them is valid ... You can work within the institution and make change from within. You have to know that's slow, it's incremental, and you'll be compromised ... Then you can be outside and throw shit at the institutions and criticise them all you like, and you got to know they're not going to like you ... You're not going to be praised. Attempts to silence you might be much more overt and direct.

The preference for outside activism was strongest among those with direct experience of working within government structures. Nicole, a former VSAC member, described leaving as a deliberate choice: "I kind of was on my path there, and I just thought, 'Oh God, I can't do this'. It was too constraining. No, I can make more influence from the outside than I can from the inside." She described her subsequent work with the #LetHerSpeak/#LetUsSpeak independent campaign as "by far the toughest yet most rewarding thing I've ever done."

Russell, a VSAC member at the time of interview, offered a more ambivalent account, acknowledging the value of his inside position while recognising that influence ultimately remains contingent on institutional discretion: "I understand my limitations within this role, and I will endeavour to be an influencer from inside, because I think that's important, and I have the ears of the people that I need to have the ears of. It becomes their choice what they do with that."

Tarang, a past VSAC member, spoke of how insider status constrained genuine critique:

Outside of government ... there's a lot of power ... One can be critical ... in a way that I believe actually affects change. If a government minister says something in parliament that's inappropriate, if you're a member of VSAC, you second-guess whether you're going to comment ... When you're not a member of VSAC, you say whatever you want ... That started to feel like it was weighing on me when I was on VSAC ... There was this kind of, 'We don't want them to say things that are going to rock the boat' or 'We don't want them to be too political.' But it's strange, because the issue itself was politicised.

Nina, a current VSAC member, expressed the experience of trying to effect change from within with particular force: "I feel like I go there [to VSAC] and it's like I'm screaming underwater or I'm running into a brick wall. Because the change that I would like to see it's just not possible." She also highlighted differences in the kinds of reforms prioritised by more and less marginalised survivors:

For some VSAC members, the only really critical stuff that they would like to change is the police response and the court response. But generally speaking, them being able to access services or having supports or getting what they needed at the time and being somewhat financially housed and financially able [is not an issue]. There's not as many complexities as there are for other marginalised communities.

Lula located institutional resistance in the character of patriarchal systems themselves:

They're patriarchal institutions that don't work on self-reflection; they work on always seeming like they're in control ... In patriarchal systems, reputation is king, so I don't think they [survivors] will ever be heard by those institutions in the way that we would want it to be.

Several participants, while acknowledging the value of inside advocacy for some survivors, concluded that they could make more meaningful change from the outside. This was not a rejection of engagement with the state, but a considered judgement about where their efforts were most likely to matter, grounded in their lived experience. These accounts suggest that the effectiveness of survivor engagement is shaped not only by whether participation occurs, but by the institutional conditions within which it is structured.

Collective Action as Power

If the inside/outside tension shaped where participants chose to act, collective action shaped how they experienced that work and whether it was sustainable. Participants consistently identified peer support, solidarity and shared action as the most powerful elements of their advocacy experience. They described these as more sustaining, and often more effective, than formal engagement with government structures. Here, effectiveness was understood not only in terms of policy influence, but also in

terms of sustainability, recognition and collective strength. Russell reflected on the unexpected solidarity he found within VSAC, despite his frustrations with its institutional constraints:

It's really amazing that I sit in amongst a group of 16 people, 15 of whom are women, all ... victim survivors of violence in some form or another ... Services put up barriers, but victim survivors just get together ... It doesn't matter whether it's an LGBTIQ family violence relationship or family of origin violent relationship ... it's like perpetrators have a manual and they all use the same tactics ... All these people around this table have a commonality ... and because we respect each other's experience, we become this united front.

Lula captured the affective core of collective solidarity simply: "The most important thing ... the solidarity. It's just someone else – when you say something, they don't step backwards from the table and be like 'oh no, that wasn't me.' They stay with you."

The experience of coming together for training also emerged as significant – not primarily for the skills imparted, but for what the collective experience created. Participants who had completed the Voices for Change program⁴ described the value of learning alongside others who understood. Luisa found the program's approach to the systemic dimensions of GBV both validating and clarifying: "It wasn't just me being silly and stupid and allowing that to happen, but that's something that it doesn't matter who you are or how well educated you are or how independent you think you are: it can happen to anyone." She also described sharing experiences in the program "that I hadn't shared with anyone else, even in my own language ... seeing the similarities, but at the same time, seeing how different it is when you come from another country." The data suggest that the value of training programs lies less in their content than in the collective experience of recognition and solidarity they make possible.

It is important, however, not to overstate the coherence of survivors' motivations or the transformative sufficiency of collective action. Fiona's account of her own decision to speak publicly complicates any straightforward reading of advocacy as oriented toward systemic change. Her motivation was primarily personal: "I needed to do it to be able to move on ... It was actually an act of spitting the last bit of poison out." Fiona had not spoken publicly, hoping to change policy so much as to be "really honest about what path I had trodden." She also described her community's ongoing perception of her as a victim as something that eventually became constraining: "I actually needed to get up and get going again, and so they actually became almost like the thing that held me back after a couple of years." Fiona's experience points to the importance of support structures that can accommodate the full arc of survivors' needs, including their need to move forward rather than holding them indefinitely in the role of survivor or advocate/activist. Fiona's account underscores that survivor advocacy is not always oriented toward systemic change, and that the meanings and purposes of speaking publicly may shift over time.

The federal policy landscape at the time the interviews were conducted (i.e., 2021–2022 during the Morrison Coalition Government's term) introduced a further sobering dimension. Tarang reflected on what the treatment of high-profile survivors revealed about the structural barriers facing those at further intersections of disadvantage:

When people who fit the ideal mould of victim are not shown respect, when women like Grace Tame, who are young, conventionally attractive, articulate, educated, survivors of abuse are not afforded any respect, there is no hope for women like ... my sister Niki [or] others, because in the intersections of violence against women they are somewhere else in the hierarchy ... When it comes to the National Women's Safety Summit, they refuse to invite certain people, and that's apparent. That's obvious.

This reflection, grounded in Tarang's direct experience of advocacy at the federal level, suggests that the barriers facing marginalised survivors are not simply a matter of access or representation, but part of a political culture that is unwilling to hear what the most marginalised survivors are saying, regardless of how or where it is said.

What Needs to Change

These findings illuminate how marginalised survivors navigate existing structures of advocacy and co-production. What emerges with equal clarity from the data is participants' analysis of what those structures must look like if survivor engagement is to generate genuine, rather than performative, change. Their accounts identify several interrelated demands: a shift in political culture and institutional respect, adequate and flexible material support and the transfer of resources and decision-making authority to affected communities.

Tarang drew a clear distinction between state and federal approaches to survivor engagement in Australia at the time the interviews were undertaken, identifying a fundamental deficit of respect at the federal level as the primary barrier to meaningful change:

At a federal level, I think that we're living in a country now where there is just a sheer disregard for the issues of violence against women. There is some political rhetoric as and when it's required ... but ... there is a fundamental lack of understanding about the lived experience of survivors ... What needs to shift is some semblance of respect for victim survivors ... At the federal level, I think we're talking about broader respect for human experience.

This is consistent with Ahmed's (2021) analysis of institutions that produce the appearance of responsiveness while structurally resisting the demands of those raising problems. The gap identified by Tarang is not primarily one of policy design, but of political will and institutional culture – a distinction that has significant implications for where efforts to change the system should be directed.

Lula identified a more fundamental reorientation as necessary, moving away from focusing on survivors as the site of intervention and towards perpetration and its structural conditions:

Victims are not the problem. Stop trying to fix victims ... Help victims recover, but know the victims aren't the problem we're trying to fix. Look at perpetration, look at why that happens. Stop perpetrators, stop perpetration from happening and then you don't have victims to fix.

That reorientation is harder to achieve when survivors remain structurally invisible in the data systems that shape policy—and where survivors go uncounted, perpetrators remain equally invisible. Russell noted that, had a violent incident with his perpetrator ultimately resulted in his death, he would not have been recorded as a victim of family violence because their same-sex relationship would not have been recognised within dominant family violence recording frameworks: “If we don't have the data, people are sitting there going, ‘Well, it's not that bad.’” Without accurate data, the case for adequate resourcing cannot even be made, let alone won.

The erasure of certain survivors from dominant frameworks constitutes a form of harm in itself. As Buiten and Cresciani (2023) argue in relation to people with disability, exclusion from the evidentiary base that shapes policy, whether through invisibility in data systems or through the imposition of frameworks that cannot accommodate one's experience, is not a neutral omission but a form of epistemic violence that scaffolds and legitimises the structural violence it purports to address. Russell's account of LGBTIQ+ experiences being absent from family violence data illustrates this dynamic precisely.

Nina's account made plain what adequate resourcing would actually require. She called for immediate, flexible financial and housing support that recognises the diversity of survivors' circumstances:

A woman needs to be given a lump sum of money and continually paid until that period of recovery has taken place, so she can find housing ... and so many different experiences that we just can't do a one-size-fits-all, and women need to be given back power and supported to make those decisions.

Deborah pointed to the gap between government announcements and substantive action: “Over and over and over we're having inquiries where recommendations are made, but they're just dismissed ... It's almost as if they're thinking, ‘Oh, that'll shut the public up for a while.’”

This dynamic takes a specifically colonial form when it comes to Indigenous women. Fiona offered the most structurally far-reaching account of what change was required, specifically in relation to First Nations communities. Locating the high rates of violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within a history of colonial violence and ongoing white supremacy, she argued for a fundamental transfer of resources and decision-making authority to communities themselves:

I would just like to see people leave us alone and give us the resources unfettered, to be able to grow self-paced solutions at the community level that make the nuance for that community ... White people do not need to scope that for us, or tell us what that looks like, or put in place performance indicators, or reporting, because the only two measures that you need to hear is, is the Aboriginal community in that area happy with what's going on? And are the rates of violence reducing? Two indicators. Very simple.

This account directly echoes Million's (2013) argument that self-determination, rather than therapeutic or bureaucratic intervention, is the necessary condition for addressing violence against Indigenous women. As Carlson (2021) observes:

We are constantly calling for Indigenous-led solutions, adequate resources and flexibility over programs to take into account the diversity of our communities. Instead, we continue to be excluded from these conversations.

It also challenges the co-production frameworks discussed in this article: if those frameworks require survivors to participate on terms set by the state, with success measured against state-determined indicators, they reproduce rather than disrupt the colonial power relations that Fiona and others identify as constitutive of the problem.

Carlson (2026) extends this analysis in the context of research on technology-facilitated abuse, demonstrating how Indigenous women are extracted as data while being denied authority over the research agendas, funding decisions and policy responses that data shapes – a process she identifies as reproducing colonial research economies rather than challenging them. Fiona's insistence on community-determined metrics of success is a direct alternative to this logic: a refusal to participate in frameworks designed to generate data about communities while withholding from them the power to define what counts as harm, what counts as progress and what change looks like. McQuire (2022) grounds this in the Australian context with particular force, documenting how Aboriginal women are not merely undercounted but actively disappeared from police datasets, coronial processes and media coverage through mechanisms that are continuous with, rather than incidental to, the ongoing colonial project. Indeed, these accounts suggest that the epistemic violence of exclusion and the structural violence of GBV are closely intertwined and may require a response that is fundamentally decolonial.

Fiona was equally direct about what non-Indigenous scholars can do:

Cite Black authors, cite Black academics, use the work, you know? ... Absorb the work into your work, and hear those academics, hear what they're saying, and find ways to apply that research. And that is activating that research, and that is respecting that scholarly work.

Taken together, these accounts point to a set of demands that go well beyond the incremental reform that formal co-production mechanisms are typically designed to deliver. As the Australian Commission for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (2025, p. 5) stated, this is not about giving people a voice – they already have one. It is about those in power choosing to listen and then acting on what they hear.

Conclusion

This article has examined what works for marginalised survivors of GBV in driving policy change, drawing on the perspectives of 11 survivor advocates and activists from First Nations, culturally and racially marginalised, LGBTQI+ and disability communities in Australia, many of whose experiences sit outside Christie's (1986) conceptualisation of the ideal victim construct. The findings demonstrate that collective activism outside state structures is both more empowering and, for many participants, more effective than co-production from within, not because formal engagement is without value, but because the institutions through which that engagement occurs are frequently unable or unwilling to accommodate the radical, structural demands that marginalised survivors raise. The experience of collective action, whether through independent campaigns or peer networks, provides the solidarity, validation and strategic clarity that formal advisory mechanisms often cannot.

These findings contribute to an emerging body of knowledge about what enables survivors to advocate effectively. They extend existing critiques of storytelling and co-production by grounding those theoretical arguments in the lived experiences of survivors whose perspectives are rarely centred in either research or policy. They also underscore the limitations of Christie's (1986) ideal victim construct. The social norms this construct describes, which determine whose suffering is legible, whose demands are heard and whose analysis of what change requires is taken seriously, are not merely exclusionary in theory, but *actively* harmful in practice. The findings also resonate with wider international debates. As Ndow (2025) has shown in a very different context, formal mechanisms of participation remain insufficient without sustained grassroots activism and structural reform. This lesson travels across settings.

What this study makes clear is that the barriers facing marginalised survivors are not primarily a matter of access or voice. Marginalised communities already have sophisticated analyses of what change requires, as both the participants in this study and the Australian Commissioner for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (2025) make plain. The need is not for more mechanisms for survivors to speak, but rather a genuine commitment from those in power to respond materially and institutionally, including through the redistribution of authority and resources that meaningful change requires. Future research should examine the conditions under which governments and institutions are most likely to make that shift and the potential role of sustained collective activism in bringing it about.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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² UN Women Australia (2020) defines gender-based violence as “harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender ... [that is] rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms.” GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, although men and boys may also be targeted. Forms of GBV may encompass family violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment in public and digital spaces, with experiences shaped by intersecting inequalities including poverty, colonisation, and ableism.

³ Throughout this article, we use “survivor” rather than “victim”, except where the theoretical and historical literature requires otherwise – including in relation to the ideal victim construct, the victims' rights movement, and the politicisation of victims in criminal justice policy, or where participants used different terminology in their own accounts.

⁴ Voices for Change is a media advocacy program for the prevention of violence against women, originally developed in 2016 by Our Watch, Women’s Health East and VicHealth (Women’s Health East, 2017). The program trains survivor advocates to speak to the media and at public events and has since been delivered across Australia.

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