Luminate

Advocacy by
survivors of online harms

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Contents

Executive summary

Survivors of different social media harms (such as hate speech, abuse, harassment, incitement of violence, child sexual abuse, gender-based violence, mental health harms, and discrimination) have a unique and important form of expertise. These perspectives are essential to improve the protection of rights in both digital and offline spaces, including prevention and response to online abuse and harassment in its many different forms. Strengthening ways for survivors to organise can ensure that lessons from their lived experience are better reflected in public debate, policymaking, and accountability standards for Big Tech. Equally crucial are respectful, trauma-informed collaborations with digital rights groups. Despite this, there are relatively few examples of organisations or initiatives that are led or primarily focused on survivors in the digital advocacy sphere.

This report aims to set out challenges facing survivor-centred advocacy in the online arena, as well as recommendations for key stakeholders – both activists and funders – moving forward.

One of its key findings is that people directly impacted by egregious online harms have already played an influential and important role in many advocacy campaigns. This typically happens through sharing their personal experiences and trauma and illustrating the human cost of Big Tech policies and practices. While some survivors have had positive and mutually respectful relationships with advocacy organisations, however, this report also highlights areas for improvement. In particular, several interviewees expressed concerns that advocacy organisations often instrumentalise survivors and use their experiences in a tokenistic or exploitative ways (sometimes called "extractivism") to achieve change. Crucially, this has failed to prioritise trauma-informed approaches that adequately take survivors' need for support into account.

Efforts by those most directly affected by online harms can be uniquely powerful in raising awareness and public debate. They can humanise the impact of online harm to better inform effective and relevant policy making, and demand accountability, including through litigation. Such advocacy can also be deeply meaningful to survivors themselves. It can help them to reframe harms they have suffered, including by reducing feelings of guilt or shame around online harassment or fraud. Survivors can also fuel pressure for positive change that could protect others.

A significant challenge, however, is that certain harms and victims get more attention – and thus better policy responses – than others. This reflects global power imbalances and the massive resource differentials among affected communities. Particularly neglected are those living in countries where Big Tech has not provided content moderation in relevant languages or anywhere near adequate staffing, where civil society may not have access to policymakers and Big Tech, or where aspects of one's identity may be criminalised (such as LGBTQIA+ people or migrants without documentation). Similarly, online harms mirror offline discrimination and biases, meaning that individuals advocating on sexual harassment and violence may confront victim-blaming and stigma. Advocates and funders should work together to identify and address these resource gaps moving forward, and to create just and equitable processes for determining movement priorities.

Another challenge is the lack of common platforms and identifying language for the hugely diverse communities of survivors of different online harms. There is tremendous variation in how different groups directly impacted by online harms identify themselves. In this report we will use the term "survivors" as a way to underscore the extreme risks enabled by digital platforms and the importance of survivor-centred expertise to enhance the public debate, policymaking and accountability standards around Big Tech.

Furthermore, while there is much overlap in the demands of different groups, there are also conflicts. These include, for example, between parental controls and youth autonomy, between support for and alarm over the erosion of end-to-end encryption (e2e), and the extent to which empowering government controls over Big Tech is supportive or harmful to a range of human rights, including rights to organise, privacy, and freedom of expression.

Moving forward, this research identifies that building common platforms for survivors of online harms to build greater support for them and to facilitate dialogue between different groups of communities affected is a key step. This should focus on allowing affected communities to have regular and meaningful participation and leadership in advocacy directed at Big Tech, for investment in trauma-informed approaches and practices, and for further exploration of what type of organising across online harms could be strategic, equitable, and impactful.

Summary of
key findings

1 When those directly impacted by online harms inform and participate in advocacy, they offer a unique and important form of expertise that humanises the impact of Big Tech's product failures. Their pressure is crucial in raising awareness and generating impact.

2 Those most impacted by online harms lack a common umbrella terminology for their experience – such as survivors, targets, victims, or those with lived experiences. This could hamper joint advocacy toward Big Tech and others.

3 There are not enough initiatives to organise and bring together people directly affected by disinformation around health or climate as a distinct identity or community, even though disinformation has had a clear impact on both issue areas.

4 Activists and survivors agreed that organising across online harms is both important and needed to amplify their common demands.

5 Most survivor-led organisations or initiatives prioritising survivors in advocacy directed at Big Tech focus on a specific category of online harm or community being affected.

6 There are only few examples of joint advocacy initiatives bringing together survivors across different social media harms.

7 There are organisations that are not currently organising or amplifying survivors' advocacy directed at Big Tech but would be well placed to do so.

8 There is a huge discrepancy in the advocacy attention and resources received by different communities affected by online harms. This reflects global power inequities and leads to lopsided and unequal policy responses.

9 Racism, classism, and other dynamics replicate within advocacy movements.

10 Organising and amplifying survivors' voices must avoid exploitative practices that instrumentalise harmful experiences.

11 An ethical approach to working with survivors of online harms requires a commitment to trauma-informed practices, including acknowledgment and support for healing and recovery.

12 Survivors who become involved in awareness-raising and advocacy can benefit from it, including by reframing their own experiences, or by being able to channel their unique perspectives into positive change.

13 The debate and advocacy focus by those directly impacted across different geographies and communities vary and may sometimes come into conflict.

14 Tech literacy can be a barrier to entry.

Summary of
recommendations to funders

1 Build greater support for survivors of online harms and affected communities by creating meaningful structures for their participation and leadership in advocacy towards Big Tech.

2 Strengthen and support models of ethical and inclusive advocacy partnerships and practices, including those bringing different communities together. Crucially, these should avoid methods that exploit trauma.

3 Ensure that trauma support is integral to any funding, including acknowledgment and support for healing and recovery.

4 Ensure that all affected communities receive equitable amount of resources and attention from the media, funders and policy makers. Take particular care to ensure that marginalised voices, in particular from non-Western countries, are elevated in public debates.

Methodology

This study was conducted by Nisha Varia, commissioned by Luminate, and conducted between May and August 2023 through desk research, remote interviews via video, and regular consultation with Luminate.

Methods of desk research included online searches of news articles, organisational and individual websites, academic and civil society reports, and individuals' social media accounts. Other methods included mapping partnerships and coalitions, reviewing the organisations and individuals involved in advocating for recently proposed or adopted legislation, and examining policy recommendations.

Varia conducted 10 interviews with civil society activists and regional representatives of Luminate to deepen understanding of the advocacy landscape. This is an anonymised version of the full report and does not include the names of interviewees and case studies. For further information about this report and its recommendations, you may contact Elise Tillet-Dagousset at: etillet@luminategroup.com.

Findings

Categories of online harm and affected communities

This project set out to identify organisations and individuals representing or bringing together survivors of different social media harms to influence public debate and policy around Big Tech's harmful practices. For the purpose of this landscape analysis, we focused on online harms such as hate speech, abuse, harassment, incitement of violence, child sexual abuse, gender-based violence, mental health harms, and discrimination. The project also looks at people with lived experience of social media harms such as climate, health, or electoral disinformation.

We focused on "survivors," "victims," "people with lived experience," and those "directly impacted" as individuals who experienced these harms, often because of their identity (sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnicity, race, religion, political affiliation, migration status, disability) and/or because of their work (journalists, political candidates and officeholders, environmental defenders, human rights defenders, digital rights defenders). This research also looked at organisations representing or advocating on behalf of communities who have been directly affected by these harms on a systemic scale. These include electorates who are targeted with electoral disinformation, populations in situations of armed conflict, and marginalised communities confronting structural discrimination.

The list below outlines groups and types of harms addressed in this landscape analysis. These are illustrative and not exhaustive of the many communities and individuals who are harmed by the policies and practices of Big Tech.

- **Children and youth**: those that experience online abuse and violence and who may use the term "victim" or "survivor," particularly victims of online child sexual abuse and cyberbullying:
    - children and youth harmed by technology-assisted sexual abuse and exploitation.
    - children and youth harmed by cyberbullying, algorithms that foster self-harm, risky viral challenges.

- **Targets of gender-based violence**: those that experience gendered online abuse and violence and who may use the term "victim" or "survivor":
    - Predominantly LGBTQIA+ people, women and girls harmed by online stalking, non-consensual image abuse, harassment, and threats.

- **Politically marginalised identities: those experiencing violence and systemic discrimination as a member of a specific group or community,** particularly members of marginalised communities and victims of armed conflict and political violence, including for example online attacks, shadow bans and algorithmic amplification of hate and conspiracy theories:
    - victims of political violence and armed conflict fuelled in part by social media, for example the Rohingya in Myanmar, those affected by the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia or victims of war and human rights abuse in Palestine and Ukraine.
    - marginalised communities experiencing hate speech, harassment, structural discrimination, and violence, on lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, migration status, and other forms of identity.

- **Professional identity: those whose personal experience of online harms is interlinked with their work (often journalists, activists, digital activists, politicians, environmental defenders)** and include attacks on their identity and democratic ideals such as independent journalism, free and fair elections, and human rights to organise and protest:
    - journalists targeted because of the content of their work and often intersecting with their personal identity, for example being Black, queer, Muslim, differently abled, or a woman.
    - activists, including human rights defenders, environmental defenders, indigenous rights defenders, and those engaged in protest.

- climate or health scientists.
- political candidates and politicians.
- content moderators - particularly from countries where Big Tech is not adequately resourced or staffed - who face trauma exposure and lack support and resources to remove abusive and incendiary content.

- **Institutions: those whose harm is experienced through organised attacks on science, information, and democratic institutions,** for example through disinformation around climate, health, elections, and conflicts, rather than personally targeted harassment and offline attacks:
  - electorates and populations harmed by election disinformation, incitements to political violence, and undermining of democratic institutions.
  - the public affected by health disinformation, for example around COVID-19 vaccines, or abortion and other sexual and reproductive health information.
  - the public affected by climate disinformation.

These are overlapping categories, and in many cases a person might align with multiple categories. For example, Marielle Franco would fall into four categories: she was a queer politician and activist in Brazil who encountered online abuse and threats, who was ultimately killed during an election period marked by targeted and organised disinformation campaigns.

Finding 1

When those directly impacted by online harms inform and participate in advocacy, they offer a unique and important form of expertise that humanises the impact of Big Tech's product failures. Their pressure is crucial in raising awareness and generating impact.

Amplifying the experiences and perspectives of those directly impacted allows the public to understand the harms more viscerally. A lesson from a respondent working with survivors of tech harm is that *"Big Tech, they are comfortable talking about technical solutions. What algorithms they could tweak. The problem with that discourse, is that it keeps it sterile and technical, it is removed from human life and how people's lives are immediately affected. As we started working on it, part of our endeavour was to pull the discussion off the 'techie', sterile space to the real, psychological and physical impacts."*[1]

A human rights researcher working in the Middle East provided an example of impact through direct advocacy and channels of communication with LGBTQIA+ activists: *"Grindr has taken really good steps. They have a person who is in direct, immediate contact with activists. In Lebanon, the leader of Hezbollah incited violence against LGBT people, it was an unprecedented event, led to mass threats, online violence. Grindr immediately stepped in and locked new accounts in Lebanon, sending referrals and resources to organisations defending their rights."*[2]

It is critical for directly impacted activists from around the world to engage directly with Big Tech companies, rather than have to rely on Western-based digital rights organisations as "middlemen". *"Meta has set up a working group with civil society organisations, allows human rights defenders to be rapid response intermediaries that flag harmful content and direct communication with Meta. Before that it was on an ad hoc basis, them [local activists] flagging to [global organisations to] communicate with Meta. But in that case, the harm is already done, that is one of the critiques. We want to flag before it turns into offline violence."*[3]

A tech accountability advocate working with parents in the United States observed, *"It was remarkable how quickly impacted people were able to change the conversation and have impact. In many situations, their voices are the most resonant."* The advocate added, *"By pairing careful strategy with survivor voices, we were able to achieve significant wins from some of the largest*

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1   Interview with a respondent working with survivors of tech harm, 23 June 2023.
2   Interview with a human rights researcher, 7 August 2023.
3   Interview with a human rights researcher, 7 August 2023.

tech companies, flip legislators, change media narratives, even get significant action in direct conversation with the White House. Integrating and elevating parent voices with our advocacy makes this issue fly faster than anything I've seen."[4]

Centring the personal experiences of survivors can provide an effective counter to the narratives promoted by Big Tech. The human rights researcher commented, *"[when] centring the experiences of those most affected, it is really prioritising their narrative as opposed to a corporate one or yielding to language of Big Tech companies. Big Tech has a tone of defeat they carry about what is in their ability to implement."*[5]

Advocacy by people who have been directly impacted must, however, not be used to sensationalise their experiences or trauma. Organisation should support survivors by recognising that they have a unique form of knowledge and experience, which is a form of expertise. A UK advocate said, *"lived experience expertise doesn't mean they need to keep telling the story of how they were traumatised, but their perspectives need to be taken into account as a form of expertise."*[6]

Advocacy also needs to ensure governments don't use these emotive stories to push dangerous policies in the guise of "online safety" to further entrench surveillance.

Litigation is another key arena where directly impacted individuals have applied pressure on Big Tech's policies and practices, and where they have a unique role. When survivors of online harms have brought lawsuits against Big Tech, it not only forces legal accountability, but also raises public awareness, mandates Big Tech companies to respond, and applies pressure.

Finding 2   Those most impacted by online harms lack a common umbrella terminology for their experience – such as "survivors", "targets", "victims", or "those with lived experiences". This could hamper joint advocacy toward Big Tech and others.

This research sought to explore how those directly affected by the worst forms of online harms define themselves and connect to others who have been impacted by Big Tech practices. While some individuals – particularly those affected by targeted harassment and abuse – frame themselves as "survivors" or "victims," others may not identify with these terms. Furthermore, those who are working on these issues may not publicly identify as "survivors" or as "individuals directly impacted" but may still have been drawn to activism through personal experiences.

One respondent working with survivors of tech harm highlighted that for their campaign, *"One barrier is there is still little self-identification. Survivors of sexual violence might identify under #metoo, there may be a […] way to relate to Rose MacGowan or to participate in 'Everyone's Invited.'"*[7]

This type of common self-identification was, however, largely absent among victims of other online harms.

Finding 3   There are not enough initiatives to organise and bring together people directly affected by disinformation around health or climate as a distinct identity or community, even though disinformation has had a clear impact on both issue areas.

For example, Climate Action Against Disinformation (a global coalition of 50+ climate and anti-disinformation organisations) works closely with climate scientists and activists who face online harassment because of their work. This research did not find any initiatives, however, that elevate the voices of communities affected by climate-related disinformation.

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4   Interview with US based tech accountability advocate, 16 August 2023.
5   Interview with a human rights researcher, 7 August 2023.
6   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.
7   Interview with one respondent working with survivors of tech harm, 23 June 2023.

Finding 4   **Activists and survivors agreed that organising across online harms is both important and needed to amplify their common demands.**

Despite the diversity of individuals and communities affected by online harms, and despite the differences in how they identify or frame these harms, their advocacy priorities often overlap. Joint calls include robust "terms of use policies" and enforcement; accessible and user-friendly reporting mechanisms; adequate staffing, diversity, and resourcing for content moderation, particularly in non-English markets; research, regulation, and accountability around harmful algorithms; transparency on research findings and business models; and meaningful consultation with relevant stakeholders, including those directly affected.

An advocate from a UK CSO commented, *"I think there is a problem with silos, people working on types of online harm separately. For example, racism and sexism separately. […] People who are perpetrating the abuse online are extremely networked and weaving together overtly racist and anti-Semitic messages. It calls for a response that is unified."* [8]

An advocate fighting disinformation in Brazil said, *"The lobby from Big Tech is enormous. When we look at civil society separately, there are organisations from digital rights, everything is so small compared to Big Tech. We feel very weak. When you put everyone together, it gives us more strength. Allows us to pursue change with different examples […] When you put expertise together, it strengthens our discourse and ability to influence."* [9]

Finding 5   **Most survivor-led organisations or initiatives prioritising survivors in advocacy directed at Big Tech focus on a specific category of online harm or community affected.**

For example, in the UK and the US, some parents of children who passed away after experiencing online abuse and harassment, trying a risky viral challenge, or being fed harmful content as a result of profit-seeking algorithms, have set up their own foundations focusing on online safeguards for youth and children. Examples include the Molly Rose Foundation and the Becca Schmill Foundation. Rohingya activists, legal support organisations, and human rights groups have organised around Facebook's failure to address algorithms that fuelled hate and anti-Rohingya violence, including through litigation. The Instituto Marielle Franco in Brazil fights ongoing efforts to spread disinformation about the nature of queer activist and politician Marielle Franco's work and killing.

In other cases, trade organisations, community organisations, and human rights groups may not be founded or led by survivors of online harms, but have amplified their experiences and partnered with them in advocacy against Big Tech. These include organisations such as #ShePersisted (for example through the *Monetizing Misogyny* reports), the International Center for Journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others.

Parents Together is a US-based group that recruits, trains, engages and supports parents who have lost their children to online harms and centres their experiences, participation, and perspectives in their advocacy.

There are also interesting examples of cross-country and global organising around single issues. For example, there are global conversations and organising around online gender-based violence, violence against LGBTQIA+ communities and child sexual abuse and exploitation (including controversial advocacy networks). [10]

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8   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.
9   Interview with an advocate in Brazil, 27 July 2023.
10   See, for example: Giacomo Zandonini, Apostolis Fotiadis and Luděk Stavinoha, 'Who Benefits?' Inside the EU's Fight over Scanning for Child Sex Content, Balkan Insight, 25 September 2023.

Finding 6   **There are too few examples of joint advocacy initiatives bringing together survivors across different social media harms.**

The research uncovered two examples that show the potential of joint advocacy across social media harms: an online campaign from Avaaz and parts of the Decolonising Digital Rights process coordinated by the Digital Freedom Fund (DFF) and the European Digital Rights initiative (EDRi).

Few other joint advocacy initiatives amplify voices of individuals who have been most directly impacted by including organisations that represent communities that have been particularly targeted on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, for example, and may be engaging with survivors. Such initiatives bring together a wide range of digital rights organisations, community-based organisations, human rights groups, and other public-interest advocates to make recommendations and put pressure on Big Tech and governments. Examples include the Christchurch Call Advisory Network, the Global Alliance against Digital Hate and Extremism, the Change the Terms coalition and Stop Toxic Twitter.

Finding 7   **There are organisations that are not currently organising or amplifying survivors' advocacy directed at Big Tech but would be well placed to do so.**

There are many survivor-led and survivor-centred initiatives that cover a broad range of offline harms but who are not prioritising advocacy around online harms. Many of these groups may have established networks for pushing policy change, generating media attention, and seeking funding that could be supportive to digital activists.

Other organisations that could potentially better amplify survivors' advocacy includes those that support people affected by online harms. Their services often focus on providing resources and information to protect oneself online, offering channels and referrals for legal support and counselling, and conducting community outreach and prevention efforts. Examples include the UK Safer Internet Centre and LGBT Ireland, or the German groups HateFree, Alliance against Cybermobbing, and Digital Courage. These groups have direct contact with people experiencing online harms, have experience in supporting them, and have expertise in the types of harms taking place and where current systems falter in prevention and response.

Other initiatives led by those directly affected – often as a community rather than individuals – are emanating from groups representing Black, migrant, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, and other marginalised communities. These are advocating against hate speech and on the structural and systemic harms on Big Tech platforms that disproportionately affect them. These initiatives may include targeted research, coalition-based advocacy, and demanding consultation and participation in policymaking. These groups typically are integrating advocacy around online discrimination and harms into their existing offline portfolios.

Research plays an important role in generating knowledge about online harms and identifying those directly impacted. It can also create space for organising. Many academic and civil society research initiatives identify people who have experienced online harms and amplify their stories. There may be ways for researchers and advocacy organisations to partner so that people who are willing to participate in research, including by sharing their stories, can learn about channels to shape policy advocacy.

Finding 8 **There is a huge discrepancy in the advocacy attention and resources received by different communities affected by online harms. This reflects global power inequities and leads to lopsided and unequal policy responses.**

"The sharp end of failures of Big Tech are where there are the least structures to do something about it […] There are big risks of massive inequity of whose problems are made prominent and worthy of action." [11]

"Privilege dictates who gets to advocate and who even knows advocacy is even an avenue." [12]

Interviews revealed examples of the wildly divergent attention and resources that diverse online harms receive from Big Tech, policymakers, digital rights groups, the media, and the public. Such attention varies widely depending on social and political contexts, contributing to how different issues are elevated in public campaigning, policy debates and legal reform. Given the diversity of harms and contexts, and the limited scope of this report, further research is needed to outline these dynamics more accurately and fully. Some illustrative quotes and examples are included below:

"There is a lot of investment […] not commensurate with the harms when it came to elections. Conversation about 70 moderators when it comes to millions [of posts]. When it comes to online GBV it is complete silence. For election integrity, they have staff in the country, they have presence. It's not commensurate for other issues. GBV and other issues are completely neglected." [13] *"Nigeria is a big country, still top in the charts when it comes to attention. But definitely the Global South, Africa, when it comes to investments in safety, it's very low."*

"In Europe, [the discrepancy happens at] multiple levels, gender dynamics, ableism, racial, sexism. That dynamic between eastern Europe and western Europe. English-dominated conversations and framing." [14]

"In recent years, there has been a lot of attention on journalists as a group impacted by violations of freedom of expression. When it comes to online GBV, a lot of focus on women politicians, women journalists […] Those groups create networks to express these issues, and their perspectives are taken on board. That's the way it's been […]." [15]

"We as an organisation come up against, still, a tendency in broader feminist and GBV movements to equate women's experiences with a white middle class woman's experience." [16]

"Those most affected […] shouldn't have to go through western organisations and bodies to reach company decision-makers. At end of the day, they are consumers and they have suffered impacts because of the product." [17]

"In the project with migrant domestic workers, we had gone in anticipating it would be a project on CCTV surveillance in homes. When we asked them in an open-ended way what made them unsafe online, we found out about state surveillance and Home Office surveillance of those with insecure immigration status. The extent to which surveillance is rarely discussed in terms of technology-enabled abuse and coercive control, it's because the white middle class aren't very conscious of that." [18]

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11   Interview with a respondent working with survivors of tech harm, 23 June 2023.
12   Interview with US-based tech accountability advocate, 16 August 2023.
13   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.
14   Interview with tech and justice funder, 17 July 2023.
15   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.
16   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.
17   Interview with a human rights researcher, 7 August 2023.
18   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.

Finding 9 **Racism, classism, and other dynamics replicate within advocacy movements.**

Differences in privilege and lived experiences can influence advocacy spaces, affecting dynamics between survivors and professional policy advocates, or even among survivors themselves. The US-based tech accountability advocate observed that without efforts to address and recognise these dynamics, *"if you just invite them in the room, what happens in society will duplicate in the room and it's not pretty."*

In reflecting on their experience, she said, *"Racism and classism feature prominently in which parents get engaged and how. Because of subconscious bias and societal privileges, white parents pretty consistently receive more engagement, attention, and opportunities from some white advocates. We consciously work to bring parents of colour and parents with less privileged socio-economic backgrounds into the advocacy realm and despite consistent efforts, parents of colour are often ignored, left behind, or tokenised by some advocacy organisations. The racial discrimination and white supremacy entrenched throughout society is alive and well in this movement, not just in how parents are treated, but in how advocates are treated as well."*[19]

Finding 10 **Organising and amplifying survivors' voices must avoid exploitative practices that instrumentalise harmful experiences.**

Key themes emerging from the interviews include the importance of valuing the expertise and participation of those directly impacted by online harms, and building structures for regular and meaningful consultation, partnership, and leadership. The Nigerian digital rights advocate talked about a workshop she was planning on *"how to engage with survivors in advocacy. Because they have a significant insight about what we can do better to protect women and girls."*[20]

The tech and justice funder observed, *"There are lots of well-meaning individuals. Lots of good work happening. But often that work is extractive. We [see groups with] funding saying working with those most impacted. Digital rights reach out to a racial group for one or two meetings, take their ideas. Those groups remain underfunded, unfunded. Lots of extractivism in those partnerships."*[21]

One interviewee observed that there can be a gap between the intentions of working with survivors and how the reality plays out, which can be jarring if conversations aren't followed up on or promises aren't kept.

The UK-based advocate said, *"Trust and Safety councils are one way that feedback from people with lived experience gets formalised. You can meet regularly and see whether recommendations have been implemented and be compensated for your time. A lot of collaboration can be ad hoc. […] They may have already created a proposal and then retroactively invite people to 'consult' them. They get credibility by working with a charity without a meaningful commitment to collaboration. The engagement has to be meaningful, not a show."*[22]

The US-based advocate said it's important to educate other advocates on how to work respectfully and ethically with survivors. Some advocates may have been working on these issues, *"their work is invaluable, but the ways they want to work with parents […] They do their thing, bring parents for an emotional hit, then they bring the parents out. They have a ton of appreciation for parents, but don't realise the way they're interacting is extractive."*[23]

She recounted that they had *"very bad experiences [with organisations] interacting with parents in a careless way, that can be extractive. Let me use you for this and bounce and then parents don't hear from the organisation for months on end, if ever. You're the prop. Advocates need to care about survivor experiences from when they leave the house and are packing, to when they*

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19   Interview with US based tech accountability advocate, 16 August 2023.
20   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.
21   Interview with tech and justice funder, 17 July 2023.
22   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.
23   Interview with US based tech accountability advocate, 16 August 2023.

are in the hotel, but often, organisations don't engage with that level of care. Sometimes it's really bad. On one occasion, we had a partner where we divided up work for an event with parents. The partner said they would handle all of the logistics, but then did not do the basics that we agreed upon. For example, instead of scheduling a meeting room, their plan was to have 10 people crowd around a desk in a hotel room telling very traumatic stories into a computer screen, while standing for hours. That's not the way to treat people so our team stayed up all night arranging logistics."

Finding 11 **An ethical approach to working with survivors of online harms requires a commitment to trauma-informed practices, including acknowledgment and support for healing and recovery.**

A consistent theme across interviews and a lesson learned from multiple social justice movements is the importance of trauma-informed approaches in working with people who have experienced great harm. In the case of online harms, individuals who are directly impacted may have experienced different types of trauma, including: the loss of a loved one; high volumes of sustained and disturbing harassment, abuse, and threats; offline violence in addition to online abuse; or their communities and countries affected by armed conflict and political repression.

Interviewees commented that, in general, advocacy involving survivors and those directly impacted by online harms has not been sensitive to their trauma and has often instrumentalised them for the purpose of media coverage and advocacy impact. For example, one interviewee urged those interested in working with survivors of tech harms to adopt a trauma-informed approach. A tech and justice donor added, *"As a funder, there is so little awareness and guidance about trauma-informed approaches."* [24]

The US advocate who worked with parents provided a specific example: *"People who are well-meaning are interacting with parents in a terrible way. For example, we are working on a bill, and we were asked to bring parents to lobby. Advocates and legislators supporting the bill want parents to be really engaged and they want us to bring as many parents as possible and go hard, so they push a narrative that this is a huge tipping point and that we are so close to passing the bill and the parent engagement will make the difference. These parents show up and do the emotional advocacy in honour of their children's memories. And then the bill doesn't pass, parents are in bed for a week and depressed for months."* When describing another incident, she said, "That's not how you do this. You get on the phone, you build relationships, you offer help."[25]

The digital rights advocate from Nigeria had investigated what types of efforts are supporting women affected by online harms: *"I didn't find any organisations providing legal or psychosocial support. That is really significant. If that doesn't exist, where do they go to organise? Where do they go for support, to recover?"* [26]

Discrimination and biases in society are replicated in response to online harms, including misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and other prejudices. For example, with respect to gender-based violence, *"Women face double standards, issues of purity, sexuality, morality."* [27] Many of the dynamics that characterise certain forms of offline abuse will also characterise online abuse, for example victim-blaming and a sense of shame around sexual harassment and abuse. The Nigeria-based digital rights advocate said, *"The victims blame themselves. [People ask them:] 'Why did you put yourself in that situation?"* [28]

There are rich lessons learned and ample guidance from diverse (offline) survivors' movements on centring support, respect, and healing as a priority, as well as an essential component of working with survivors in advocacy, programming, or research. Relevant support structures, services, and healing spaces will look different depending on the harm.

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24   Interview with tech and justice funder, 17 July 2023.
25   Interview with US based tech accountability advocate, 16 August 2023.
26   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.
27   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.
28   Interview with digital rights advocate from Nigeria, 14 July 2023.

Recounting experiences of abuse repeatedly can be retraumatising. Several of the interviewees discussed trauma-informed approaches with respect to engaging with the media. For example, the UK-based advocate said, *"We have some guidance for journalists on how to engage people with lived experience [...] As a trauma-informed organisation we strongly encourage all media outlets to navigate GBV with care, we caution against shock factor. Do not include graphic details."* [29]

One interviewee also raised managing expectations of survivors when making introductions to those interested in their experiences, by being transparent about previous interactions, updating them regularly, or how much engagement to expect.

Finding 12 — Survivors who become involved in awareness-raising and advocacy can benefit from it including by reframing their own experiences, or by being able to channel their perspectives from trauma into positive change.

Before they were directly impacted themselves, survivors of online harms have varying levels of familiarity and knowledge about biased algorithms, Big Tech's business models, organised disinformation movements, and inadequate response efforts to reports of online abuse. In some cases, becoming involved in organised advocacy efforts and learning about Big Tech policies and practices can change their analysis of their own experiences.

For example, an advocate who worked with women politicians explained that they are often relieved when they learn their harassment was part of a large influence operation. It can be seen as a relief in some ways that it was not because people hated them or because of what they wore.

Finding 13 — The debate and advocacy focus by those directly impacted across different geographies and different communities vary and may sometimes come into conflict.

For example, in the US and Europe, there has been attention paid to online harms to children and youth, as well as election disinformation. In countries such as Ethiopia and Myanmar, the focus has been on political violence. In other countries, for example Nigeria, India, and Jordan, activists are often concerned about governments' use of online platforms for surveillance and repression. LGBTQIA+ groups face particular challenges in organising in countries where same-sex conduct is criminalised. Some interviewees expressed an interest in elevating awareness and public debate about the harms perpetrated by Big Tech since much of the priority has been on online surveillance, repression, and violence perpetrated by governments.

There may also be tensions between the advocacy asks of different groups of people directly impacted by Big Tech. For example, parents and youth may have differences in the emphasis they place on protection, particularly for children, versus privacy and freedom of expression. These may result in different advocacy objectives related to content moderation, user accessibility, and parental controls.

Another one has included the debate around end-to-end encryption (e2e), which many digital rights groups, human rights groups, and civil society in the global majority maintain is critical for protecting privacy, freedom to organise, safety for marginalised groups like LGBTQIA+ communities, and freedom from government surveillance. Advocates for e2e include some organisations fighting technology-assisted sexual abuse and exploitation and technology-assisted gender-based violence.

In terms of organising across borders, there can be a perceived divide in the advocacy asks in countries with stronger law enforcement and where governments have been seen as a "protector" against Big Tech. This differs from countries where the government may be seen as a "perpetrator" of abuses that will be exploiting Big Tech to continue repressive practices against journalists,

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29   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.

activists, and LGBQTIA+ communities. The UK-based advocate calls into question the idea that there is a clear divide between those governments that are rights-respecting and those that are not: *"There are cases in which the US government has been prosecuting abortion access using private FB messenger group that wasn't encrypted."*[30]

Finding 14 **Tech literacy can be a barrier to entry.**

The digital advocacy space can be intimidating to people who are not well-versed in technology and technology-speak. There can be assumptions that a high degree of tech literacy is needed to be effective. The UK-based advocate observed: *"There is a very specific way that tech expertise is talked about. There is definitely a process of upskilling happening in the DV [domestic violence] space. People describe themselves as not tech experts."*[31]

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30   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.
31   Interview with an advocate from a UK civil society organization, 14 August 2023.

Conclusion and recommendations

People who have been directly impacted by online harms have a unique and important form of expertise that is crucial to amplify in public debate and policymaking, and to reflect in accountability standards for Big Tech. This expertise can be powerfully combined with the know-how of digital rights groups to ensure that their lived experience is integral to change-making efforts.

This research has uncovered some gaps that should be addressed:

• Very few initiatives currently bring together survivors across different social media harms for the purpose of coordinated advocacy that targets the business model of Big Tech platforms. This hampers joint advocacy efforts and prevents cross-learning on best practices.

• Diverse online harms receive wildly divergent attention and resources from Big Tech, policymakers, digital rights groups, the media, donors, and the public at large. This discrepancy reflects global power inequities, which translate into lopsided policy responses. For example, issues such as Western youths' mental health and election disinformation have received significant support and attention, while other harms, such as online GBV or the use of tech by authoritarian and democratic governments to entrench surveillance, have nowhere near the same resources.

• Racism, classism and other dynamics within advocacy movements impacts which survivors of online are prioritised through support and access to funders, the media and policymakers.

• Advocacy involving survivors and those directly impacted by online harms is often insensitive to their trauma, instead instrumentalising them for media coverage and advocacy impact in a way that can be exploitative.

• Tech literacy can be a barrier to entry and intimidate survivors and potential activists who are less well-versed in digital rights activism.

Therefore, it is crucial for funders to:

• Build greater support for survivors of online harms and representatives of affected communities by ensuring that they have meaningful structures for participation and leadership in advocacy directed at Big Tech. Their perspectives are essential for strengthening the protection of rights in digital spaces.

• Strengthen and support models of ethical and inclusive advocacy partnerships and practices. Crucially, these should reject "extractivism," and the exploitation of trauma, but instead innovate and promote trauma-informed approaches, investments, and practices.

• Actively work to break racial, gender, and other structural barriers for people with lived experience of social media harms to access funders, Big Tech, civil society, the media and policymakers.

• Ensure that trauma support is integral to any funding. An ethical approach to working with survivors on online harms includes a commitment to trauma-informed practices, including acknowledgment and support for healing and recovery.

• Elevate public reporting and debate that exposes harmful Big Tech practices and global inequities in response to harms, in particular in contexts where public attention may focus on narrow subsets and ignore less well-resourced survivor communities. Philanthropy must work to break existing power imbalances rather than exploit them.

• Learn from movements that have strong frameworks and models of prioritising the right to participation by those most affected, and who develop and implement trauma-informed approaches. These include disability rights movements and movements fighting gender-based violence.

• Consider convening relevant stakeholders to jointly explore whether and what type of coordinated organising across online harms could be strategic, equitable, and impactful.

• Promote collaboration between victims and survivors and digital rights organisations that commit to taking a trauma-informed approach.

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