

Conducting Listening Sessions with Survivors of Gender-based Violence

Gabriela López-Zerón, PhD,
Michigan State University

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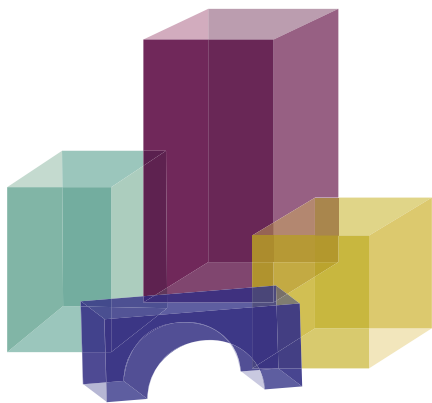
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The federal Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium (the Consortium) is an innovative, collaborative approach to providing training, technical assistance, and resource development at the critical intersection of domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, and housing.

Funded and supported by an unprecedented partnership between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, and Department of Housing and Urban Development, this multi-year Consortium brings together national, state, and local organizations with deep expertise on housing, domestic and sexual violence in order to collaboratively build and strengthen technical assistance to both housing/homelessness providers and domestic/sexual violence service providers. The Consortium aims to improve policies, identify promising practices, and strengthen collaborations necessary to improve housing options for survivors of domestic and sexual violence and their children in order to enhance safety, stability, and well-being.

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Listening sessions are an excellent technique to capture participants' views and suggestions about an issue. There are several well-established principles regarding how to conduct effective listening sessions; however, when working with survivors of gender-based violence, it is critical to integrate a trauma-informed perspective to every aspect of the process. The aim of this brief document is to provide some key considerations and guidelines when conducting listening sessions with survivors. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of considerations, rather, it highlights some of the most prominent issues that may arise when eliciting survivors' perceptions, experiences, and suggestions in a group setting.

Safety Considerations



An important concern when working with survivors of gender-based violence is safety. When thinking about safety issues during a listening session, consider both physical and emotional safety. Physical safety is a broad concept and refers to the location, time, and other logistics of the listening session. Emotional safety refers to participants' ability to be open to express themselves honestly during the sessions without fear of risk or injury.

When considering safety, it is also important to make sure the location, time, and other logistics of the listening session center survivors' needs. Further, it is critical to frame the listening session in a way that invites participants to have open conversations that honor their experiences, views, and suggestions.

Some guiding questions during the planning of listening session(s):

- Will the listening session be held at a location that is easily accessible (e.g., public transportation available, no barriers for participants with physical disabilities, etc.) and at a time that is convenient to most participants?
- Will the listening session be held in a private space where no one else can listen to the discussion?
- Will the listening session be held at a location where participants feel comfortable to express themselves honestly without fearing negative consequences or repercussions on their relationships with providers, services they are receiving, or services would like to receive in the future?
- Will childcare be provided? Food? Reimbursement for transportation costs?
- Did your budget include incentives for survivors' participation in the listening session (e.g., cash, gift card, etc.)?
- Will participants be able to express themselves in their preferred language? (see section on Language Access and Justice below)

Size of the Listening Session



Another important consideration is the number of individuals invited to participate in a single listening session. A large group may be appealing because diverse views are likely to be represented. However, if the group is large (i.e., more than 10-12 survivors), participants may not feel comfortable openly sharing their perspectives. Further, it may also be difficult for facilitators to guide the conversation, probe, and follow-up with participants. Therefore, if there is a lot of interest in the listening session, it may be beneficial to hold several smaller listening sessions rather than a single large meeting.

Some guiding questions regarding the size of listening session(s):

- Is the number of participants invited to the session too large for everyone to have the opportunity to share meaningfully within the allotted time?
- Does the budget and/or project deadlines allow for more than one listening session?

Attentiveness to Trauma Disclosures

Often listening sessions with survivors may touch on issues of trauma and abuse. Even if that is not the focus of the session, survivors might share sensitive details of their stories. Although some participants may be willing to share the trauma and abuse they experienced, it may trigger posttraumatic stress responses on other participants or themselves. Facilitators must therefore be prepared to gently guide the conversation away from trauma processing (which may be more appropriate for a therapeutic setting) back to the main goals of the listening session. Further, project leaders may consider creating a resource sheet with local and national resources (e.g., websites, hotlines, local supportive services organizations) for anyone needing additional support after the listening session.

Some guiding questions to better prepare for potential trauma disclosures during listening session(s):

- Are the guiding questions for the listening session clear and focused on the session goals and objectives?
- Do facilitators have experience conducting listening sessions with survivors of gender-based violence?
- If not, how will facilitators be trained on the general considerations about conducting listening sessions with survivors?
- How will facilitators establish group guidelines and agreements to prevent trauma processing during the listening session?
- Are facilitators prepared to gently guide conversations away from trauma processing in the case of detailed trauma disclosures?



Listening Session Facilitators

Given the multiple complexities of conducting listening sessions, it is important to have at least two facilitators during a meeting. The lead facilitator may then focus on the content of the session, while the support facilitator focuses on the process of the listening session. That is, the lead facilitator guides the conversation by asking questions, following up, and probing when relevant. In turn, the support facilitator may then answer any individual questions as they come up, monitor participants' nonverbal cues, and offer relevant reflections or additional probing questions. A facilitation team may also be ideal in case there is a need to interrupt irrelevant tangents or problematic discourses.

Additionally, project leaders may consider the importance of providing facilitators with the opportunity to debrief after listening sessions, particularly if the sessions were emotionally charged. Facilitators may also experience emotional reactions to the topics discussed and it is important to provide the space they may need to process those reactions. Additionally, facilitators may have reflections and observations about the process of the session that may be important to document. In those conversations, key lessons about facilitating listening sessions may emerge.

Some guiding questions about facilitating listening sessions:

- How many facilitators will be available for the listening sessions?
- Is there time set aside for facilitators to prepare for the listening session to determine roles (i.e., lead vs support facilitator)?
- Is there time set aside to debrief and reflect on the process of the listening session?
- How will relevant reflections and observations be documented?



Language Access and Justice

Language Access refers to the importance of ensuring that those who do not identify English as their primary language have access to a wide range of services. Language Justice builds on the importance of language access, while promoting equity among languages. That is, it is grounded on the premise that it is critical for organizations, researchers, and service providers to ensure that all individuals are able to express themselves in the language they feel most proficient and powerful. Centering language needs is necessary to

provide culturally responsive and trauma-informed listening sessions. It also ensures that data collected is not only accurate, but also rich and robust.

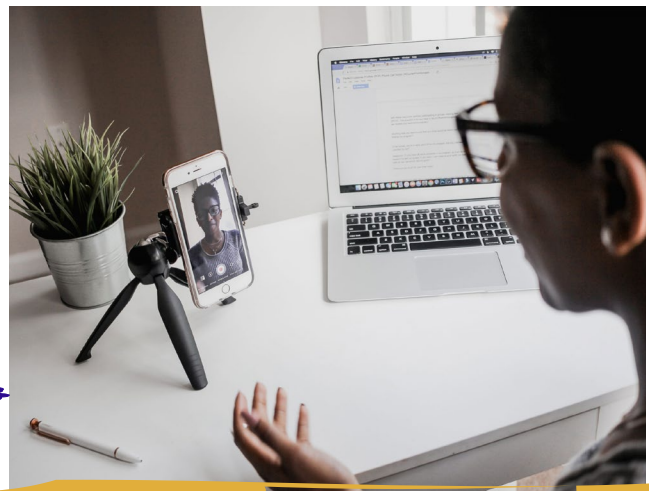
Language is central part of an individual's identity and experiences. Consequently, making sure that participants have the opportunity to freely express their thoughts, concerns, desires, and stories is key to conducting meaningful listening sessions. Further, individuals who do not have the opportunity to express themselves in their preferred language may likely choose to use simpler language or omit sharing complex ideas because of how much effort it may be for them to express themselves in English. Therefore, integrating a language justice perspective is a central aspect of conducting trauma-informed, and culturally and contextually relevant listening sessions.

Some guiding questions regarding language justice:

- Will the listening session include participants who do not identify English as their primary language?
 - If yes, how will it be ensured that participants are able to express themselves in the language they feel most proficient and comfortable?
- Will there be a need for interpreters?
 - If yes, what is the budget allocated for interpretation services?
 - If yes, how will interpreters' skills be assessed prior to the listening sessions?
 - If yes, how much time will interpreters' have to prepare prior to the session (e.g., go over the goals for the listening

session, review guiding questions, coordinate logistics with facilitators, etc.)?

- If yes, how will note taking be facilitated when there might be multiple languages represented in the listening session?
- If yes, is there time set aside for interpreters to debrief and reflect on the process of the listening session?



Virtual Listening Sessions

As virtual listening sessions become more common, project leaders may need to make strategic decisions regarding the structure and content of the session. It may be helpful to have planning conversations with subject matter experts, community partners, and potential participants to decide whether a virtual listening session is the most culturally and contextually appropriate and trauma-informed way to achieve project aims. If determined that a listening session is appropriate and relevant, project leaders may need to modify the goals, size, and of the session to accommodate for a virtual setting.

Project leaders may consider limiting the scope of the meeting to make sure that the session remains focused on the main goal(s). In addition, it may also be important to consider inviting fewer participants to a virtual listening session than to an in-person meeting to foster an intimate and comfortable space where participants can express their views. Finally, it is critical to consider and plan for some of the potential difficulties that may arise during the virtual session, such as bandwidth problems for participants, interruptions, and time constraints.

Given these numerous challenges, it is important to have conversations with participants prior to the session regarding their access to the equipment (e.g., smart phone, tablet), the platform that will be used (e.g., Zoom, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams), and the bandwidth necessary to support the virtual session. Additionally, if participants will be offered an incentive for their involvement in the listening session, project leaders may consider having multiple options of delivery (e.g., gift card, Western Union, Venmo) to accommodate for diverse needs.

Some guiding questions when preparing for a virtual listening session:

- Is a virtual listening session the most culturally and contextually appropriate way to collect data at this time?
- How many individuals will be invited to a single virtual listening session?
- How will project leaders ensure that participants have access to a private location to sign on to the virtual session, the online platform used for the event, and the necessary bandwidth to participate in the session?

- How will survivors' emotional needs be monitored/supported in a virtual session?
- If working with multilingual participants, how will language justice be considered in a virtual listening session?
 - Does the platform support interpretation services?
 - Are facilitators and interpreters familiar with the language services of the platform used for the listening session? If not, will there be a need for additional training or practice sessions?
- How will participants receive the incentive for their participation?

Final Thoughts

This brief document highlights some of the key issues that must be considered when conducting listening sessions with survivors of gender-based violence to ensure that the sessions are trauma-informed, survivor-centered, and culturally and contextually relevant. The following section includes a checklist summary of the considerations discussed above. There may be additional considerations and concerns depending on the goals and content of the session.

General Guidelines for Listening Sessions with Survivors of Gender-based Violence

1

Prior to the Listening Session:

- Establish clear goal(s) and objectives for the listening session
- Identify key stakeholders (e.g., community partners, potential participants), and discuss planning and communication strategies
- Consider confidentiality and privacy issues for participants when determining the location for the meeting
- Consider accessibility issues when determining the location, date, and time of the meeting
- Create a guiding listening session protocol and ensure that discussion questions are clear and focused - add specific probing questions that may help facilitators follow up with participants
- Identify language needs and plan accordingly
- Identify transportation, food, and childcare needs and plan accordingly
- Identify staffing and facilitation needs - provide guidance and training to staff, facilitators, and interpreters
- Strategize with facilitation team techniques to interrupt tangents and/or inappropriate discourses, gently guide the conversation away from trauma processing, and focus on both the process and content of the listening session
- Virtual meetings: Test technology in advance, arrange technical support for participants, consider language needs in a virtual space, and have a back-up plan in the event of technical difficulties

2

During to the Listening Session:

- Provide a brief description of the goals and objectives of the listening session
- Ask for participants consent to record the meeting
- Establish group guidelines
- Set clear expectations about participation and engagement during the meeting
- Introduce staff, facilitators, and interpreters
- Establish clear roles for facilitators: lead facilitator focuses on the content of the session, while support facilitator focuses on the process of the session
- Be mindful of time

3

After the Listening Session:

- Ensure that there is time for the facilitation team (and interpretation team if relevant) to debrief about both the content and process of the listening session
- Take note of any major reflections, observations, and/or reactions that might be relevant for the analysis of data collected