



## *Opinion*

# Inspiring Practices for the Meaningful Inclusion of Victims/Survivors of Terrorism in P/CVE Work

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## *Opinion*

# **Inspiring Practices for the Meaningful Inclusion of Victims/Survivors of Terrorism in P/CVE Work**

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## Introduction

Victims and survivors can play many valuable roles in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), through sharing both their personal testimony and their experience and expertise built up over years of work and research in the wider P/CVE sector. Acknowledging this must be the baseline for the meaningful inclusion of victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE work. Yet, considerations must also be taken to prevent such inclusion from becoming exploitative or further causing harm to the health and well-being of victims/survivors.

It is key to remember that victims/survivors going into P/CVE work are exceptions, not rules. Most victims/survivors may not wish to contribute to the P/CVE field, and they have no obligation to do so. If a victim/survivor chooses to enter the field, they also have every right to later withdraw from it. That must be respected.

Some victims/survivors choose to engage with the P/CVE field by giving testimony and sharing their experiences in educational and preventive contexts; this involvement often takes place in a part-time capacity. If facilitated well, these contributions can be a fruitful experience both for audiences and the victim/survivor. Other victims/survivors transition into full-time careers in the P/CVE sector and contribute to research, prevention and intervention work, policy development, legislative proceedings and law enforcement efforts.

This paper aims to address some of the challenges faced by victims/survivors in the P/CVE sector and explore inspiring practices for the inclusion of victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE work.

## The role of victims/survivors in the P/CVE sector

Victims and survivors play several roles within the P/CVE sector. For some, their status as victims/survivors is a starting point for building fruitful, lifelong careers within the sector or adjacent fields across policy, academia, law enforcement, tech and beyond. For others, it may have been a turning point, leading them to play a more casual role in part-time or volunteer capacities. The latter often takes the form of giving testimonials in memorial or educational contexts. These paths are valid trajectories for those who have lived through an act of terror. Equally valid is the choice of any victim/survivor not to engage in the P/CVE field.

While many are able to speak from and beyond personal and subjective biographical experience, victims/survivors are not, by default, experts on violent extremism, terrorism, or the psychology of either victims/survivors or perpetrators of violence. While testimony based on the subjective experience of surviving a terrorist attack can serve a valuable purpose in educational and memorial contexts, it is important to underline the distinction between the personal and subjective biographical experiences of victims/survivors versus objective facts, research being conducted, criminal investigations, etc.

Victims/survivors of terrorism are diverse individuals with vastly disparate experiences. These experiences are not limited to those of the attack but also to their life experiences before and after the attack. This gives victims/survivors vastly divergent tools, mechanisms and support structures for coping with traumatic events. This means that there will be a diverse range of experiences related to any singular terrorist incident. It also means that survivor and victim testimony may evolve as victims and survivors learn new facts about the incident or interpret their experiences in new ways. This should not be taken to discredit the credibility of victims/survivors sharing testimony.

An appreciation for — and understanding of — victims/survivors as non-homogeneous groups (even if they survived the same attacks) is vital to including these in P/CVE work <sup>(1)</sup>. Attempts at advocating for victims and survivors as a group must thus be inclusive and not aim to enforce conformity in how the incident should be treated neither from a psychological nor from a narrative perspective by the individual survivor, as this can reinforce a sense of isolation of individual survivors and cause psychological damage. This particularly applies to support groups and other formalised networks intended to provide care for victims/survivors.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hobfoll et al., 2007: Refining our Understanding of Traumatic Growth in the Face of Terrorism: Moving from Meaning Cognitions to Doing what is Meaningful.

Testimony relating lived experience can be important in raising awareness of an issue, advocating for resources and meaningful changes in policies that may have a preventive impact. Testimony may also serve as early-stage inoculation or be educational to students learning about the human impact of terror. Giving testimony may thus not have an immediate or measurable preventive impact but may support longer-term efforts to prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. A preventive impact should thus not be expected from testimony, nor should the responsibility for this be placed on the shoulders of victims/survivors.

While some victims/survivors may find it healing and beneficial to share their testimony, doing so may also come at a significant psychological cost, which may lead to burnout and substantial psychological harm resulting in harmful behaviours, including self-harm, violence, substance abuse and severance of personal relationships <sup>(2)</sup>.

Some evidence suggests victims/survivors may elicit more sympathy from an audience, and confrontation with victim/survivor narratives can, according to some research, predict affective and attitudinal outcomes <sup>(3)</sup>. Some studies, on the other hand, show that victims/survivors are viewed as less credible voices in counter-narratives by the (violent) right-wing milieu and as neither more nor less credible than control groups by general audiences <sup>(4)</sup>.

This puts into question the deployment of victims/survivors as exceptionally credible voices in counter-narrative or alternative narrative campaigns. As there is no conclusive evidence that victims/survivors are exceptionally credible voices for the general public in counter- and alternative narrative campaigns, employing them in such efforts should be well thought through. When involving victims/survivors in such campaigns, it should be clearly outlined how the benefits outweigh the potential harm to the victim's/survivor's mental health.

The fact that credibility might not be solely derived from personal experience with terrorism does not mean that a victim's/survivor's credibility can't be drawn from other sources that may be inspired by such experiences, including, for example, education, institutional affiliations, academic credentials and expertise built up through work in the P/CVE field. A survivor may, in other words, due to their biographical relationship to terrorism, be exceptionally motivated to become an expert on P/CVE, meaningfully contribute to the field beyond their personal relationship to the subject matter, and thus derive credibility from the entirety of their work, expertise and relationship to the subject.

The biographical relationship of a victim/survivor to an act of terrorism may thus be viewed as only one component of a complex set of experiences that, in sum, may add up to credibility both within the sector and in communication with external actors, including general audiences, media, academia, policymakers, etc.

The sector has often largely focused on the role of victims/survivors as intrinsically and directly connected to their experience, sometimes at the peril of not recognising their expertise. This does not serve the best interest of victims/survivors, nor does it honour the extensive knowledge and expertise a person may have that extends beyond their status as victim/survivor.

It is thus important to recognise the expertise of the survivor, not by virtue of their status as a survivor, but by virtue of their actual expertise and knowledge that goes beyond lived experience with the subject matter.

## Extraordinary and specific challenges for victims/survivors

The overwhelming urge survivors and victims may have to contribute to the struggle against violent extremism, rooted in the personal experience of loss and trauma, has great potential both for exploitation and causing further harm to the individuals in question. This drive, the acute awareness of the real cost of terror, may weaken the victim's/survivor's sense of urgency in advocating for themselves. This does, however, not mean that their contributions to the sector do not come at a significant personal cost.

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<sup>(2)</sup> McGowan, 2022: Victims of Political Violence and Terrorism: Making up Resilient Survivors.

<sup>(3)</sup> Knupfer & Matthes, 2021: An Attack against Us All? Perceived Similarity and Compassion for the Victims Mediate the Effects of News Coverage About Right-Wing Terrorism.

<sup>(4)</sup> Koehler et al., 2023: Don't Kill the Messenger: Perceived Credibility of Far-Right Former Extremists and Police Officers in P/CVE Communication.

The cost for many is both psychological and financial. The impact of both can be mitigated, and it is the responsibility of the P/CVE sector to do so rather than to fall into a pattern of exploitation of vulnerable individuals.

Victims/survivors come from a wide array of backgrounds and circumstances. They are at different life stages, at different points in their career, come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have vastly different support networks. Throughout the lifelong process following the survival of a terrorist attack, an individual's relationship to their own trauma will never be static. It is a continuous journey. In including victims/survivors in P/CVE work, it's important to remember this and not place undue expectations on a survivor's testimony, resilience, or mental or physical health situation.

For the responsible inclusion of victims/survivors in the P/CVE sector, we must consider their multi-layered life experiences and biographies. In responsibly including victims/survivors in P/CVE work, we thus must take into consideration a range of financial, practical, safety and psychological factors.

The situation of individual victims/survivors may vary vastly. A victim/survivor may not have institutional affiliations or independent financial support for their work within the sector. Victims/survivors may also feel uncomfortable with financial gain from traumatic incidents, the loss of life of friends and loved ones, etc., or may fear being stigmatised and discredited either by the public or by other victims/survivors as a result of this. This may result in the under-communication of the realities of the financial situation and needs of victims/survivors and may inadvertently lead to the exploitation of the labour of individuals who, for various reasons, may feel unable to advocate for themselves.

Some will have to take time off from other work to be able to participate or contribute to work in the P/CVE sector. This may have an immediate financial impact in terms of lost wages, coverage of travel costs, etc., but it may also have a long-term and harmful impact on their non-P/CVE careers, resulting in reduced long-term income.

To account for the potential long-term loss of income may be difficult. Still, as a baseline, the sector should put in place measures to mitigate the short-term financial costs of victims/survivors contributing to the P/CVE sector by offering healthy remuneration for work and coverage of expenses, including expenses for potential childcare during travel. This must also account for days lost to recovering from the potential negative psychological impact of sharing testimony, being exposed to the testimonies of others or other harmful impacts resulting from their participation in the sector.

The psychological cost to anyone working in P/CVE is high. This may be especially true for victims/survivors contributing to the P/CVE sector. Yet, such costs may often be under-communicated. It can be especially hard for victims/survivors driven to contribute to the sector to recognise such issues in themselves. Victims/survivors may also expect to experience a negative response to expressing such costs, such as a loss of credibility within the sector or loss of income should they depend on independent or institutional work within the sector. This may further deter the communication of such issues at the peril of victims/survivors. These psychological costs may lead to burnout, self-harm, substance abuse, and other negative and harmful behaviours. Mitigating such costs is thus important to sustainably and responsibly including victims/survivors in P/CVE work.

A vital element of the participation of victims/survivors in P/CVE work is informed consent and knowledge of the potential harms and the existing support apparatus for victims/survivors who choose to enter the P/CVE sector. Where such an apparatus is missing or lacking, one should be built.

Several steps can and should be taken by organisers, institutions and others facilitating the inclusion of victims/survivors in the sector, including offering professional and specialised psychological support in line with the needs of the individual, ensuring that victims/survivors can be accompanied to events by supportive individuals, that there are designated spaces available for self-care and that the options to remove oneself from a situation are clearly communicated. Short-notice cancellations or for a victim/survivor to decline to share testimony rooted in self-preservation should also be respected and met with understanding.

Special considerations should be taken when dealing with minors and addressing the particular needs and challenges faced by young victims/survivors of terrorism in the P/CVE sector. This is covered in greater detail in the RAN conclusion paper [‘Supporting the voices of young victims/survivors of terrorism’](#) <sup>(5)</sup>.

## Operational security considerations

As outlined in the previous section, victims/survivors may face extraordinary challenges surrounding mental health and well-being. Some of these challenges may be viewed as internal to the P/CVE sector and can be mitigated by increasing care for individuals within the sector. The P/CVE sector is a natural target of threats posed by violent extremist and terrorist actors. These threats may disproportionately impact victims/survivors.

Several factors contribute to why victims and survivors in the P/CVE field may face disproportionate physical and operational security risks and become targets to violent extremists and terrorist actors. Among them is that victims/survivors who chose to engage in the aftermath of an attack often have public profiles, speak out against extremism and are known to have been targets of extremists or terrorists. Considering these factors, the fact that causing public spectacle through targeting frequently is a tactic employed by terrorists and violent extremists may put victims/survivors at particular risks.

The status of victims/survivors may inspire threats from communities or actors who worship terrorists or are inspired by them. This may often result in hateful and threatening behaviour through hate mail, threatening comments online, etc. Often, these threats will play on the original attack. These threats may raise the risk profile of individual victims/survivors and cause such individuals to retract from public appearances or participation in the sector. They may cause or amplify the psychological harms explored in the previous section. Organisers within the sector should thus, where possible, work to ensure that public appearances and public communications involving victims/survivors or testimony are done safely, including by monitoring responses and moderating or limiting comments on public social media posts surrounding the participation of victims/survivors.

We have observed how the actions of violent extremist and terrorist actors inspire extremist actors globally. This has, among other outcomes, resulted in copycat attacks. Within these globalised networks of influence, extremists may find inspiration to commit attacks targeting known victims/survivors of previous attacks. This could be driven by the public profiles of victims/survivors or a desire to ‘finish the job’. This is a sentiment we often see in threats targeting victims/survivors, implying they forever are marked as justifiable targets of terror in the eyes of these extremist networks.

Within some extremist communities, prominent terrorists are referred to as ‘saints’ and viewed with a certain reverence by individuals who may be inspired to carry out violence. A driver of threats specifically targeting victims/survivors could be a desire from an extremist actor to build such clout and their profile within an extremist community or to gain recognition and respect from the perpetrator of the original attack.

Several of the harms faced by victims and survivors in the P/CVE field are not unique to victims/survivors. The P/CVE field can be hostile, challenging and problematic in multiple ways for many groups. There is a growing recognition of this throughout the sector.

A recent VOX-Pol publication, ‘Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers’ Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field’, covers some harmful impacts and coping mechanisms that may be applicable in some detail <sup>(6)</sup>. This research also underpins that identities such as gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation may significantly impact how individuals are subjected to threats of harm. An intersectional approach to understanding the risks individuals face is thus important and also applicable to victims/survivors.

In many cases, the reason extremist and terrorist actors originally targeted a victim/survivor is intimately tied to their personal identity. They may belong to a religious or ethnic minority, a particular political movement, or have a particular gender identity or sexual orientation. These identities remain true and are often vital to victims/survivors after an attack. They may add to the risks of a victim/survivor becoming a target of additional

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<sup>(5)</sup> Canters & Schernbeck, 2021: Supporting the voices of young victims/survivors of terrorism.

<sup>(6)</sup> Pearson et al., 2023: Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers’ Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field.

attacks, particularly in countries, communities and environments where minorities frequently are targets of hate.

Within the P/CVE sector, the complex risk profiles of survivors/victims must be fully understood and risk mitigated to the greatest extent possible. This may involve additional physical security measures for events and meetings, keeping locations of such meetings secret and secure, ensuring photos and social media are not tagged or published until after events, and ensuring that the lodging and means of transport of travelling victims/survivors are kept safe. Ensuring that workplaces are kept safe and allowing for flexible working locations may also be a component of providing appropriate security measures for victims/survivors.

To maintain the personal safety of victims/survivors, it may be worth also considering the information visible on placards, registration documents, name tags and other public-facing documentation that frequently include information about the geographical location a victim/survivor is from, such as their hometown or nationality. Organisers of events should consider the implications of making this information available to participants and the potential risks associated with naming locations, that is, on name tags that may appear in photographs shared externally.

Some victims/survivors may, in certain circumstances, prefer to operate under pseudonyms. This should happen in coordination with organisers.

A key component of creating an inclusive environment for victims/survivors within the sector is not only to ensure they are kept safe but also to ensure they feel safe. Consulting with victims/survivors prior to meetings and events, ensuring they understand the risk and mitigating measures, is thus vital to successful inclusion.

## Making P/CVE a career path for victims/survivors

Building a career and expertise in a field with which one through traumatic experiences is intimately connected can be a difficult endeavour. As victims/survivors develop their careers within the sector, they may seek to transition from roles tied solely to their personal experience and expand their expertise beyond the anecdotal.

The transition for a victim/survivor from solely participating in the P/CVE sector based on this status to gaining recognition as experts in the field, not due to their experiences as victims/survivors but rather due to their hard work, research and years committed to building expertise, may come with several challenges. Among these is the challenging nature of working on the subject matter and transforming the perception of an individual solely as a victim/survivor to that of a legitimate expert.

There are several paths towards building credibility beyond personal experience, among them a demonstration of professional development through active participation in public fora, working groups, conferences and seminars, contributions to the literature and the development of the sector. Additional routes include participating in academic research and gaining relevant academic credentials, that is, by completing a degree in a related field.

While those victims/survivors who have built a career as professionals and experts within the sector should be respected for their expertise, it is also vital to remember their status as victims/survivors also will be part of their identity, without this detracting from their credibility or professional perception. A victim/survivor working in P/CVE will have an active relationship with the sector and evolving research, ideas and practice, but also with their experiences as a victim/survivor, giving unique perspectives and providing additional value to the sector.

In supporting victims/survivors making the leap to expertise to build a career within the sector, it is essential to acknowledge the value they add to the field as rooted in their depth of expertise and as a result of their professional and academic contributions and achievements, not as a result of their status as victims/survivors. For many making this step, gaining recognition of credentials beyond their status as victim/survivor may be the most challenging step towards a sustainable career in the sector.

Ensuring that professional credentials, qualifications and achievements are highlighted in accordance with the wishes of victims/survivors in, for example, biographies, invitations, programmes, name tags and other public-facing communications is a crucial way of respecting the endeavours of victims/survivors, and

providing them with the agency to control their own narrative and shape their public perception in accordance with their goals.

## Conclusion and key findings

The P/CVE sector is responsible for developing safe paths for participation for all, particularly those directly affected by terrorism. In order to do so, special measures may be taken to protect the well-being and security of victims and survivors who may be facing extraordinary challenges due to their experiences and status as victims/survivors.

To ensure the safe participation of victims/survivors, it is vital to remember:

- Victims/survivors of terrorism are diverse individuals with vastly disparate experiences. These experiences are not limited to those of the attack but also to their life experiences before and after the attack.
- Victims/survivors going into P/CVE are exceptions, not rules, and have no obligation to enter the P/CVE field nor any obligation to remain in it.
- Victims/survivors contributing to the P/CVE sector should receive appropriate remuneration for their labour and contributions to the sector, whether through their participation in events, through contributions to research or as experts. Organisations and event organisers have a responsibility to ensure this.
  - This includes coverage expenses associated with travel, such as airfare, ground transport, airport parking and lodging. It should also account for potential childcare during travel.
  - This should also account for possible days lost to recover from the potential psychological impact of participation.
- Institutions and others facilitating the inclusion of victims/survivors in the sector should consider:
  - offering professional and specialised psychological support in line with the needs of the individual,
  - ensuring that victims/survivors can be accompanied to events by supportive individuals,
  - providing designated spaces for self-care, and that the options to remove oneself from a situation are clearly communicated.
- Fully understand the complex risk profiles of survivors/victims and mitigate such risk to the greatest extent possible. This may involve:
  - additional physical security measures for events and meetings,
  - keeping locations of such meetings secret and secure,
  - ensuring photos and social media are not tagged or published until after events,
  - ensuring that the travel and lodging of travelling victims/survivors are kept safe,
  - ensuring that workplaces are kept secure and allowing for flexible working locations may also be a component of providing appropriate security measures for victims/survivors.
- To maintain the personal safety of victims/survivors, the information on placards, registration documents, name tags and other public-facing documentation that may include information about the geographical location a victim/survivor is from, such as their hometown or nationality, should be considered.
- Ensuring that professional credentials, qualifications and achievements are highlighted in accordance with the wishes of victims/survivors in, for example, biographies, invitations, programmes, name tags, and other public-facing communications.
- A victim/survivor who chooses to build a professional career in the P/CVE sector beyond testimony is not defined by their experience as a victim/survivor but by their expertise.
- A preventive impact should not be expected from testimony. The responsibility for any impact should not be placed on the shoulders of victims/survivors.

- While some victims/survivors may find it healing and beneficial to share their testimony, doing so may also come at a significant psychological cost, leading to burnout and substantial psychological harm resulting in self-harming behaviours.
- Victims/survivors own their stories. To share them or not is their choice.
- Do not 'out' victims/survivors who have not given explicit consent to having their status be known within a specific context.

The most fundamental component in all engagement with victims/survivors of terrorism must be acknowledging the individual's agency. The nature of terrorism includes the complete removal of agency from victims/survivors. Terrorists effectively achieve this through acts of violence, putting victims/survivors in situations against their choosing, in which they have no control, and they ultimately face the potential of death at the hands of a perpetrator who controls the situation.

Terrorism and violent extremist attacks affect a wide range of communities and individuals at various life stages. It is, therefore, essential to account for the diversity of circumstances and experiences of victims/survivors. Each victim/survivor must be seen and treated as an individual with an active relationship to their own personal and professional development in the aftermath of an attack.

Despite this diversity of experiences, victims/survivors may, as a category, face extraordinary challenges, both as external contributors to the P/CVE sector and, if they choose to do so, in transitioning to a career in P/CVE. These challenges may be practical and psychological and can significantly impact the security, safety and well-being of the individuals in question, their families and their communities.

The most meaningful role victims/survivors play in the P/CVE sector by virtue of their status as victims/survivors is not necessarily a preventive one, nor one as a credible voice in counter-narratives. Instead, it may be as the voice of humanity, reminding the public, the policymakers, and those who have an impersonal, academic or professional relationship to terrorism of the human impact of the issue we spend every day tackling.

Victims/survivors remind us of the facts we must never forget, yet so often do: the pain, the suffering and the loss caused by the radicalisation of violent extremism that far too often results in terrorism, costing the lives of loved ones, forever altering the lives of those who bear witness.

### About the author:

**Bjørn Ihler** is the co-founder and CEO of Glitterpill LLC and the co-founder and Director of the Khalifa Ihler Institute. Ihler is an internationally renowned expert on counter-terrorism and preventing radicalization into violent extremism. Ihler's work is focused on the international dynamics of terrorist networks online and offline. This work has been vital in developing a shared understanding of the global threat landscape and informing national and international policy and practice, regulating technology, online content and harms while maintaining a principled approach to human rights. As a survivor of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011 terrorist attack in Norway Ihler is also working to ensure the rights and healthy inclusion of victims and survivors of terrorism and violent extremism in the work to prevent violence.

Ihler is a member of the Obama Foundation Leaders Europe Network and has, among others, advised world leaders, governments, and international organizations through his work with the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Khalifa Ihler Institute. His work has been instrumental in developing a more comprehensive approach to terrorism and violent extremism across sectors. From 2020 to July 2022, Ihler served as the inaugural chair of the Independent Advisory Committee of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, facilitating joint efforts across the tech industry to counter the spread of terrorism online.

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