



WHAT IS POWER?

A Definition Rooted in Survivor Perspectives

January 2024



IJM

BUILDING POWER WITH THE GLOBAL SURVIVOR NETWORK

The Global Survivor Network (GSN) is leading a movement to protect people from violence. IJM convened the GSN to equip survivors as leaders, and to create opportunities for groups of survivors to advocate for justice systems that effectively protect vulnerable people from violence. Building power is at the heart of IJM's strategy for strengthening the GSN.

Leadership can be defined in many ways; we draw upon Marshall Ganz's definition that *leadership is a practice of accepting responsibility to enable others to achieve a shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty*. IJM is facilitating that kind of leadership development by building power across three dimensions: *Individual, Advocacy, and Organizing*.¹

- **Individual** (*power within*) — Survivors are managing complex trauma histories as they lean into their role as leaders. GSN leaders have identified internal and external factors that lead to this foundational type of power that comes from within.
- **Advocacy** (*power to*) — Advocacy power reflects the ability of survivor leaders to participate effectively in advocacy opportunities by sharing their stories, expertise, and recommendations with power actors in government and influential agents of change.
- **Organizing** (*power with*) — Organizing power captures the power of a GSN chapter to campaign together to achieve shared advocacy goals, and it involves survivor leaders taking initiative to organize others within their community.

Survivor Leadership Builds Safe Communities

IJM's vision is to protect half a billion people living in poverty from violence. As we expand and accelerate our programs to reach this vision, IJM and our partners in government and civil society must be guided by those who understand the problems and solutions best--survivors themselves. Survivor Leadership is essential and drives protection in two ways: internally, people with lived experience shape the design and implementation of IJM programs, and externally, survivors mobilize their communities and influence decision-makers in government.

Learn more about the GSN: [GlobalSurvivorNetwork.org](https://globalsurvivornetwork.org)

Learn more about how Survivor Leadership is integrated into IJM's approach to justice system transformation: [Protection Model & Toolkit SharePoint page](#) (internal link)

FRAMING



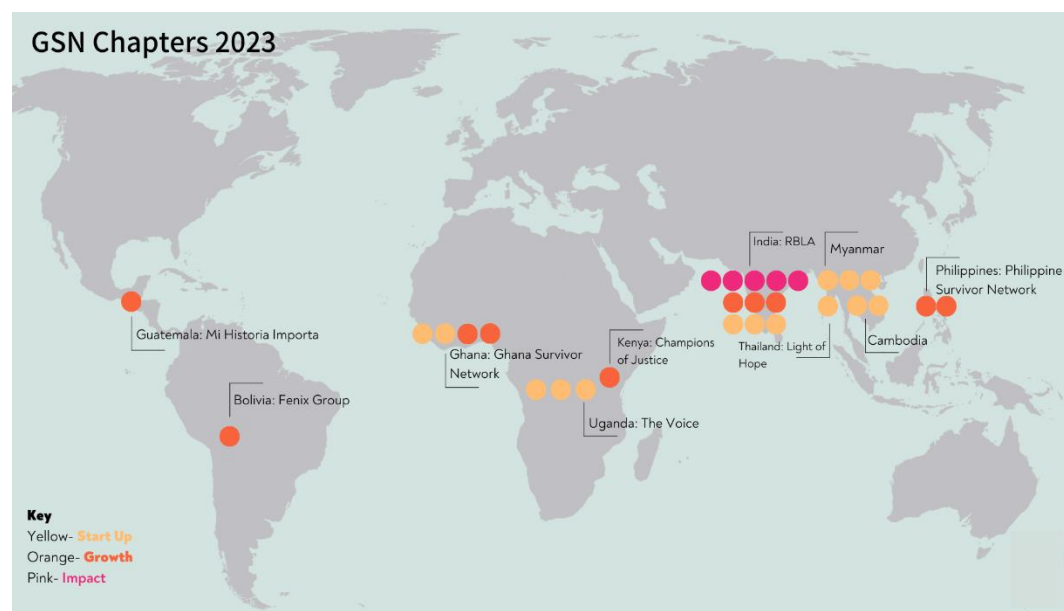
PROJECT OVERVIEW

The GSN's focus on three dimensions of power (*Individual, Advocacy, Organizing*) is informed by our experience working with local GSN chapters, with community organizing experts at Leading Change Network, and by reviewing current academic literature. We embarked on this project to ensure people with lived experience are shaping our definition of "power" and guiding the actual interventions to build power across these three dimensions. Having a shared understanding of "power" also lays the foundation for IJM and the GSN to evaluate impact collaboratively.

Using a Human Centered Design methodology, we invited people with lived experience to share their experiences of living with and without power to strengthen our proposed definition.

A Definition Rooted in Diverse Perspectives

- **8 GSN Leadership Council members** were interviewed about power. The Leadership Council shapes the GSN and informs IJM's programming. The interviewees are all survivors who have lived experience of the violence IJM works against, including human trafficking, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power.
- **8 countries were represented**, including Bolivia, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Uganda, and these countries represent all the regions where IJM is working.
- **Multiple languages were spoken, and literacy was not a requirement to participate.** Interviews were conducted over Zoom in English, with two relying on simultaneous interpretation of Burmese and Spanish. IJM staff who spoke local languages were also present to provide support and allow interviewees to respond in their native language as desired (Tamil, Swahili, Luo).
- **Interviewees reflected the diversity of the GSN:** Four women and four men participated, with ages and stages spanning from student to retiree; interviewees were from both rural and urban settings; all interviewees were invited to speak from their personal experience of power (having it, lacking it), and some questions prompted them to consider how their peers in a survivor group experience power or apply power.



As of 12/2023, there are more than **4,000 members** of the Global Survivor Network, with **27 chapters** across **10 countries**. Chapters are at different stages of growth and independence, from 'start-up' to 'impact.'

DISCOVER



For members of the GSN, “Power is the confidence and freedom to make choices for yourself and to work with others to make the world better.”

As we synthesized insights from the GSN leaders, six foundational themes emerged. These insights further explain how survivors in the GSN understand power.

Belief in self

Leadership Council members reflected on believing in oneself as the essential foundation for power. This power *within* was also framed as self-respect, confidence, finding one’s voice, and self-knowledge. As Collins (from Kenya) shared, “First I must know ‘who am I’, then I can inspire what is in me for others”; he added that “using my voice” is more powerful than anything else. Believing in oneself is a necessary first step to inspire others to take action.



If I can’t believe in myself, I can’t encourage or help others. Power grows because of belief in myself.

Mya,* Myanmar

Choice

GSN leaders identified two important dimensions under the theme of ‘choice.’ The first is internal, reflecting on the importance of their own courage and overcoming fear to do exercise power. Ruby* (from the Philippines) shared, “There is no power when there is no courage.” The other dimension is connected to one’s external environment. Physical freedom, safety, economic security, and physical and mental health are important factors that shape one’s ability to choose.

Education

Formal and informal education was identified as a very important component of building power. Betzi (from Guatemala) shared “Education and knowledge gives you power, the power to act or improve things.” Some leaders reflected on the significance of formal education that confers a degree. As Kumar (from India) stated, “We should help many more children to study. Our vision is to see many graduates, *they* should be the government officials.” Others talked about education in terms of understanding one’s rights. Godwin (from Ghana) shared that “without education, I would not know that [slavery] is not supposed to be done.”

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If you ever want to make a change in the world, you have to start with yourself. That's taking responsibility.

Sergio, Bolivia



Platform to be heard

One way that a person experiences power is through opportunities to speak to an audience, to see the impact that one's life and words have on others. Collins (from Kenya) expressed the simple truth that “to express your powers you must be talking to somebody so that you can know whether you are being heard or not being heard.” Godwin affirmed that, in the context of social movements, this power and influence should rest with “the people who have been in that situation, not those who have not felt that pain.” Training on storytelling and communication will support this dimension of power.



Accepting Responsibility

A connecting bridge between believing in oneself and choosing a path of action is accepting responsibility for the change that a person wants to see in the world. As important as believing in oneself is, in Godwin's words, “the ability to believe life could be different.” Sergio (from Bolivia) said, “if you ever want to make a change in the world, you have to start with yourself. That's taking responsibility.” Lillian (from Uganda) described the importance of not waiting for everyone to be ready for action; part of exercising power in the world is deciding to act within our sphere of control.

Working together around a shared strategy

For most leaders we interviewed, an important dimension of power is “togetherness.” This is a power that comes from raising voices in greater numbers and from working together around a shared strategy. Kumar reflected on the concrete governmental changes he has witnessed the Released Bonded Laborers Association bring about through collective action--raising their voices and taking petitions forward together.

CONCLUSION

The GSN strategy is focused on building power with survivors of violence, and now that strategy is undergirded by a shared definition of power: *the confidence and freedom to make choices for yourself and to work with others to make the world better*. The definition affirms that the experience of power has both inner and outer dimensions.

We began the project with a particular curiosity about how survivors would describe the internal, or *Individual*, dimension of power. In fact, the themes that emerged in these interviews have helped us to refine how we understand and will evaluate all three categories of power:

- *Individual Power*: We now have a clear understanding of what it means to have power emanating from within, and it includes these three “buckets”: 1) belief or confidence in oneself; 2) choice: both the internal courage to overcome fear in making choices and an external environment that makes choices available to a person, including important factors like physical safety, economic stability, and mental/physical health; and 3) education, which includes formal degree programs and basic knowledge of one’s rights.
- *Advocacy Power*: We heard survivors emphasize the importance of having a ‘platform to be heard’, affirming how the idea that effective advocacy moves power actors.
- *Organizing Power*: ‘Working together around a shared strategy’ maps to this third expression of power, which includes the collective power that comes from greater numbers and shared goals.

Returning to our Human-Centered Design approach, we conclude this stage of the project with some questions that will guide our next steps (*comments included from the Global Innovation and Design Center team*):

- How might we grow the confidence of individual GSN members?
- How might we support GSN members in inspiring courage in one another?
- How might we meet individual GSN members’ needs related to mental and physical health, safety, and economic security?
- How might we create pathways for GSN members to pursue formal education?
- How might we ensure that all GSN members have a basic understanding of their rights, especially as it relates to engaging with the justice system?
- How might we best equip GSN members with storytelling and communications skills to persuade strategic audiences to act?
- How might we create strategic advocacy opportunities for GSN members to share their stories, expertise, and recommendations with government decision-makers?
- How might we support GSN members in developing leadership skills that increase a GSN chapter’s collective power, such as community organizing?

As program teams continue to implement the GSN strategy, we are now in a better position to co-design, pilot, and evaluate specific interventions that aim to grow power in these three dimensions (Individual, Advocacy, and Organizing), which are interconnected. In 2024, we are initiating evaluative practices to understand progress by 1) surveying GSN members and 2) conducting in-depth interviews with GSN chapter leaders; we want to understand the most important interventions leading to progress or barriers that might be holding individuals or chapters back.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Project team would like to acknowledge and thank the GSN Leadership Council members and Founding members who contributed their insights and perspectives to defining “power”: Betzi, Collins, Godwin, Kumar, Lilian, Mya*, Sergio, Ruby*, and Josephine. The full Leadership Council discussed and confirmed the final definition during their November 2023 meeting. Their expertise and input have played a critical role in shaping a shared definition and identifying important themes that will inform GSN strategies to build power with survivors and work toward healing, restoration, and leadership.

Leadership Council members have provided their consent to share their names, pseudonyms (), and locations as noted here in the report. This serves as confirmation that this project was conducted with full and informed consent of all participants.*



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