

Research in Sensitive Settings

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Being in the business of unpacking human decision-making often leads us to joke about how our lives affect our work. However, given the contexts we explore we realize that our work often strongly affects our lives as well. The stories here aim to convey how our researchers grow and build preparedness alongside our projects.



Final Mile's approach to behavioral science research and intervention design requires us to come as close as we can to the problems we're trying to help solve. As researchers, we frequently listen to challenging narratives and confront issues of social justice. These sensitive and complex issues often hit very close to home. They challenge our belief systems and compel us to reflect.

The people we engage with give us much more than their words – they share a part of themselves. We absorb and process their voices and stories, and we feel the responsibility of making better what we can.

But we must also acknowledge how our research findings affect our day-to-day lives. Sometimes the stories we hear are inspiring – at other times, they can be heart-wrenching. We know that when marginalized people talk with us, we are almost always coming to the conversations from a place of relative privilege. Yet we must balance the ethical considerations of research and participant well-being with building our own physical and emotional resilience as researchers. Each of us has had to learn to balance empathy with a degree of detachment necessary to get the work done.

Here we share our experiences working with survivors of sexual violence in India's Madhya Pradesh state, understanding the dynamics of demand and supply around sexual trafficking in Mumbai, and exploring disease prevention among vulnerable girls and young women in South Africa. We hope these stories will illuminate the interplay between our work and our lives, and give you a sense of what research looks like in complex settings.

Journey to a 'New Normal'

In the monsoon season of 2019, we visited a town in central India's Madhya Pradesh state as part of a research project.



I sat across from women in their early twenties, and we spoke about their lives. They were survivors of sexual assault who sought help from an organization, Jan Sahas, that supports them through judicial proceedings. Our project aimed to find ways to help them cope better with their emotional trauma, by using behavioral science to capture their journey and understand their experiences.

These women's stories altered my ideas of justice and reminded me of my responsibility as a researcher.

We began by reading the judicial case files of the women we were to meet and going through academic research in the area of sexual assault. The harshness of the legal proceedings was immediately revealed in the case files, with the detailed questions that were asked and the candid responses that were required. It was numbing to see the simplicity with which horrific incidents were described. The contexts were so commonplace: she was shopping at the market, taking a shower, going to meet her friend, and suddenly her life was turned violently upside down.



“Mai kapde dho rahi thi, mai akeli thi, woh deewar koodh kar andar aaya...”

– 24-year old woman

English Translation

I was washing clothes,
I was alone, he jumped over
my bathroom wall...

Talking with the survivors, I began to question societal concepts of justice. For these women, the importance of the judicial process didn't lie in punishment – it was about the survivor being able to regain her identity. While there was value in seeing the perpetrator imprisoned, it was more important to focus on the survivor. She sought acceptance from her family and the people around her in the wake of what had happened. Some families would share the burden of her trauma, but others would give a disproportionate weight to the judicial proceedings instead of her, hindering her recovery.

As I listened to the women tell us their stories, I had to work hard not to break down in tears. Empathy and distance had to go hand in hand. As a researcher, I had not anticipated the degree of second-hand trauma I would experience. I learned the importance of structured debriefs and coping mechanisms. Each day after field research we checked in on how we were feeling, and were allowed to opt out of interviews the following day if we needed a break. Our manager created a safe space by acknowledging and validating our research experiences. She had a strong understanding of our individual thresholds. We reminded each other that our research, though difficult, was important and would make a difference to organizations working in the space of gender based violence.

“Mera parivaar mere liye kitna karte hai, meri wajah seunko kitna sehna padta hai.”

– 24-year old woman

English Translation

My family do so much for me, they have to bear with so much because of me.



Based on our research, we constructed a map detailing the survivor's journey to help the organization understand and address her needs. It divides her journey into three stages. She begins as a victim who is actively suffering, moves on to being a survivor who is driven to action and has gained some distance from the trauma, and finally reaches a new normal, where her identity is not strongly defined by the experience of sexual violence.

While it is not possible to circumvent this process, through the three states as they are all are essential to her coping, we aim to strengthen and hasten her journey to her new normal. Whilst the difficult legal journey cannot be altered or alleviated, the experiences that surround it can be enhanced and made more meaningful, in order to help her cope better and more quickly reach her new normal. Small gestures of care by the family could reassure her. We also suggested a strong focus on shifting the blame from her to the perpetrator or the situation. Finally, we wanted her moments of bravery, agency, and achievement in the legal, personal, and social contexts to be acknowledged, in order to provide a sense of progress and facilitate her movement toward a new normal.

For us as a team, the biggest takeaway was that while the problem of sexual violence seemed overwhelming, it was not something for us to “solve” ourselves.

It was humbling to realize that the best we could do was to ensure that the existing efforts of survivors and the organizations that help them are validated and supported. The experience revealed to me both the limits and the possibilities of our work, and it reminded me that our research is always part of – and contributes to – an ecosystem of people, organizations, and institutions.

Opening Up About Sexual Health

Young women share their relationship vulnerabilities

We recount stories told to us by those exposed to the risk of HIV in South Africa and understand their decisions around sexual health.

I remember she was crying, and as we listened, tears welled up in our eyes too. Back home in India, I close my laptop and look out of the window at the steady rain. I need to step away from the emotions flooding me when I re-read the stories told to us by adolescent girls and young women we were working with in South Africa.

Adolescent girls and young women aged 15-24 account for 25% of South Africa's new HIV infections, and HIV incidence among them is much greater than among boys and men of the same age.

The young women we talked to had engaged in sex without protection at some point in the previous six months. They knew that their partners had other sexual partners, or they themselves had had more than one partner. Either way, they were exposed to the risk of HIV infection. Although such behavior is commonplace, these young women are often criticized for their actions and sexual relationships as it challenges ideals of monogamy, the “right” age to start having sex, and the appropriate age difference between partners. They fear experiencing stigma from their parents or health care workers whose inherent biases and beliefs of sexual relationships come in the way of advising these young women in a relatable manner. This often deters them from accessing safe healthcare services and making informed decisions about their sexual health.

Creating a safe space for these women to discuss otherwise taboo and difficult subjects like sex, transactional relationships or intimate partner violence became a very critical aspect of our research and design process. It required considering countless details, taking time and exercising patience, and continually adjusting our approach. Our research methodology simulated the experience of making difficult trade-offs within relationships

To ensure that they felt respected and comfortable, familiarity, relatability, trust, and support were interwoven into the research process.

Interactions with the women were moderated through local researchers, our extended team. We trained them in the behavioral science and research methodology, and they became our eyes and ears into the communities, helping us understand the cultural context and providing feedback to refine the research process and make it easier for the participants. We had counsellors available in case the young women felt the need to speak to them. We built trust by keeping promises, ensuring that the participants met with the same researchers, and carefully considering age and gender as we selected the research team. Each research phase informed not only the strategy but also the creation of this safe space for the next time we interacted with the adolescent girls and young women. We continue to acknowledge what we don't know, learn and evolve.



We were exploring their stories to co-create support structures to set them on a path of healthy decision making around sexual health and relationships.

At first sight, research in a culture that we don't belong to may seem difficult. There are two reasons our team did not find this to be the case in South Africa. First, our local collaborators helped us internalize the context and culture. Second, discussing and understanding emotions is central to our investigation of behavior and decision-making. The adolescents and young women were not merely telling us why they did not use prevention but sharing heartfelt stories of the first time they had sex, the times when their partner refused to use condoms, when they had fights, when they were scared. They shared stories of everyday dilemmas and how they felt as they navigated their relationships. Hence the tears that I recalled – and that prompted my own – as I read through their accounts later.

Although coming from a different culture, I could relate to these stories. Indeed, at times I needed to withdraw slightly from my normal state of being empathetic to regain my calm.

Being of the same age as many of the women we spoke to, I sometimes couldn't help feeling overwhelmed by the knowledge that I could so easily be in their position.

Their accounts reminded me that many of us – even coming from positions of relative privilege – don't adequately perceive risks to our sexual health. Their words made me understand how easily we can overvalue the momentary feelings of safety or affirmation from partners rather than what's truly good for us as individuals. These young women personify strength in the face of vulnerability, and they taught us lessons for life.

Stepping Into Unwanted Shoes

Understanding the perspective of men who sexually exploit trafficked girls

One of our most personally challenging projects was to understand the dynamics of demand and supply in the sexual trafficking of girls in Mumbai.



In order to stem the demand, we had to understand the decision-making process of men who purchased sex. Working with the My Choices Foundation, which addresses issues of gender-based violence in India, we spoke to men who frequented the city's red-light areas, most of them migrant workers.

The experience was challenging in two ways. First, it was difficult to persuade men to participate in the research and talk openly and honestly about such a sensitive topic. Second, although some of the men were willing perpetrators of criminal and exploitative acts, our research objectives required us to withhold judgement and empathize with them in order to understand their decisions.



What the participants in our research revealed – through a decision-making game, group discussions, and in-depth interviews – was disturbing and perplexing. Men who hinted at or admitted to purchasing sex chose to deliberately ignore the plight of the girls or young women they exploited. They transferred the responsibility for their behavior onto them, and framed their own actions as harmless transactions that benefited the girls economically. Many men thought of themselves as victims of a habit which was hard to break, or of a society which forced them to seek an outlet for their frustrations by purchasing sex.

Empathy is key to conversations that give us deep insight into participants' psyches and decision-making processes. But as a researcher, it was a struggle not to judge these men or betray any emotion when some of them expressed misogynistic and malicious opinions. I was taken aback by the casual language with which they spoke about these topics. It made me realize that the problem did not lie simply with individual men, but was deep-rooted in our culture. Casual sexism and misogyny are direct antecedents of more heinous forms of gender-based violence and exploitation. Male peer-bonding dynamics clearly contributed to the tendency to purchase sex. These dynamics are ubiquitous and mostly manifest harmlessly, but in the specific context of our participants, they led to criminal and exploitative acts.

We began to see similarities in the context of men who purchase sex. Young men from low-income or rural migration backgrounds feel a complete loss of control and a lack of importance when they arrive in Mumbai. These frustrations, coupled with peer pressure, push them toward sexual gratification and control through purchasing sex. They lack firm identities, and are not held accountable for their behavior because they are disconnected from their community in the village. This makes them susceptible to buying sex, a habit which, once formed, is hard to break.

We realized that bringing men's context to the table was key. Our study aimed to inform the My Choices Foundation's Red Alert Campaign, a nationwide, mass media campaign to raise public awareness of sex trafficking of minors. The original plan had been to evoke outrage over the situation and call men who purchase sex from girls 'rapists'. But we suggested that this was unlikely to lead to actual change in the behavior of men who purchase sex. They would be alienated by being called criminals when they saw themselves as victims.

Our proposed approach was radically different. To reach these men, we'd have to empathize and speak their language.

Emphasizing the inherent good in men would harness their desire to measure up to expectations, to be admired and respected. It would move the focus away from the problems they faced – financial difficulties and loss of control – and onto their ability to make good decisions in spite of these challenges. We also stressed the need to target men when they first started buying sex, to break the cycle of habit formation. Finally, we suggested leveraging celebrity role models for young males, such as sportsmen and movie stars, to promote norms of restraint in sex trade and respecting women.

We barely scratched the surface of this extremely complex and deep-rooted social problem. Targeted interventions can only go a certain distance in terms of reducing the demand for trafficked girls and women. The culture which enables such attitudes towards women is what needs to be addressed. This heightened for me the importance for everyone – women and men – of taking small steps to combat misogyny in daily life.