



Community **বোল Bol**
বোল **Community**

Round Table Talk

Maybe it's because I have been trained as a lawyer.

Or perhaps it's because I've become comfortable with the adversarial nature of our legal system. I find myself thinking and understanding the world in juxtaposition, opposites, antonyms - a concept or a label only making sense in contrast to something else.

Petitioner versus Respondent. Complainant versus Defendant. Victim versus Batterer. Where does the word survivor fit in within this framework - within the legal context of advocating for the interests of the women I represent? In the legal arena, victim (not survivor) is the label that helps everyone understand and contextualize the families with which we are working - if we know who the victim is we can decide who should get an order of protection, who should get custody, who should get crime victims compensation, etc. In this arena, a victim signifies a person who has had a family offense committed against them or may qualify for certain benefits available to persons who have had a crime committed against them. On the surface, in this context the term does not suggest disempowerment. It is a term judges, police, lawyers, and other participants in these systems use and understand.

I often feel confused by the label survivor. Perhaps this confusion stems from the pressure of the label, of the actual word. If I use the term survivor, am I no longer referring to a victim? If and when I use the label victim does this mean I don't support the act of reclaiming or strength? When I am discussing a case with another lawyer, referring to my client as a victim of domestic violence, am I using this label in juxtaposition to survivor? Am I adding to negative stereotypes? Survivor. Dictionaries define as one who remains alive or in existence, one who copes with or persists after. I think about the women who I have represented in court, over 300 women in domestic violence situations, and the survival of these women is manifested in so many ways. Some have transformed their lives, reclaimed their sense of self, and said no to violence. Among domestic violence advocates, this is the classic success story - the transformation from victim to survivor.

But what about the others? There are those who have survived by looking difficult choices in the face and remaining in their relationships: perhaps for the sake of their children, for lack of financial resources, for hope that things may change, or for other unique and complex reasons. What does the word survivor mean to these women? Have they made the transformation from victim to survivor? Is the label of survivor a judgment to them? A challenge? A burden? Is victim the opposite of survivor? Once in a meeting with other women's rights advocates, someone used the label "victims" rather than "survivors." I heard the hush. It seemed to me like victim is the opposite of survivor - a term rejected by the women's rights movement. How then do we come to terms with the fact that the label remains outside of the systems survivors use to access justice? How do we come to terms with the fact that some women may feel that the term excludes them?

What does surViVOr mean?

- By Sameera Hafiz

যারা পারিবারিক নির্যাতনের শিকার, তাদের বিভিন্ন সময়ে, বিভিন্নভাবে নির্যাতিত হতে হয়েছে; তাদের অত্যাচার সহ্য করতে হয়েছে এই জেনেও যে অত্যাচারী কাছেই আছে এবং সমাজ অত্যাচারীকে অপরাধী আখ্যায়িত করার বদলে, আঘাতপ্রাপ্ত ব্যক্তিকেই দোষী সাব্যস্ত করে - এই বাড়তি বোঝাটুকু ৯/১১-এর মত ঘটনার শিকার যারা, তাদের কাঁধে নিতে হয়নি।
-জেনীফার ডেকারলী

Survival is knowing that no one will hurt you and that you do not have to accept abuse anymore. You don't have to deal with it.

You don't have to choose this.

-Kohinoor

Speaking on Survival

Survivor in the domestic violence context to me is the ownership a survivor takes of their experience of domestic violence. It is to show that the individual is no longer a "victim" but an individual who has survived the violence. It is a way of taking away the blame and shame from the survivor/victim and show the strength the individual has in claiming and living through their experience.

To me the word survivor has many meanings.

I think there are many levels of survivorship. There are primary survivors who experience the abuse and violence directly and then there are the secondary and tertiary survivors. The secondary survivors could be the friends, family, and children who are impacted by the violence the primary survivor has experienced. An example of primary survivors would include the woman and her children who were abused, the secondary survivor could be the sibling of the woman who is trying to help his sister. Tertiary survivors could include community members who are impacted or the community as a whole.

The impact of domestic violence affects not just the individual in the home but the community as whole. As an advocate for survivors there is an impact based on working with survivors, hearing their stories, and walking with them on their journeys.

- Aparna Bhattacharyya

یہ (سرواء بیور) نام ہے خود میں ایسی قوت پیدا کرنے والی ہستی کا جو اپنی زندگی کی طنابیں خود تھام لے۔ جو دہشت اور تشدد کی ہولناکیوں کو شکست دے لے۔ اور شب ظلمت کی ستم کاریاں جھیل کر بھی سر اٹھا کر چلے۔

(یشونت پٹیل)

To me a survivor is a person with courage, conviction, and an undefiled dream for a glorious future, despite all circumstances. A survivor knows that the tests and trials are too small to overwhelm the reservoirs of human endurance. So it is the survivor who would smile at the approaching darkness of the night, because a rosy morning is right on its heels.

- Ghazala N. Afzal

The term "survivor" in the domestic violence context refers to an attempt by advocates, researchers and activists to shift the image of abused individuals (most often women) from the status of "passive victims" experiencing pain, violence, and hardship to "active agents" who have the courage to resist and/or overcome their abusive situation. As is often the case, certain words have relevance at a given time and within a socio-historical context. Today, I do believe that the word survivor is inadequate. It is too diffused and does not encapture the nuances that are embedded in the subjective experiences of abused individuals, both at the interpersonal and at the institutional levels. The usage of the word "survivor" in the public eye today has been trivialized to include a broad spectrum of issues many of which do not reflect the lived experiences of abused women along the axes of ethnicity, class, gender and citizenship. At this juncture we need to re-evaluate the efficacy of the term and explore alternatives words that are better suited to define the subjective and objective experiences that women encounter within the context of domestic violence.

-Margaret Abraham

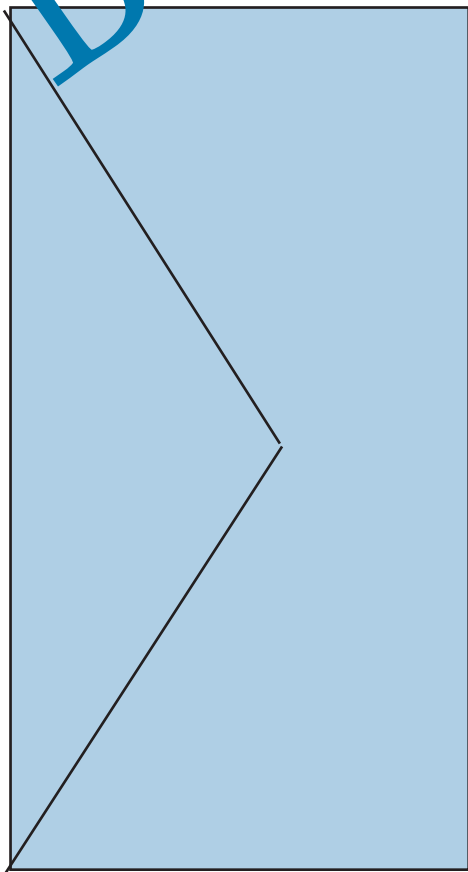
Should we consider the instances when a tool of reclaiming and strength can be both a sword and a shield? I was approached by a woman in court one day; she was tired, heartbroken, and I could see she thought it was futile to talk to me. She still shared her story with me. She had endured violence at the hands of her husband; she told me of unimaginable acts of rage and disrespect performed by him against her. However, this woman was in court because she had been arrested and her husband had filed for an order of protection against her.

Her husband had convinced the justice system that he was the victim of family violence. He had obtained legal relief against her, even had a victim's advocate speak on his behalf, and was going home with a sense of beaming vindication. Who then is the survivor in this situation?

Perhaps all labels, terms of art, come up for re-evaluation after making their way into the world. Is it time to reconsider the term within our movement to end violence against women? Perhaps we should consider this label in juxtaposition to those we have rejected.

Perhaps we need to consider whether we need a label at all.

Bol-etin Board!



Dear Reader,

So we are on our journey again. *Voices of Sakhi* is now *Community Bol* (or community talk, or talk back)! It has been my great pleasure to help bring forth this first issue of *Community Bol*. I could not have done it without the contributions of our writers, editor, information-gatherers, printers, idea-people and doers! Thank you all.

In our efforts to make *Community Bol* more fully representative of the conversations we *desis* have in real life, we tried to make it more multi-lingual. But we discovered, as perhaps you will too, as you tackle the question "what does survivor mean?", that in some of our non-English native languages, survivor means...nothing at all. Either the word does not exist or, if it does, it is so far removed from what it conveys in English in the context of domestic violence that using it is meaningless.

It raises the long-standing question of whether as a South Asian immigrant community, we must re-think some of the terminology adopted from the mainstream discourse so that it is more useful and applicable to our specific contexts. But that is just one debate. We look to your responses for more.

The "Bol-etin board" is empty in this issue. But we trust that next time onwards, this (and more) space will be packed with your responses not only to the question on the postcard, but also with your comments, suggestions, art, articles, and inspirations.

You, dear reader, we hope, will also be
dear writer.

Bix Gabriel
Community Outreach and Media Coordinator