Survivor engagement: Experience with an advocacy-based model in Washington, D.C.

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Key points of interest

- IRCT-member organisation TASSC has a unique model of encouraging survivor engagement in advocacy that other agencies supporting survivors may be able to draw from
- TASSC's internal monitoring suggests that survivors experienced strong motivations for and compelling benefits from participating in advocacy events, despite the challenges that the deeply personal nature of their engagement could present

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Abstract

Introduction: As an IRCT member organization supporting survivors of torture, the Torture Abolition and Survivor Support Coalition (TASSC) International places survivor engagement at the core of their work, aiming to provide safe and inclusive spaces for survivors to speak out and take meaningful action to prevent torture. This article describes TASSC's model for engaging survivors in advocacy and presents evidence on the personal impacts such engagement can have.

Method: Each year from 2016-2019, TASSC administered a simple survey with questions for survivors to complete after their annual "Advocacy Day" in Washington D.C. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected to inform internal service provision and the design of future events.

Results: Across the four years a total of 140 survivors and compatriot human rights advocates participated in the annual Advocacy Day, and a majority completed the surveys. In their survey responses, survivors agreed they had many positive thoughts and feelings after advocacy. Their reported positive experiences included a sense of being listened to and heard by an understanding and responsive audience, the power of feeling part of a group that was speaking out on behalf of themselves and others, and a sense of motivation and hopefulness for the future.

https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v33i2.135716

Discussion: Although undertaken primarily to inform internal processes, TASSC's surveys with survivors who engaged in advocacy shed light on the potential value of well-designed advocacy experiences. Consistent with past research, survivors reported strong motivations around and compelling benefits from participating, despite the challenges that the deeply personal nature of their engagement could present. This feedback suggests TASSC has a strong model that could be replicated elsewhere, but it would be beneficial to further investigate the experiences of survivors engaging in advocacy in other country settings.

Keywords: Torture survivor engagement, advocacy

Around the world, many agencies and community groups have been established to support people who have survived torture. The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)—a network of 161 of these agencies and groups—encourages all its member civil society organizations to place survivor engagement at the core of their work, highlighting the importance of providing safe and inclusive spaces for survivors to speak out and taking meaningful action to prevent torture from continuing (IRCT, 2022). In this article, we describe the ways in which one survivor-led agency in Washington, D.C, has promoted survivor engagement in advocacy and public testimony, and has worked with survivors and researchers to identify the personal impacts such engagement can have. The evidence gathered by the agency, while collected predominantly for internal service-design purposes (rather than with the intention of contributing to a body of academic literature), provides valuable insights into the potential value of increased survivor engagement in advocacy spaces. Patel and Williams (2022) have encouraged sharing such evidence, collected "within the work of civil society and community-based organizations – which may not adhere to the hegemonic discourse of evidence-based practice, but may have significant and weighty contributions to understanding what helps, and what is valued within those communities" (p. 229), as a way of contributing to epistemic justice.

The agency: Torture Abolition and Survivors' Support Coalition (TASSC) International

The Torture Abolition and Survivors' Support Coalition (TASSC) International was established in 1998 as a survivor-led, non-profit organization engaged in anti-torture advocacy and providing support to survivors (see Barron, 2020, for further details on TASSC's founding). It is governed by a Board of survivors and human rights activists and led by an Executive Director with lived experience of torture. Over its history the organization has had a small core staff and relied heavily on volunteers and charitable grants and donations. It has also received some government grants enabling the employment of professionals to provide direct, trauma-informed services (e.g., social, psychological, legal) to TASSC members. More information on current and historical services is available on the organization's website: www.tassc.org.

The model: engaging survivors in advocacy

Building on the foundation of activism that founder Sister Dianna Ortiz and other survivors established, TASSC developed an advocacy program that draws on the contributions of expert staff and volunteers and engages survivors directly in opportunities to speak out about torture. TASSC publishes book chapters, articles, opinion pieces, and blog posts about torture and other human rights abuses,

and campaigns to increase awareness and urge those with power and influence to take action (Barron, 2020). Survivors are regularly invited and supported to engage as "Truth Speakers", sharing their stories of survival with schools, faith groups, and other community organizations. In addition, TASSC's location in the U.S. capitol provides unique opportunities for survivors to directly engage with politicians and policy makers. Survivors have given powerful testimony in the U.S. Department of State and congressional hearings, spoken with senators and congressional representatives, written letters to convey their experiences and concerns, and participated in protests outside the White House to call for necessary attention and action. Every year in June, around the timing of the U.N. International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on June 26, TASSC organizes a focused week of survivor gathering, knowledge-sharing, advocacy, and activism, including visits to U.S. congressional offices to give testimony in person on a designated "Advocacy Day".

To center survivors in the process, TASSC members are regularly asked to share their priority areas of concern and to take an active role in preparing advocacy campaigns. Drawing on local knowledge and experience, the TASSC advocacy team provides input on areas where the greatest political traction may be achieved (e.g., timing advocacy campaigns well to influence decision-making, tailoring messages to tap into specific political and community interests, and meeting with individuals most likely to hold some sway in a political process or most receptive to hearing survivors' views). The team organizes formal training sessions and offers individual coaching to support survivors in developing and delivering speaking points and understanding the logistics of public advocacy, training on average over 50 survivors each year. Such partnership between survivors and TASSC staff and volunteers helps to direct limited resources effectively and is also important for respecting the wellbeing of survivors.

Recent topics for advocacy efforts during June Survivors' Week Advocacy Day included supporting a proposed U.S. resolution decrying human rights abuses in Ethiopia, calling for U.S. action to address human rights abuses across survivors' home countries, and campaigning for reducing the backlog in asylum processing (which negatively impacts survivors seeking sanctuary in the U.S.). During June Survivors Week, approximately 80 people participate in Advocacy Day each year, including 30-50 survivors. Delegations collectively visit 40-50 congressional offices where survivors speak with aides and sometimes with the senators and congressional representatives themselves. Meetings typically last 30-40 minutes. Each delegation is made up of two or three survivors, a TASSC staffer or intern, and a college student or another volunteer interested in human rights activism. After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Advocacy Program continued congressional meetings for survivors on zoom.

The research: assessing the impacts of advocacy on survivors

Until recently, survivor experiences with advocacy activities had not been documented in a systematic fashion. Accordingly, in 2016 TASSC decided to gather more input from survivors on their experiences around advocacy events, with a particular interest in the psychological impacts of their engagement.

Past literature

Existing research involving trauma survivors and the mental health providers supporting them suggested that survivors engage in advocacy for a range of reasons. For instance,

a survey of participants who provided testimony in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC; a type of international war crimes tribunal) found that their most common reasons for participation were seeking justice, revenge or reparations; duty to family; and feeling personally compelled as a form of individual coping, perhaps by sharing their experiences aloud (Stammel, Burchert, Taing, Bockers, & Knaevelsrud, 2010).

Literature also pointed to several benefits for survivors from engaging in advocacy and truth-speaking (O'Connor, S., Byimana, L., Patel, S., & Kivlighan, Jr., 2021). These included feeling validated by having the political context of their trauma recognized; developing a greater sense of self-esteem, self-value, self-identity, and self-efficacy (particularly in relation to being able to speak up for their rights); and increased motivation to support their community (e.g., Laplante, 2007; Suarez, 2011; Rees et al., 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005). For example, torture survivors in India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and the Philippines who had participated in a form of "testimonial therapy"—which involved writing up their personal accounts of torture and human rights abuses to be publicly witnessed, and potentially used in group advocacy efforts by non-governmental organizations helping to organize the testimony process as part of their support for survivor recovery—reported positive feelings such as pride, relief, feeling listened to and feeling motivated to continue engaging in advocacy (Agger, Igreja, Kiehle and Polatin, 2012); Jorgensen et al., 2015). In Peru, women who survived many brutalities during the civil war, and mental health professionals in advocacy-oriented community organizations that were supporting these women, reported that engaging in the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped in developing a sense of effectiveness and efficacy by taking on social and political leadership (Laplante, 2007; Suarez 2011). The women described feeling "more than victims", more resilient, gaining a sense of agency by holding the government accountable, and gaining self-esteem and a feeling of tranquility from being able to share their experiences in the Commission hearings, and appeared to be more resilient.

At the same time, literature highlighted some challenging experiences for survivors engaged in advocacy, especially in public tribunal-type settings where their personal experiences might be under scrutiny. For instance, participants in the Special Court for Sierra Leone (a war crimes tribunal established by the UN) felt pride about breaking silence and being able to tell their story, but experienced emotional difficulty while relating painful experiences and discomfort with being questioned (Stepakoff, Shawn Reynolds, Charters, and Henry, 2015). Puvimanasinghe and Price's (2016) study of a testimonial therapy process in Sri Lanka found that, although most participants reported benefits, some suffered increased distress and declines in emotional wellbeing after sharing their torture experiences. Brounéas' (2008) study of women in Rwanda who had testified in gacaca village tribunals (a type of truth and reconciliation commission) found that many women reported feeling ill and re-experiencing trauma while testifying, and fearing for their for safety in the village afterwards. In South Africa, Byrne's (2004) study of participants in the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that many reported disappointment and frustration with the bureaucracy of the process and experienced a significant emotional toll from testifying.

However, there was limited literature on individual-level changes in wellbeing after engaging in advocacy activities, and no existing

studies focused on TASSC's community—i.e., survivors of torture seeking asylum in the U.S. To help address some of these gaps in understanding gained from more formal research literature, from 2016-2019, TASSC staff and research associates undertook a series of small studies with survivors who had participated in Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill during TASSC's Annual June Survivors Week. The purpose of these studies was to identify whether survivors felt they had experienced changes in wellbeing as a consequence of participating in TASSC's Advocacy Day, to develop a deeper understanding of what advocacy activities meant to survivors in both quantitative and qualitative ways, and to gather feedback that could help to shape future advocacy events. As the studies were designed primarily to inform practice, rather than to present in academic contexts, their design was more simplistic and varied across years.

Study design

Survivors were invited to voluntarily participate in an Advocacy Day held during June Survivors Week, as described above. Each year from 2016-2019, TASSC staff developed a simple paper survey with questions for survivors to complete at the end of the day. In 2018, an additional survey was developed for survivors to complete *prior* to participating in the Advocacy Day, to enable a pilot pre-post comparison study to be undertaken in collaboration with a local medical researcher (Dhital et al., 2018).

As an evolving project connected to the agency's internal monitoring and evaluation processes, the format and content of the annual surveys changed from year to year; thus, the results cannot be directly compared or amalgamated. However, there was consistency in the general topics covered in each survey, as outlined below.

First survey—2016: The 2016 survey comprised five items referring to the mental wellbeing dimensions of self-esteem, confidence in ability to speak about human rights, desire to support others, feeling of being supported, and belief that they could help make political changes. Survivors were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how much each dimension had changed for them (compared to before Advocacy Day), from 5 (increased a lot) to 1 (decreased a lot). A sixth question asked the survivor to explain in their own words how they felt after participating in advocacy that day.

Expanded survey in 2017: TASSC retained the same five questions covering dimensions of mental wellbeing from 2016 (with responses on a 5-point scale) and added five additional open-ended questions. Three items focused on survivors' personal experiences, asking them to report their emotional reactions after the advocacy day, their thoughts and plans following the day, and the challenges they had faced during the day. Two additional items solicited constructive feedback on the organization of the advocacy training and on Advocacy Day.

Pre- and post- surveys in 2018: Two separate surveys were developed to enable improved comparison of wellbeing pre- and post-participation. The pre-survey was administered two days before the Advocacy Day, and, as in past years, the post survey was administered at the end of the Advocacy Day.

In the pre-survey, survivors were presented with 13 items asking them to consider how much, *over the past two weeks*, they had experienced depressive symptoms (e.g., *I have little interest of pleasure in doing my daily activities; I am down, depressed, or hopeless)* or common cognitions reported in previous years' surveys (e.g., *I am a voice for others; I want to advocate for myself; I have an important story to tell*). Survivors were asked to indicate their response on

a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree". They were also presented with an open-ended question about their current thoughts or emotions.

The post-survey presented the same items from the pre-survey, adjusted to refer to how they felt *after participating* in the advocacy event. In addition, survivors were asked to report their reasons for participating in Advocacy Day, suggestions for improving the pre-event training or the organization of the day, and challenges they faced. They were presented with four items asking how much they had experienced certain negative cognitions or experiences (e.g., *I was emotional while recollecting painful past experiences*; *I was worried that my participation in this event will be noticed by someone from my home country and as a result will cause harm to my family who are still there*) on a 1 to 5 scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The 2018 surveys also collected information on participant age, gender identity, country of origin, asylum status, and family separation, and included a space for a unique ID to be assigned to enable matching of pre- and post-participation responses.

Streamlined survey in 2019: TASSC modified the survey to make the wording simpler and to collect more qualitative data. Survivors were asked to respond to 13 quantitative items covering eight emotions and cognitions after Advocacy Day (e.g., *I have told an important story today*; *I feel listened to; I feel down, depressed, or hopeless)* and 5 challenges faced during Advocacy Day (e.g., *It was difficult for me to express my feelings in front of people; I was anxious about speaking to congressional staff)* on a 1 to 3 scale, with 1=not at all, 2=a little / somewhat, and 3=a lot/very much. In addition, they were presented with 7 open text entry questions on their reasons for participating, best experiences from the day, sense of preparation for advocacy, skills related to advocacy, hopes and plans for the future, suggestions for future events, and advice for other survivors who consider participating. Information on participant age, country of origin, gender identity, and immigration and family separation status, as well as whether they had participated in an Advocacy Day event before or not, was also collected.

Study results

From 2016-2019, a total of 140 self-identified survivors and compatriot human rights advocates participated in the annual Advocacy Day (with participant numbers ranging from 30 to 57 each year). Most participated only once in that time period, but 17 individuals participated twice and one participated three times. A majority of participants each year completed the surveys (70% in 2016, 64% in 2017, 69% for the pre-participation survey and 53% for the post-participation survey in 2018, and 63% in 2019), allowing for a reasonably representative reporting of survivor experiences. As the surveys were completed anonymously, and demographics were not routinely collected for Advocacy Day participants (especially as not all were registered TASSC members/survivors), it was not possible to identify whether the views of specific groups of survivors might have been missed among the non-responders. We also did not ask participants directly regarding their torture experiences, and note that those who identified themselves as compatriot human rights advocates may or may not have been primary or secondary survivors; i.e., have had direct or indirect torture experiences themselves.

From the demographic information collected in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, it appeared that more men than women participated, and most were middle-aged adults

Table 1. Quantitative Data for Participants

Year	Number of Advocacy Day participants	Number of survey respondents	Psychological wellbeing, thoughts, and feelings ***before*** participating – questions	Mean scores*, **, ***	Psychological wellbeing, thoughts, and feelings ***after*** participating – quantitative	Mean scores *, **, ***
2016*	41	29			Self esteem	4.7
					Confidence	4.7
					Desire to support others	4.9
					Feeling of support	4.5
					Belief that can help make change	4.5
2017*	55	35			Self-esteem	4.7
					Confidence in ability to speak about human rights	4.7
					Feeling of being supported	5.0
					Belief that can help make political changes	4.7
2018**	32	22 for pre-survey17 for post-survey7 matched pre-post surveys	Could be a voice for others	4.3	Could be a voice for others	4.7
			Could represent more than themselves	4.3	Could represent more than themselves	4.7
			Wanted to engage in advocacy for themselves	4.3	Felt inspired to engage in advocacy for themselves	4.5
			Wanted to engage in advocacy for others	4.5	Felt inspired to engage in advocacy for others	4.7
			Had an important story to tell	4.4	Had told an important story	4.8
			Had been listened to	4.1	Had been listened to	4.6
			Had high self-esteem	3.8	Had high self-esteem	4.3
			Had confidence in themselves	4.0	Had confidence in themselves	4.8
			Could support others	4.4	Felt they could support others	4.8
			Felt supported by others	3.9	Felt supported by others	4.4
			Felt hopeful for political change	4.4	Felt hopeful for political change	4.8

			Had little interest in daily activities	2.7	Had little interest in daily activities after the advocacy event	2.2
			Felt down or depressed lately	3.1	Felt down or depressed after the advocacy event	2.2
					Felt anxious while giving testimony	3.1
					Felt emotional while giving testimony	3.4
					Felt worried about people at home being in danger	2.5
					Had difficulty expressing themselves	1.9
2019***	32	20			Felt like a voice for others	3.0
					Wanted to continue doing advocacy	3.0
					Had told an important story	2.9
					Felt listened to	2.8
					Felt confident	2.8
					Felt supported by others	2.8
					Could help make political changes	2.6
					Down or depressed after advocacy	1.3
					Challenged by difficult emotions coming up during their advocacy	2.4
					Felt concern about retaliation against friends or family if their participation	2.0
					Felt anxiety about speaking to congressional staff	1.6
					Challenging to speak in English	1.5
					Challenging to express feelings in front of others	1.3

Notes:
** Scale for post-surveys 2016: 5=increased a lot, 3=no change, 1 = decreased a lot*
***Scale for pre- and post- surveys 2017-2018: 5=strongly agree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 1 = strongly disagree*
**** Scale for post-survey 2019: 3=a lot / very, 2=a little / somewhat, 1 = not at all*

Table 2. Qualitative Data for Participants: Additional thoughts and feelings after participating

Meta-Theme	Year	Themes Identified From Responses
(a) Sense of being listened to and heard by an understanding, responsive audience	2016	Felt like they were listened to (e.g., *"It was really interesting. Officers at each Senate Office are ready to listen to our feelings. They gave us enough time for discussion too*") Felt good to have met and delivered their message to Senators (e.g., "*I feel proud in passing my message to the member of congress and senators*") Valued the opportunity to speak freely in the US (e.g., "*It helped me understand the working of the American System, its transparency and accessibility… It really makes me feel great to be in this great country.")*
	2017	Felt heard and understood (e.g., "*I feel excited. I believe that this participation has given me a chance to have my voice heard*") Appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences and to be listened to attentively (e.g., "*It was amazing and very important in speaking for people oppressed by dictator governments*". Relief of tension (e.g. *"I feel relieved in such a way that when I tell my story some of the things which are in my mind are settled as if my issue is addressed*") Felt that US officials and staff cared about their views (e.g., "*The attention of representatives and senators of the USA about human rights violations back in home is really astonishing*")
	2018	[not identified]
	2019	Felt positive about the responsiveness of the people they met with (e.g., *"hearing them listen and commit to fight for change and development along with us"*)
(b) Power of feeling part of a group that was speaking out on behalf of themselves and others	2016	Social support and togetherness (e.g., *"I have felt great. I feel like I'm surrounded by great people that help us bring about great and positive change in the world"*)
	2017	Pride in being and continuing as part of the TASSC community (e.g., "*I feel more proud for being a member of TASSC International which creates conducive environments to speak for political problems".*) Had served as a voice for others *(e.g., "It was a dream come true to be a voice for voiceless people and the people of my country in general".)* Sense of having provided important testimony (e.g., "*the long-awaited opportunity to share my story and that of [my home country] was given to me*")

Meta-Theme	Year	Themes Identified From Responses
	2018	Felt important to be there together with others *(*e.g., *"I want to be part of a group.*")
	2019	Power of sharing their story and concerns (e.g., "*speaking out what is inside me"*)
(c) Sense of motivation and hopefulness for the future	2016	Felt happy or excited about their advocacy experience (e.g., *"I'm so excited about the conversation*") Felt hopeful that a change would come (e.g. *"Today, I feel very hopeful that the future will be better.*") Felt more positive about themselves (e.g., *"I have increased a little bit my esteem, speak about human rights, feelings of being supported by others"*) Felt positive emotions (happiness, pride, confidence, strength, energy, delight, hope, relief, thankfulness, motivation) Learned new information (e.g., *"I am really excited and learned a lot during this advocacy day*")
	2017	Happy with their participation (e.g., "*I am very happy for expressing my feelings and the pains I have faced to congressmen and all participants".*) Encouraged, empowered, and hopeful (e.g., "*I realize that I can speak with a full of confidence and feel important person to speak about my people"* Desire to become an activist or continue advocating (e.g., "*I want to speak and march for human rights to keep track of settling and respecting basic human rights and / or democratic rights of everyone in the globe"*
	2018	Sense of ongoing motivation (e.g., *"I feel that I need to do more / more needs to be done about torture"*)
	2019	Excitement, relief, and sense of self-efficacy (e.g., "*I got a big relief. I feel my voice was heard.*") Felt motivated to participate again in the future (e.g., "*My hopes are that a positive outcome should come out of the advocacy, and I plan to go back if my voice was not heard"*) Hope for meaningful change in their countries (e.g., "*I hope it yields fruits, like cause changes in the political situation in my country"*) Hope for improved funding and services for asylum seekers in the US (e.g., "*I would hope congress would pass a bill to accelerate asylum cases and listen to people (activists)"*) General hope for change (e.g., "*Hope there will be some kind of awareness by the congress and may be some action".*)

Meta-Theme	Year	Themes Identified From Responses
(d) awareness of talking to people with political power in pressured situation	2016	[not identified]
	2017	Pressures of giving public testimony, especially in non-native language (e.g., *"[it was] challenging to share my ideas with my broken English"; "being in front of a world-leading country's congressman made me to be emotional which might affect my speech"*)
	2018	Had difficulties / not enough time getting their points across (e.g., "*Time factor in presenting is small in telling the representative about my country"*)
	2019	Best part was opportunity to meet and talk with decision-makers (e.g., "The fact that congressional aide at the office gave us time to express our self and asked some questions.")
(e) emotions during testimony	2016	[not identified]
	2017	Feeling emotional during their testimony (e.g., *"It was very emotional while I talked about my torture experience. It was really painful"*)
	2018	Difficult feelings around ongoing need to share their stories and fight against injustice (e.g., "*Emotional*"…. *"That there's a need to continue to fight for these issues and do justice"*) Disappointment when not feeling listened to (e.g., feeling "*some staff have no heart"*)
	2019	[not identified]
(f) fears after testimony	2016	Concerned that nothing would change (e.g., "*Overwhelmed by feelings of disappointment in politics. Not sure if we can change something. Still have to do it, to fight, to believe, to try to make a change. The meetings were successful, we did our part well and it was well received; but the practical side, I'm not sure how much it will help"*)
	2017	Fearing retaliation from their home government (e.g., "*the government maybe do something to my family. I wrote to TASSC do not post my photo*".)
	2018	[not identified]
	2019	[not identified]

Table 3. Qualitative Data for Participants: Reasons for participating

Year	Themes Identified From Responses
2018	Importance of telling their stories and increasing awareness about torture and human rights abuses in their countries (e.g., "*To inform and educate congressmen about our experiences and make them aware of issues and to show that we are here and have survived"*) Desire to spark action (e.g., "*To push for stronger action by the US congress towards pressuring governments…to respect human rights*") Desire or feeling of obligation to represent others (e.g., "*Back in my country people are facing the military for the sake of others. Me being in peaceful country can sacrifice my time and help for those selfless people dying for others' rights*")
2019	Addressing injustices in their home countries (e.g., "*To raise awareness on issues that are undermining governance, democracy, and accountability in [home country]"* Speaking out for the issues asylum seekers are facing in the US (e.g., "*To ask for the USA government to facilitate (accelerate) the asylum process for asylees like me"*) A general opportunity to share their story and be heard (e.g., "*To express my healing and share with other torture survivors"*) A general sense of support for TASSC (e.g., "*To add a voice to TASSC"*)

Table 4. Qualitative Data for Participants: Feedback and suggestions for future advocacy

Year	Themes Identified From Responses
2016	More advocacy opportunities
2017	Hoped that Advocacy Day would be continued in future (e.g., "*Keep the good work on!"*) More time to speak with political decision-makers (e.g.., "*It was difficult just to describe the situation in [my home country] in such short time.*") Being able to speak to a broader range of people (e.g., "*I would've loved to see the congress people themselves. But I know that this is a giant step*") Could expand its scope to include more people, issues, and meetings (e.g., "*I would love to see more work done on publicity and more countries included*"; suggest "*To incorporate more victims and broaden the outreach*" Helpful to have more time to prepare (e.g., *"A little bit of time to collect some data and prepare.*") Could have more follow up from Advocacy Day (e.g., "*survivor's points made at the capitol be followed up to hear from those they met*"). Training was helpful and informative (e.g., *"It is very important to have training beforehand. It helps to think strategically how to take attention by presenting critical issues in well-organized way.*") Liked the way that training and Advocacy Day was organized (e.g., "*The event was well organized and it gave us the opportunity to speak up about what the US govt should do regarding protecting human rights*")

Year	Themes Identified From Responses
2018	Could adjust the timing or nature of meetings (e.g., "*Let's find more ways for them to allow more time for the meeting and for more questions and answers")* Training was helpful (e.g., "*The helpful part was explaining the current situation about my country. Participating survivors and train them how to speak before the congressmen was very important.*") Logistical aspects, such as the time involved in getting to the site, were challenging (e.g., "*Time and place is a bit distant for me to come regularly*")
2019	Important to continue with more Advocacy Days (e.g., "*This is a big step in the right direction. We need to keep doing this but most importantly we need to bring the stories of advocates to the central stage and help promote their work"*) More extensive preparation (e.g., "*To work with the community ahead of time so that each participant will have preparation time.*") More participation (e.g., "*Bring more people on board.*") More follow-up (e.g., "*We need feedback session & follow-up meeting to capitalize on it.*") Training was helpful (e.g., "*The training was helpful to prepare myself to the point*") Good organization of training and Advocacy Day (e.g., "*It was nicely organized & well-articulated agenda"*) Prior experience helps (e.g., "*I was well prepared, first of all because it was not my first time advocating on the Hill."; "I also think my prior experience helped me craft some of the messages"*) Having good communication skills helps (e.g., "*I am orator, and communicator well acquired from my teaching and research presenting experiences"*) Knowledge about topic helps (e.g., "*Knowledge of what is happening on the ground, knowledge of human rights law.*." Inspiration and motivation matter (e.g., "*I think I am just inspired. Inspiration do matter to me before skills"*) Encourage participation, even if people were fearful about it, because the experience was positive, impactful, and educational (e.g., "*It's a good thing to do because you let your concerns known to people who can cause a change"; "To be voice for the voiceless people is something beyond money. It's super easy and gives you happiness and internal satisfaction. So come and taste it!"*

(average ages ranging from 39-46 across the groups of respondents). Their countries of origin were listed as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Argentina, South Cameroon, Congo Brazzaville, El Salvador, Philippines, Uganda, Liberia, Republic of Guinea and Eritrea. Many had arrived in the U.S. several years ago and were still waiting for their asylum claims to be granted. Most had family members still in their home country.

Tables 1 to 4 present a summary of the main findings from each year, highlighting both quantitative and qualitative data. As Table 1 shows, on quantitative items, mean scores

indicated that survivors *agreed* that they had many positive thoughts and feelings after advocacy (scores above 3 on a 5-point scale, or above 2 on a 3-point scale), and generally *disagreed* that their experiences had been negative (scores below 3 on a 5-point scale, or below 2 on a 3-point scale). However, it is important to note that some individuals did experience more challenges than others. The results from 2018 suggests that, on average, survivors already had good levels of wellbeing and a positive sense of self before participating in Advocacy Day but appeared to experience slightly higher scores in some of these dimensions after participating. Analysis of a small sample of seven participants who completed both pre- and post-surveys indicated that these survivors reported statistically significantly less depression and more confidence and desire to support others after participating (Dhital et al., 2018).

The qualitative data, where participants could choose their own words to describe their thoughts and feelings, provided further insights into their experiences. Across the years, recurring positive themes included a sense of being listened to and heard by an understanding and responsive audience, the power of feeling part of a group that was speaking out on behalf of themselves and others, and a sense of motivation and hopefulness for the future (see Table 2). Participants also noted the salience of being able to give testimony in front of people with significant influence over government policies and decisions, referring to this as both positive and exciting on one hand, and as daunting and potentially challenging on the other hand. Further reflecting the mixed (both positive and challenging) nature of the advocacy experience, other recurring themes centered on how emotional participants felt when sharing their personal stories, and fears they held around their advocacy being somehow inadequate and nothing changing as a result of it or—worse—that there might be retaliation from their own governments.

With regards to reasons for participating (asked only in the 2018 and 2019 surveys—see Table 3), participants appeared to have reasonable expectations for what they might get out of the Advocacy Day. They reported a desire to speak out about human rights abuses in their home countries, to be heard and to push for action, and to support or speak for others who had faced similar suffering.

Finally, across all years participants provided feedback on how they would like Advocacy Day to evolve in the future (Table 4)—another important aspect of their engagement. A predominant theme was a request for more time and opportunity to prepare for and engage in advocacy, and to have more follow-up after Advocacy Days to debrief and to keep track of how issues were unfolding. Participants also indicated that the training provided prior to Advocacy Day was very useful in helping them to feel adequately prepared. In 2019, responses to additional questions around factors that helped participants to engage in advocacy highlighted the importance of communication skills, feeling knowledgeable about the issues being advocated for, and feeling inspired and encouraged to speak out—all of which may be considered and incorporated in future training and preparation.

Comparison with past research

The results from TASSC's internal studies, as summarized above, appear broadly consistent with published research related to survivor engagement in advocacy. For instance, implicit references to truth-speaking, justice, and serving others (in this case, family members) in TASCC participants' responses echo the motivations to participate in public truth-speaking in the ECCC in Cambodia identi-

fied by Stammel, Burchert, Taing, Bockers, & Knaevelsrud (2010). Similarly, the themes of pride, relief, feeling listened to and feeling motivated to continue engaging in advocacy identified by TASSC have also been reported in studies on testimonial therapy in India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and the Philippines (Agger, Igreja, Kiehle & Polatin, 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015), public advocacy by women survivors in Peru (Laplante, 2007; Suarez 2011), and participants in the Special Court for Sierra Leone (Stepakoff, Shawn Reynolds, Charters, and Henry, 2015). Subsequent research on a smaller sample from the same broad population (O'Connor et al., 2021), involving in-depth qualitative interviews with survivors who gave personal testimony as part of advocacy efforts in government settings (as experienced in the TASSC Advocacy Day described above) as well as in wider education and community settings, has highlighted similar themes related to survivor motivations and their positive experiences during advocacy. The feedback given by participants in the TASSC surveys, reported in this paper, about how Advocacy Day may be developed and expanded in the future suggests that survivors see these benefits as being worth extending to others and as something they might build on for themselves in future.

At the same time, as identified in the TASSC surveys, advocacy experiences can be painfully emotional for some participants and even lead to negative reflections afterwards, perhaps particularly if the advocacy setting does not allow for the full benefits of feeling heard and seeing action taken to be realized. This has been highlighted in past research showing the strong emotional impact of speaking about traumatic personal experiences in public settings where participants may feel interrogated, and the fears that participants may have afterwards (e.g., Puvimanasinghe & Price's, 2016; Stepakoff, Shawn Reynolds, Charters, & Henry, 2015; Brounéas, 2008; Byrne, 2004). A further area of challenge that was minimally referenced in the TASSC survey responses is the difficult broader U.S. context for survivors—for instance, the long and uncertain wait for asylum to be granted, the pain of family separation, economic challenges from not being able to access a stable income, and the difficulties of facing racism and cultural and linguistic differences (further identified in a later study by O'Connor et al., 2021). Delker and colleagues (2020) propose that these types of oppressive factors and experiences of marginalization are important to further consider before assuming that advocacy is always "redemptive" or primarily positive for participants. Mohan (2009) and Taylor (2014) also suggest that expectation-management is an important factor in assessing the value of survivor engagement in tribunal or transitional justice settings, in particular, and caution against assuming that all participation will be positive or beneficial. Providing survivors with ongoing support before, during, and after advocacy may be helpful for mitigating against harm; TASSC's considerable efforts to provide adequate preparation and training ahead of time, and support during the day, were likely helpful for survivors in this respect, but further opportunities to debrief might also be beneficial.

The future: moving forward with research and survivor advocacy

Although undertaken primarily to inform internal processes (rather than as an academic research program), TASSC's four-year series of surveys with survivors who engaged in advocacy sheds some important light on the potential value of well-designed advocacy experiences. Future research could build on TASSC's monitoring and evaluation efforts

by treating these studies as pilots worthy of reproduction and expansion in a more robust research framework.

The limitations of these small studies include the variation in survey format and wording from year to year, the collection of pre- and post- data in only one year, the absence of demographic information for participants in earlier years, and the varying response rate that may have meant some survivor voices were not represented. Few survivors participated more than once, which may have been attributable to obstacles to participation in a full Advocacy Day and the proceeding training (e.g., work or personal obligations, costs involved); such barriers to participating could be further explored. We also note that survivor responses may not always have been fully anonymous to organization staff; although demographic information was only collected during years in which non-staff research associates were assisting in data collection, and this raw data was not directly shared with staff, in some cases participants were quite open in sharing their experiences with staff, or gave their surveys to staff directly and discussed them. In "real world" settings such blurring of the boundaries between "research" and relationship-building may comprise inevitable and culturally congruent lapses of anonymity, but should ideally be minimized in order to ensure survivors feel free to express negative as well as positive views.

In future research it would be helpful to engage in further pre- and post-advocacy "testing" to more precisely identify positive psychological and social outcomes attributable to participation, and to collect more information about participants' demographics, access to stabilizing resources, sense of safety, and existing skills and experience to help better identify the characteristics of survivors who may benefit the most from engaging in advocacy initiatives—as well as shedding important light on the contexts in which certain forms of advocacy may *not* be advisable. Research on related models of survivor engagement, such as recent research on the Communities Healing And Transforming Trauma (CHATT) initiative for diverse trauma survivors trained to participate in a speakers' bureau (Fields et al., 2020), could provide a useful model for future studies more specifically focused on torture survivors.

It would also be beneficial to further investigate the experiences of survivors engaging in advocacy in other country settings. Some survivor-led organizations already have well-established advocacy and activism processes in place—for instance, Sadiq-Tang (2018) describes the model of activism offered by Freedom from Torture in the UK and highlights multiple ways in which survivors find this model valuable (including, for instance, in increasing their skills and confidence).

The feedback collected from participants in TASSC's advocacy program suggests that it may also be a strong model that could be replicated elsewhere, with appropriate local modifications, to support other survivors to be directly engaged in collective efforts to end torture. In the process, many survivors may also find that they are supported in their healing journey and in moving towards a sense of justice, and become connected more closely with others. We hope that deeper evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of TASSC's model may further substantiate these claims.

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