

Power Dynamics and Informed Consent

Survivor-centered case management are the services the survivors “experiences and needs and rights and decisions at the center of a case management relationship that is a space for healing and empowerment. It incorporates the standard social work practice of assessing needs and providing and/or coordinating services to respond to those needs and monitoring the progress made in services, all through a lens that recognizes that the survivor’s experiences have stripped the person of dignity and control and have shattered their trust in relationships. Our overall goal in case management with survivors is to establish a relationship with the survivor that promotes the person’s emotional and physical safety, builds trust and helps her restore some control over her life.”¹

Part of the case management process is obtaining informed consent for services or any information sharing. This is the voluntary agreement of the survivors, and a process that seeks to protect their rights, ensure knowledge about limitations and that risks and benefits are clarified.² Going through this process to get informed consent is not a choice, it’s an ethical obligation. It is “an important part of building trust with a survivor. It is a way to promote the person’s self-determination and start restoring their power and control. The process for informed consent is:

- Explain what will happen if you work together.
- Explain confidentiality and its limitations (see below for more information).
- Explain collection, use and storage of the survivor’s information (if you are collecting client data).
- Explain the survivor’s rights throughout the helping process.
- Ask the person if they have any questions.
- Ask the person if they would like to continue with services.”³

How is the process of obtaining informed consent impacted by power dynamics between the case worker and the survivor?

A case worker’s primary role is that of “a guide or facilitator of a process that involved the survivor’s disclosure, learning, decision-making, action and personal transformation; to manage the survivor’s expectations and their own; caseworkers may not be able to find solutions to all of the survivor’s needs; and to **use power with rather than power over the survivor**. A caseworker supports a survivor to be able to do these things rather than doing them FOR the survivor.”

Power OVER, Power TO, Power WITH

“Power OVER is the use of your influence, access to resources and decision-making in a way that makes someone else’s life smaller, and does not pay attention to their needs, wishes or boundaries. We see this in GBV when perpetrators do not respect survivors and pay no attention to the survivor’s wishes, needs and boundaries. Perpetrators will try to make survivors meet the perpetrator’s wishes, even if doing so is harmful to the survivor.

Power TO is the power that we all have to have our own thoughts and opinions, even when our lives are constrained and made smaller by someone using ‘power over’. When we are working with beneficiaries, this what we are helping them to find – their own definition of what is happening , their own thoughts about their lives and their own opinions about how they would like it to be. This is what we mean when we talk about agency, and that is what working with survivors focuses on. Whenever we work with survivors we must keep in mind that survivors, though their lives may be very difficult and their circumstances may seem to be limiting their choices to almost nothing, they do still have ‘power to’ and the potential to understand their lives on their own terms.

Power WITH is when we use our power as workers and as professionals in collaboration with survivors, beneficiaries or service users. We recognise our own access to resources, decision-making and our opportunities to mobilise and influence others, but we do not use this to tell survivors or beneficiaries what they should do or what choices they should make. As we recognise the ‘power to’ in the person in front of us, we work together to think about how we can use our power to support them. It is critical that we do this; if we are not mindful and careful, we risk our power in a ‘power over’ way.”⁴

Approaching the informed consent process with a power WITH mindset is crucial to ensure the survivor’s responsibility for change, to acknowledge their power. Violence removes a survivor’s power. For case workers, our responsibility is to utilize power WITH instead of power OVER, seeking partnership, collaboration, and direction from the survivors on their care to ensure we are not following the path of violence in power OVER.

Are these scenarios using power OVER or power WITH?

Scenario 1: Case worker, well dressed, sitting behind her desk with a desktop, notebook, pen, handbag and wearing eye glasses. She follows the steps by the book. She invites the survivor inside to sit on the chair opposite her at the desk (the desk is between them).

Scenario 2: The case worker says, “Thank you for sharing your story with me. Know that you are not alone and that I am here to support you in the best way possible. Whatever you decide, I will support you.”

Scenario 3: The case worker says “Now the second part of this consent form to sign is about sharing information about what happened to you and all the women who come to see us so we can share what is happening in this community, to help us best support you. It’s fine, just sign here.”



¹ From the Inter-Agency Case Management Guidelines Training Package

² From the Inter-Agency GBV Case Management Guidelines, https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Interagency-GBV-Case-Management-Guidelines_Final_2017_Low-Res.pdf

³ From the Inter-Agency GBV Case Management Guidelines, https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Interagency-GBV-Case-Management-Guidelines_Final_2017_Low-Res.pdf

⁴ From the IRC GBV Core Concepts