Chayn's trauma-informed design principles
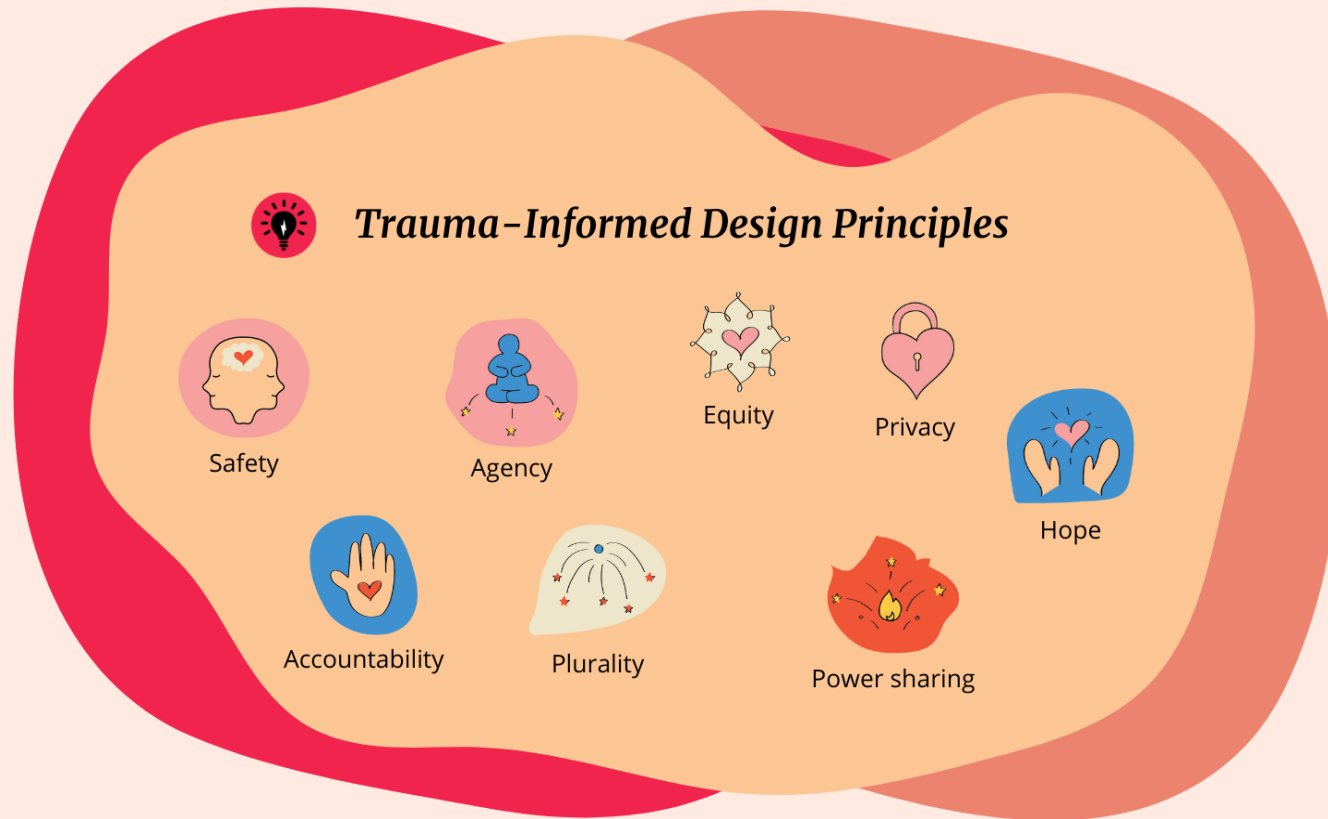
An exploration of how our principles have evolved and how you can put them into practice

Trauma-Informed Design Principles

Safety

Agency

Equity

Privacy

Hope

Accountability

Plurality

Power sharing

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Where there is trauma, there is room for healing.

Based on a decade's work, [Chayn's](#) trauma-informed design principles are foundational to everything we do. From our HR processes to content writing to user research to product and service design, these principles ensure our practices are centred around the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence around the world.

In this whitepaper, we will explore our eight principles, their genesis, and how to apply them to your work. This work could prove to be useful for anyone interested in creating systems, products, processes and environments that are safe, impactful, and empowering.

Genesis

Trauma is an emotional response to one or many terrible events that involve a risk of harm or danger to ourselves or others. The threat can be a threat to our life, such as assault; our sense of self (as in emotional abuse); or our personal identities, like everyday experiences of racism. Behaviours and norms that destroy, invalidate, or erase our sense of identity, self, and well-being, can cause trauma.

A traumatic situation can evoke different reactions in different people. Trauma is never prescriptive. When internalised, trauma can make us feel frightened, humiliated, rejected, abandoned, trapped, ashamed, and powerless. It makes us feel unsafe in our bodies, minds and within our wider communities.

The impact of trauma can affect a whole group of people — and even extend beyond life. Intergenerational, transgenerational or ancestral trauma generally refers to the ways in which trauma experienced in one generation affects the health and well-being of future generations.

When we talk about trauma at Chayn, we are primarily referring to the experiences of women and marginalised genders such as non-binary and trans people, who have experienced trauma through gender-based violence.

The world fails survivors of gender-based violence every day, but it also creates pockets of hope and nourishes solidarity.

For many survivors who look for ways to understand their experiences, advocate for themselves and find help, there are many barriers that stop them from getting the support they need and deserve.

Since 2013, our focus is on empowering women and other marginalised genders who have experienced domestic, sexual, or tech-facilitated abuse. Every decision we make – and every resource we create – has lived experience at its core. We've remained a survivor-led initiative; back when we were volunteer-run and now as a volunteer-staff hybrid. Since the start, we've come across design flaws in technology and support mechanisms that both put survivors at-risk, and impede their ability to deal with their trauma.

From the existence of power and information asymmetries resulting in limited knowledge, choice, and recourse for survivors, to extractive research practices and policies, to technology and language that don't take into account the impact of trauma, we need a transformative shift.

For Chayn, our trauma-informed principles have emerged from ongoing learnings and interactions with survivors, who are users of our services but also the community of survivors who have created our services. In the early days of our community-building, we started experimenting with what kind of language and tone would help survivors understand their experiences while also offering them hope, in knowing that they haven't caused the abuse.

In the first 7 years of Chayn, many iterations of the design principles emerged, without them being termed as such. Sometimes during brainstorming sessions, they'd be written on post-its, at other times we'd be thinking about what principles mattered the most for specific projects. We toyed with many variations without ever documenting or gearing towards a process that would result in the design principles we have today. But - such is the beauty of participatory design which involves hundreds of people across the world with different insights and experiences, that the common themes bubbled to the surface - ready to be formalised in 2021.

As the founder of Chayn, I've been the longest-serving member of the community but I'm also more than that; I'm the steward or the shepherd. It's been my responsibility to hold on to all the thinking, experience, and feedback we've had from different survivors (users or volunteers) as well as staff and partners. I reviewed pictures of Post-Its, threads on Facebook and Slack, notes on the different documentation we had, as well as scanned my own memory to create the first draft of our trauma-informed design principles.

Initially, there were 9 including Safety, Trustworthy, Plurality, Agency, Open and Accountable, Solidarity, Empathy, Friction and Privacy and Hope. You may have seen these in this [blog](#) I wrote about our trauma-informed approach, in May 2021. The feedback to this blog was overwhelmingly encouraging, and it felt like many of the principles resonated with people in different industries, especially user researchers and service designers.

Safety   Trustworthy   Plurality

Agency   Open and Accountable   Solidarity

Empathy   Friction and Privacy   Hope
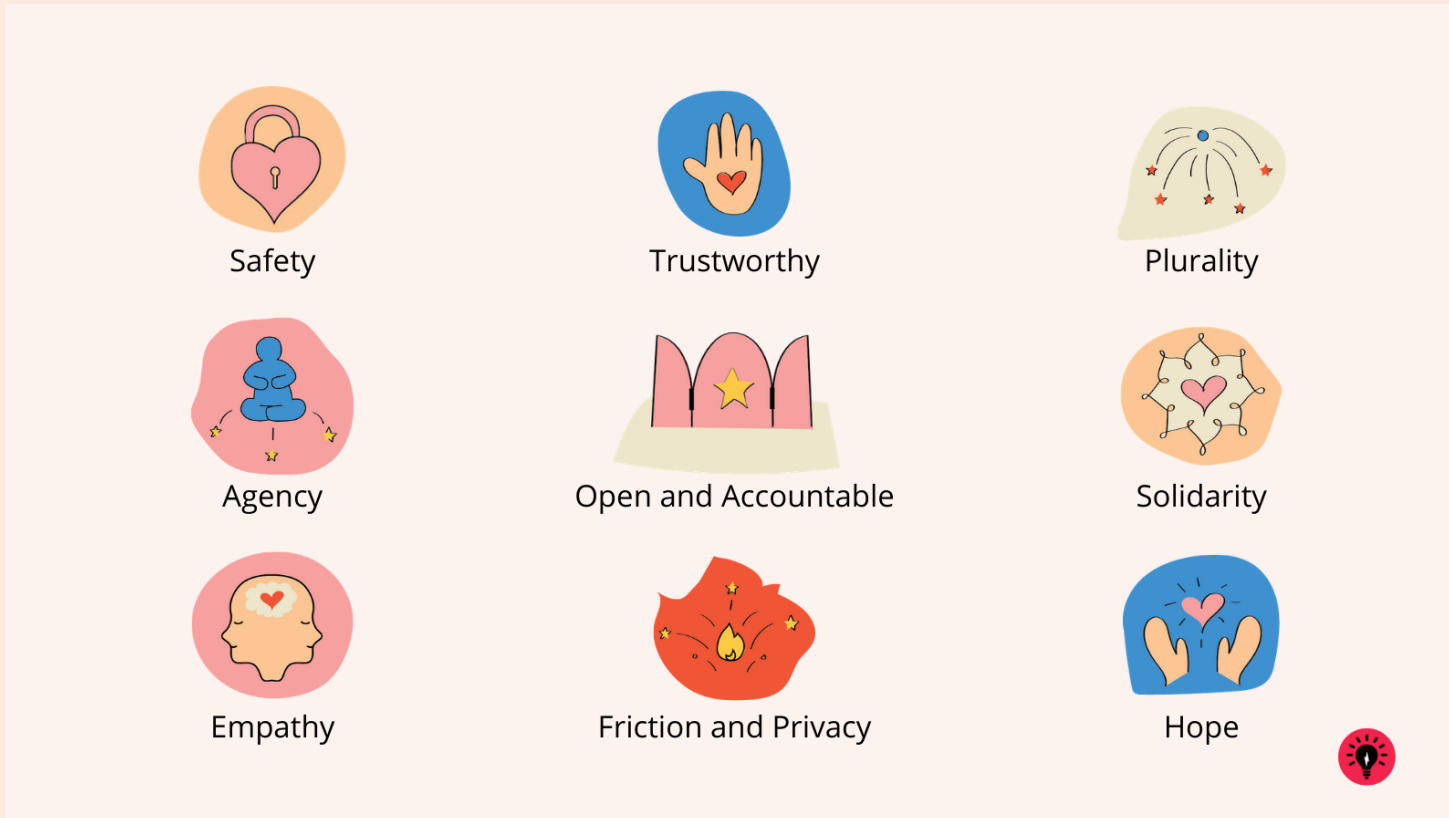
Serendipitously, working on these principles coincided with our partnership with End Cyber Abuse on [Orbits](#) - a global field guide to advance intersectional, survivor-centred, and trauma-informed interventions to tech abuse. Chayn proposed that we use our design

principles as a framework for this and over many sessions with End Cyber Abuse staff as well as Chayn staff and volunteers, we condensed these to:

- Safety
- Privacy
- Power redistribution
- Agency
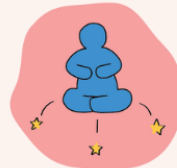- Accountability
- Equity
- Plurality
- Hope

Throughout our 18 months of collaboration, we held workshops with over 100 global technologists, policymakers, researchers and survivors outside of our direct community. We consulted them on these principles, and the feedback and co-design sessions showed us that the framework did stand up to many viewpoints and industries.

This brings us to Chayn's current iteration of design principles, which are the same as the Orbits ones with a slight reframing of "Power redistribution" to "Power sharing", which feels more true to our community. We don't represent a colonial institution therefore we are not trying to redress centuries of entrenched oppression but we have always taken a decolonisation approach because our lives, mindsets and the systems we live in have been affected by it and we don't want to replicate that harm. Chayn's humble beginnings were as a community started by me, a woman who grew up in Pakistan, and just wanted to create a space of solidarity for survivors from Pakistan. From there, we became a global initiative because of how many survivors from different parts of the world, overwhelming the Global Majority or Global South, reached out to take part in the organising and service delivery work.
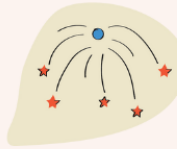
Safety Agency Equity Privacy
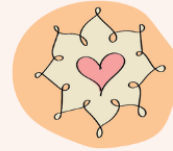
Accountability Plurality Power sharing Hope

Our current design principles are:
- Safety
- Agency
- Equity
- Privacy
- Accountability
- Plurality
- Power sharing
- Hope

How to use our design principles

There are many ways of taking these principles and applying them to different types of work or areas of interest.

Trauma-informed practices vary across sectors and spaces. It's important to recognise that the trailblazing work on trauma-informed approaches emerged from those who work within care and social work settings, especially around rehabilitation. One of the earliest documented (communities have been working through trauma-informed approaches naturally without documenting them for a long time) models of trauma-informed care is by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

A trauma-informed approach acknowledges:
(i) the prevalence of trauma;
(ii) how trauma affects all individuals involved with the programme, organisation, or system, including its own workforce;
(iii) and responds by putting this knowledge into practice.

SAMHSA's **Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Approach** are:
1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues
(SAMHSA, 2012)

Though you'll notice similarities between Chayn and SAMHSA's principles, how and where we apply them are very different.

A literature review of other trauma-informed practices will reveal many similar values, which often focus on ensuring user safety and preventing re-traumatisation. In a physical setting, this would mean thinking about the reception space of a clinic or removing triggering sounds, objects, and smells from a treatment area.

Using the principles of trauma-informed care — and combining it with Chayn's ten years of experience in creating content and services for survivors of abuse across the world — we have narrowed down a design framework which has enabled us to test, rationalise and question our product decisions. We're applying our principles through the lens of designing and building technology and content on trauma recovery.

Chayn's approach to trauma-informed work is not through the delivery of care because we're not a care provider - neither for our users nor our staff and volunteers. We design and deliver resources with and for survivors of abuse, and we create intentional spaces of warmth and solidarity to organise that work. Most of our resources require survivors to self-advocate and use them in a way that suits their healing. Our volunteers also join to support the creation of these materials. In being part of our community as volunteers, many survivors have told us this has additionally benefitted their healing, and they have found purpose and connection through the solidarity of the network. We're also not a crisis support service, which means that even in our limited direct contact with our users, we aren't supporting them in the way that crisis support services are set up to do. Our work is also different to rehabilitative settings or services that work directly with young, vulnerable people and children.

When you engage with our design principles and think about how to apply these to your work, we encourage you to keep an open and inquisitive mind. We'd recommend that you think of this white paper less as an "instruction manual" and more like an exploration of the different ways that the principles could be modified or used to create your own.

In this whitepaper, we are using the lenses of research, design, policy and organisation, to show how we've used the principles internally as well as how others could apply them.

Research

"Though research methods have changed over time, ethical considerations about how trauma is studied, believed, portrayed, and extrapolated into findings remain highly relevant today. The term 'extractive research' is used to refer to research where information or knowledge is 'extracted' from those with experience or knowledge of the research subject without care or interest in their well-being, preferences, and needs. In regards to GBV, research is extractive when it uses the experiences and labour of survivors without appropriate consent, control, or compensation. This might involve reducing a survivor's role and input to that of an informant, disregarding pain or discomfort that may be caused by participation in the research, or discarding information that dissents from the organisation's own ideas.

When survivors' insights are treated like an asset but their own agency in the process isn't, when they are consulted but have no idea of why and how their experience will be used, and when language, culture, race, disability, and other characteristics aren't considered even when survivors mention them, it's extractive."
- Orbits, Chayn and ECA 2022

Design

Design can be both transformational and transportive. It can also be exclusionary. When we talk about design in this whitepaper, it covers service, product and content design. We will pay particular attention to technology design and how it relates to preventing and fighting tech abuse. While Human Centred Design has brought some useful techniques, its widespread adoption without a critical view of how and by whom those techniques are applied has created room for oversimplification and harm. Personas, experience maps, and surveys are especially prone to this. The tools themselves do not present the limitation; it's the assumption that a group of humans can be reduced down to a snippet of their lives. There's also an assumption that co-designing at certain one-off points is enough to share power, which is not the case.

When product teams and leadership are lacking in diverse experiences and fail to meaningfully consult or hire people from marginalised groups such as survivors of cyberstalking or activists facing oppressive governments, these gaps in knowledge are reflected back in the products and policies that put survivors directly at-risk.

Policy

Systems of law and order are entrenched in centuries of oppression and violence. Yet, these become arbitrators of a form of justice, whether survivors choose that path for themselves or not. These systems need fundamental reform. Often, these are the only places survivors are told they can seek support from due to a lack of alternatives. Chayn's interest in this area is particularly around tech abuse, so the policy landscape relates not just to the government but also to the technology companies themselves.

"Given the ever-changing and accelerated pace of technology, policy often lags significantly behind when it comes to properly defining tech abuse in its many forms. As tech has developed over the years, it has been evident at every milestone that it can, and likely will, be used to cause harm. From email messages leading to incredible levels of spam and social media posts leading to online violence, hate, and text-based abuse, to the unprecedented use of video calling during the pandemic leading to 'Zoom bombing' difficulties - the law simply hasn't been able to keep up. Instead, survivors and those trying to support them are often made to navigate a complex web of copyright, IT, criminal, and other laws."
- Orbits, Chayn and ECA 2022

Organisation

As an organisation that was created and is run by survivors, thinking about how we can live the values we want to see in other spaces has been a live discussion. Through getting things wrong, [trying different approaches borrowed from others, or reflecting by ourselves](), we've developed a series of practices that work for our community. Our trauma-informed approach to well-being and people management relies on individual and collective commitment to these principles and organisational values, which we incorporate in our work. Whether we come into this work with lived experience of gender-based violence or not, we can benefit from trauma-Informed HR policies and processes. We apply these to all of our processes while facilitating learning, reflection, peer support, and making room for recovery through rest and flexibility.

Putting these principles into practice

These design principles have helped Chayn test, rationalise and question our product, service, and strategic decisions. As design principles should, these will keep evolving, adapting, and morphing with our experiences over time.

We also don't come to this work from a purely harm-reduction angle. We see it as enabling joy, creating space for expression and an opportunity to fill the darkest pockets of the internet with gardens of hope.

When thinking about putting these principles into practice, we invite you to consider this:
- It's not a checklist. It's a guide.
- All principles don't need to apply to every decision and process. Some will be more important than others, especially depending on which area you work in
- Our products, services and our thinking should evolve. The design principles shouldn't be so responsive that they don't remain robust but how we understand them and apply them should be responsive.
- Focus less on semantics and more on application. Many well-intentioned people and organisations can get caught up in deciding what to call things rather than focusing on learning by doing.
- People love reading design principles but often forget them in practice, so think about how you will operationalise them for everyday work.

And perhaps most importantly, sometimes you can take all the right steps with the best of intentions and you will still fall short of where you wanted to get to.

Given the importance of decolonisation to Chayn's purpose and the story of how it began, we pay special attention to not generalising or flattening user experiences into needs that neatly fit into one Post-it. People live in a multi-dimensional world and therefore, our understanding of their needs, journey, challenges, fears, hopes and aspirations must hold space for that complexity and richness of nuance.

Though there is some commonality in how gender-based violence will impact survivors, each survivor's trauma reaction and path to healing will look different. Accepting and acknowledging the parameters of design – even survivor-centred and trauma-informed design – makes it easier to create research and product interventions without the expectation of uniformity.

As practitioners and movement builders, we believe in growth and accountability, not perfection and punishment. We encourage you to do the same!

The Principles

Safety

We must make brave and bold choices that prioritise the physical and emotional safety of users, especially if they have been denied this safety at many points in their lives due to gender-based violence. Whether it is the interface of our platform or the service blueprint, safety by design should be the default. Instead of minimising safety risks because we would rather believe people would not abuse the opportunity, we should embrace risk analysis as a vital part of the product life cycle. We should also prioritise the safety and well-being of our staff and volunteers, who are critical to our mission.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
In screening surveys, make answering detailed questions about their experience optional for survivors. We say, "'If you feel able to, please share more about your experience"	Create 'safety exit' buttons on websites that take users to a non-conspicuous website in case someone is watching. To support emotional safety, consider redirecting to something	Provide clear terms of use that highlight zero tolerance for abuse and clearly identify examples of harmful behaviours Add perpetrator information to a	Develop a company culture of openly discussing feelings, prioritising self-care, and asking for each others' help in sharing difficult experiences

Before interviews, tell participants which topics will be covered and what you won't be asking them, so they can mentally prepare and avoid anxiety

Take informed consent in advance (we've also trialled a video to explain consent so people have informed consent before signing the form)

Be flexible to the safety needs of the participant. For e.g, when making requests about the practical set-up of a Zoom call, be mindful that being at home or having a quiet, distraction-free space is a privilege not available to everyone. If you go with what the survivor wants, you may not get the perfect recording or their full attention, but you'll hear from them in the place they feel safest

Keep an eye on how the participant is feeling and responding. If they feel overwhelmed, pause. Make it clear that strong emotions are OK. Our

comforting. For e.g, the exit buttons on Chayn's websites open a new tab with Wikipedia.com and provide relief by searching for "cute baby animal memes" in the tab where the Chayn website was open. If you click back, it takes users to a blank screen

Test all technology for abusability by conducting threat modelling at multiple stages of the design lifecycle.

Add 2-factor authentication and other safety measures

Allow users to opt for disguised emails with fake subject lines, like Chayn's mini-course platform [Soul Medicine](#)

Let users block and filter content and users

Offer options to restrict how people can get in touch with users

Don't show people "someone they may know", as it can make a secret profile discoverable

digital offender database maintained by the company or law enforcement (if applicable)

Offer to provide safe contact details as these may differ from the ones that survivors use to access platforms

Permit third-party reporting

Make it possible to report to platforms for offline behaviour of users

Design reporting mechanisms that don't involve resharing or further distributions of harmful content

In chat bots, provide safety advice before and during the conversation

Provide adequate support and trauma counselling for staff. For e.g, Chayn provides staff with free access to an online therapy service through Spill, as well as two 1:1 therapy sessions with a therapist per year, and a monthly collective care session

Provide adequate time to rest. For e.g, Chayn offers 4 paid rest days a year on top of usual sick and holiday leave allowances.

Introduce fun and relaxation to help the team transition into meetings. At Chayn, every team call begins with a grounding exercise or fun question which helps regulate our nervous systems, as well as create connections.

Be careful about the safety of anyone who directly interacts with survivors such as the research lead. Have a colleague attend interviews with them. They can debrief afterwards to discuss insights and check in with each other emotionally

research lead offers to do a grounding exercise together. If the participant is struggling to stay on topic or oversharing, gently bring the conversation back to the original plan otherwise they may feel unsafe later Plan for multiple check-ins throughout with the participant, allowing for pushback, reflection, pause, breaks, switching topics, or stopping completely Plan for the warm and comforting tone you'll create during the process Follow up with participants who shared any distress during the interview to check how they're doing. Offer to share relevant supportive resources Don't conduct more interviews than the researcher can handle in a given time. For example, our research lead feels that after two-three interviews in a day, she isn't confident that she's taking	Don't auto-save information on the user's end as they might be using a shared device Allow use of alternative names, which can help stop stalkers and abusers from finding and tracking survivors Let people view last known logins, so survivors can spot if an abuser or stalker has managed to get control of their devices or accounts Create user controls on how images can be downloaded and shared Through digital fingerprinting, assist with removing offending materials from all platforms and flagging accounts that shared the offending materials		

care of participants, colleagues, and herself			

Agency

Abuse, inequalities, and oppression strip people of agency by removing power and control of the narrative from the survivor. By honouring the survivor's wishes and how their story is told and used, we can create an affirming experience. This requires seeking informed consent from survivors at every step and providing information, community, and material support.

We must not use the tactics of oppression and abuse. Informed and meaningful consent must be at the heart of our work. Lengthy, legal speak forms set out to get consent for data protection are in reality setting up users to fail because most don't want to read through them. Sometimes, for fear of retraumatisation, a question is raised about whether it is safe to expose survivors to co-design processes. These attitudes are paternalistic and patronising, and we must always centre the user's agency alongside safety. Creating environments that value agency can build trust, both internally and externally in an organisation.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Don't assume that a survivor would not want to take an active role in design or feedback, just ask them Remain open to interviewing through different formats. For example, when a survivor asked if they could give an interview	Offer users different safety levels of getting the same content rather than making that choice for them. For e.g in Bloom, users could receive content through WhatsApp and Telegram. 80% chose WhatsApp though Telegram is considered more secure. It may be because it's a platform they are	Allow people to access essential information without creating an account Actively ask survivors for their consent in sharing information with other agencies and individuals within the organisation,	Design with, not for. At Chayn, survivors who do not fear retraumatisation volunteer for us. They have an option to tap out, if anything changes Remain flexible. Outside of team meetings, partner or service user commitments, team members at

through chat instead of Zoom, our research lead went ahead with this. After typing for several minutes, the participant felt comfortable enough to switch to video call

Let participants choose which questions they answer, whether they have their camera on/off, whether a note taker joins the call, and whether the session is recorded (using notes, audio and/or video) or not

In emails with participants, give them the option to query, push back, or request changes to planned topics

Offer interviewees a wide selection of interview dates and times, so they can take part when they feel most mentally able to and make allowances for these times to change at the last minute

already using and have devised ways of keeping it safe

Offer tools and content that people can customise and use at their own pace. For e.g, our [Bloom] courses come in self-guided as well as structured and sequential options. Course videos have transcripts, bonus content and activities, providing different ways of interacting with the content at any pace the survivor wants

Keep as many resources as possible open. For e.g, in [Soul Medicine], users can view the course content without creating an account. Or they can sign up for disguised emails with fake subject lines

Give the survivor the option to decide what information is kept public and private, such as full names and location

and be clear how and why their information is being shared

Provide comprehensive reporting mechanisms that let survivors report even if the perpetrator deactivates/disconnects their account

Don't force users down one pathway for their situation, for e.g, only calling the police. Give a range of resources so users can choose what they would like at that moment

Have consideration for language barriers or grammatical differences in disclosures

Create flexible mechanisms that enable people to describe their own experience, provide consent at all stages, and share the remedial measures they wish for, rather than forcing incident reports into rigid, predetermined categories

Chayn can move their hours to suit their own productivity, rest, and social needs. We let our manager know we need time out, and we don't give an explanation unless we want to. We also work a 4-day week with a 5-day salary, which helps us stay flexible to respond as things come up.

Beyond the initial period of training the staff, don't micromanage them. Trust that your team members can get the job done that you hired them for and make space for them to come to you for support when they struggle

Clearly explain what it's like to work at your company so people can make informed decisions about whether they want to work with you. For e.g, at Chayn we've made [this document] that we share with people applying for our jobs

Equity

Systems are set up to work for dominant groups and do not do justice to the differing needs of people. All of our interventions need to be designed with inclusion and accessibility in mind. Survivors are not a homogenous group and they will not all benefit from the same types of support. We must consider how positionality, identity, vulnerabilities, experiences, knowledge, and skills shape trauma and recovery. We must create solutions that leave no one behind.

Inclusion by design should be the norm, ensuring products and services can be used by everyone. When designing products that are to be used by diverse groups, it is vital to actively be aware of and avoid racial, gender, and class stereotyping as well as geopolitical differences.

Accessibility considerations enable people with disabilities to engage, preventing exclusion and producing a superior, more usable design for all. This promotes a sense of belonging and ensures there's justice in the built environment (whether online or offline).

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Share your intentions for asking specific questions in surveys. For example, we say, "As we design our services, it's important for us to hear from survivors with a range of experiences so that we understand how people's needs differ. Please describe what kind of sexual assault and/or abuse you experienced," instead of just asking people to share their experience with no context as to why.	Don't assume the default language based on the location of the user. For example, if only French content is visible for users using your service in France, migrants or refugees who cannot understand the language, are not fluent in French, or desire to use a different language that feels like home to them, will be left out of a rich experience.\n\nProvide resources and information in multiple formats - for example,	Ensure strong referral pathways to specialist services for survivors from marginalised communities\n\nRoll out new safety features simultaneously in all low and high-income countries\n\nIntroduce voice-activated reporting mechanisms to account for different literacy levels and the diverse technology needs of different communities	Provide free and easily accessible services when possible. Our services, being free and online, are central to our mission of being equitable\n\nBe mindful that if your work is available online, anyone from around the world may be using it. For e.g, people use our services even in places where our work isn't localised. Our content in different languages can be used by anyone, anywhere connected to the

Provide a list of answers for survivors to choose from, to make it clear what you're asking for details on. For e.g, for Chayn this can be 'non-consensual touching', 'stalking', 'gaslighting', or 'receiving indecent pictures.'

Recognise that people's cultural identity cannot be reduced to a drop-down list. For example, in surveys, instead of asking for race or ethnicity, we ask 'What country or culture feels like home to you?' with an open field into which people type their preferred descriptor

Let people talk about challenges that go beyond your subject area

Do UX research in multiple languages, for example, we've done it in English, Arabic, and Urdu

Write and improve research questions with the help of an in-group, in our case survivors

captioned videos, as well as written resources, the way we do in [Bloom](#)

Use gender-neutral language without being gender-ignorant

Create gender-diverse images

Design products that cater to a range of accessibility requirements such as speech, hearing and visual impairments

Use examples from across the world. For e.g, we do this irrespective of who is in the room, to highlight the unique ways in which patriarchy impacts people and also how survivors and activists fight back

Create content in multiple languages. For e.g, we have content in many languages including German, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic and more. But our biggest sources of traffic are from the UK and the US, showing that in countries where English is the dominant language, people do

Make policies and reporting mechanisms available in different languages and dialects

Offer reporting processes with accessibility considerations embedded, including an option for low-bandwidth or offline reporting

internet who can read those languages

Provide staff training and learning opportunities on anti-oppression and decolonisation

If hiring a remote and global team, don't pay people differently based on geography. This increases global pay disparity, where people with similar skill levels are competing in a global digital market but are being paid less, especially in the Majority World. We pay our staff a globally competitive rate decided based on US and UK pay scales because this is where our funders are based.

Don't dance around words like sexual assault, as this can add to taboo and stigma

Avoid words like 'more' and 'less serious' as descriptors of an experience of abuse

Gather insights from lots of different people for identification of clear patterns across a big group. This creates confidence in your research, and you can then take steps that serve a wider group

Compensate people for participating in research, while keeping in mind that there may be legal restrictions for some to accept money so provide alternatives

Decolonise assumptions and feedback | want to access content in their mother tongues | | |

Privacy

Privacy is a fundamental right. Due to the stigma, victim blaming and shame associated with gender-based violence, the need for privacy is greater. A survivor's personal information, including their trauma story – such as data, images, videos, or statements – must be kept secure and not disclosed, unless the survivor decides to do so. At the same time, we should remove unnecessary obstacles for users getting to the information and help they require.

In an economy where data is considered the currency of interactions, when we design technology, we must consider the harm we may introduce from intrusive data collection, storing, and selling. This involves understanding that some vulnerable groups will not be able to foresee the risks that may arise out of their shared data.

Data justice acknowledges that data can often be used as a form of oppression by rendering certain communities invisible or misrepresenting them, and thus we need to actively think about how people are counted, represented, and treated through the lens of data science.

At Chayn, this has meant deleting chat transcripts from Bloom, our remote trauma support service after a certain time period. Survivors share intimate details about their trauma with us, and we want to ensure nothing we do betrays that trust or their safety. We don't sell this information to any third party. Survivors are reminded of the confidentiality of our service multiple times throughout the user journey. Most of our resources do not require an email address either.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Strictly limit access to research participant recruitment information within the team

Anonymise all research | Make your content available without the need for signing up. Most of Chayn resources, such as the Manipulation is Abuse and The Good Friend guide, are open access - no | Only collect information that is absolutely necessary and create clear options for more data storage

Plainly articulate policies in an easily understandable format. If they are long, there should be a summary | Make sure you are fulfilling legal responsibilities such as safeguarding

Protect the privacy of staff, especially anyone having direct interactions with survivors |

notes and recordings Store research data securely and confidentially, before deleting it after 12 months or before	sign-up required, allowing for complete anonymity If you want to collect some user data, consider having optional sign-ups. In our [YSM](#) and [Soul Medicine](#)services, sign-up gives users access to new features but the content remains the same If there are sign-ups involved, such as we have in [Bloom](#), encourage users to be creative with their names, which can help with privacy Clearly indicate what data is publicly accessible and what isn't Automatically disable cookies and tracking when survivors report abuse on platforms Avoid misleading language and design that can lead to usage and selling of their data in ways people have not agreed to (often for profit)	available so users understand what they are agreeing to, For e.g, explain GDPR upfront in simple and summarised narrative Seek explicit consent for selling user data where relevant, especially when it is related to marginalised groups Maintain strict confidentiality for incident reporting processes Withhold survivors' details from the perpetrator during taking of any punitive actions Delete chat transcripts, for e.g, we delete 1-1 chat transcripts from [Bloom](#) within six months unless there is reason to keep it (such as if the user is still interacting)	Secure all databases, use end-to-end encrypted technology, and explore the use of privacy-enhancing technologies (PET) such as data masking Provide survivors with a digital file of evidence that can support civil and criminal cases, if they want to pursue those routes Hold entities liable for misuse of sensitive data

Accountability

We must build accountability into the systems that enable and facilitate harm and the interventions addressing it. This includes being open and transparent about what is being done, how, and why: creating and nourishing constructive feedback loops that trigger change. It also means openly communicating about what is working and what isn't. To build trust, this communication should be clear and consistent.

Products often demand that survivors should trust their intentions but when opaque reporting mechanisms, algorithms and lack of feedback loops become a frequent experience, survivors learn that they should not place their trust in these systems. Instead, technology companies must deliver timely responses and articulate rationales for decisions which impact the safety and lives of survivors. This is also true for decisions that could impact staff, volunteers and partners.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Acknowledge internally and externally the identities, positionality, biases, and power you bring into the research, and think about how that might influence the stories you notice

Introduce research participants to all the team members that they will come into contact with and clarify the role each one will be playing

Have a participant information sheet which outlines exactly what you'd like to do, why, and what the | Be consistent and predictable in design - by providing structure and routine, you signal to users that not only have you thought about the service, but you are a stable source of support for them

When a service is not being used in the way it was intended to, step back and reevaluate. For e.g, Little Window was our smart search bot that directed survivors to the information they were looking for as quickly as possible. It was designed in the persona of a cat to create the sense that this | Communicate to survivors which department deals with incident reporting and whether there is a dedicated and specialist resource to handle this

Share openly when something is not working or is a trial feature

Explain reasons for the limitations of a service upfront, for e.g, in the error experience

Acknowledge gaps in knowledge or foresight, which can contribute to harmful features | Create and nourish constructive feedback loops with participants and the wider community. This is central to community-centred design, participatory design and co-design that catalyses change. At Chayn, we make an effort to speak regularly with survivors, but we also do this work internally in how volunteers are involved in decision-making. We regularly partner with other stakeholders, who can support us to keep improving and who we can help improve. |

participants can expect (see an example here), as well as how much compensation will be offered, how long it will take to arrive, and how you plan to take care of the participant.

After sessions, assure survivors how much you learned from them and how their generosity will support reaching the organisation's goals as well as other people in a similar position.

Learn about the context of participants, such as their identities and cultures, to better understand their needs for the interview and what they communicate during it. Do this by chatting with friends and contacts with lived experience, putting out a quick online call for experts, checking articles on Google Scholar, and reading posts on Reddit

If you don't know how to pronounce a participant's name, do a 30-second Google search to find out how or ask them

wasn't a crisis service. However, when our data revealed that it was being used by people seeking direct emergency support, we retired the bot until we can correctly design one that manages that expectation more expertly.

Be clear about the hours of your service or the boundaries of your support. In our 1:1 chat, we make it clear when we're offline, and what time we will be back online. We also say who is running the chat service that day, and survivors can check who they'll be chatting with through the team bios.

Be honest and consistent about what you can offer, when, where and why. For e.g. when we couldn't offer a Bloom course because our team was stretched, we shared what had happened with survivors, giving them alternative options for accessing course material.

Provide clear ways to help survivors identify in-platform reporting mechanisms such as

Commit to long-term change, rather than reacting to scandals and infrequent public outrage

Create effective and responsive grievance redressal mechanisms on platforms for reporting tech abuse

Remove the offending user's accounts from other platforms owned by the parent company

Share your learnings, processes and resources in the open. Chayn is committed to this. For e.g, we've run multiple workshops to train other organisations to adapt, remix, and use Bloom. We also invite others to comment on and use our work, such as in our 2022–2025 strategy development, and have run workshops on how to build a trauma-informed organisation and tech product.

Create internal accountability measures and a culture where people are comfortable speaking up. For e.g in our regular meetings, quarterly retreats and monthly Town Hall, employees can raise a topic for discussion. We conduct 360 feedback reviews. Anyone can ask a question or politely disagree with another team member without any repercussions. And any volunteer or staff member can attend a budget or board meeting at Chayn.

When something goes wrong, such as in the world around us or directly related to the organisation,

Recap and summarise what participants have shared at different points during the interview to make sure you are gathering accurate insights Ask participants if you're understanding what they're communicating correctly especially if English is not their first language Share synthesis, insights and stories with participants afterwards to get their input. If someone does not recognise themselves in their story, fix this rather than design based on assumptions. Frame this 'checking the insights' request as optional rather than part of the research, unless the incentive covers this Share insights with the rest of the team especially if they're from the same community as the participants Action user research and feedback in design and communicate clearly with the rest of the team	quick access bars for reporting, supported by clear wording about what follows Include space for users to suggest new content, features, and give feedback on their experience		recognise its impact on your team. For e.g, Chayn encourages debriefs, and staff can take a day off through our 4 paid rest days a year

Plurality

There is no single-issue human. To do justice to the complexity of human experiences, we need to suspend assumptions about what a user might want or need and account for selection and confirmation bias. Harms manifest in different and disproportionate ways for people living at the intersection of multiple oppressions. And these lived realities must be recognised. We should never assume a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

We need to design for cross-cutting needs, power, and experiences that can change how an individual experiences the digital world and seeks remediation from it. A decolonising design practice will understand the many ways harmful stereotypes can turn into assumptions for users.

There is a tendency to treat women and non-binary people experiencing abuse as a single population. This misses a whole spectrum of survivor experiences based on their context, access to support, and the type of abuse they are facing. Nuance in project and product design is missing. Through our collaborative, survivor-led approach, we've been able to counter over-simplification.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Don't imagine or assume all experiences. For e.g. in screening surveys, enable people to provide their own answers about their experiences such as through an 'other' or an open-field option In surveys, ask questions about any identities, such as	Offer ways for people to customise their journey on your product or platform For e.g in YSM, our digital companion for survivors of sexual assault, a user can get information to take care of their body as well as understand the process for reporting the assault. They can create a curated	Try not to use language based on location Recognise that people in digital spaces might experience multiple forms of discrimination/hate (for example, gender and race discrimination). So in complaint processes, survivors should have	Keep plurality in mind when recruiting the team. At Chayn, our hybrid volunteer-staff model allows us to easily and quickly bring groups of survivors and allies together who are deeply experienced in GBV globally and co-create services

neurodivergence or sexuality, that can help you design better services. Make sure to explain why you are asking this information and make it optional to respond

Select interview participants with multiple marginalised or oppressed identities to inform your product design work

Underserved and marginalised groups might not be in obvious places like a recruiter's database. They may respond less keenly to calls for research since their experiences and needs have been ignored in the past. Make additional efforts to find and recruit them

Hearing another person's reactions and musings can lead the final insights to reflect a rounded 'take' on the data, rather than one person's view, which could be biased. Interviews can be attended by two people who can debrief afterwards. The research lead can also take learnings to a

journey for themselves

Allow people to choose multiple languages and locations that they want to access resources for

Allow users to fully communicate experiences within a service, such as in a chatbot. Instead of only allowing answers through a restricted set of responses, also have options people can enter free text

When referring people further, link them to support for multiple areas that reflect an intersectional understanding of underserved and marginalised audiences, for e.g, health, housing and legal issues.

Whenever possible and feasible, offer customised support. For e.g, our 1:1 chat team for Bloom write personalised responses to every message that comes in to our chat service, taking time to familiarise themselves with the history of a user if they haven't talked to them in the past.,

the option to identify multiple offences, including offline ones

If anonymising data to protect personal information, don't anglicise (or equivalent majority ethnic/religious group) usernames and take away from the diversity of your users

Provide adaptable and personalised well-being support for staff. For e.g, at Chayn you can talk about well-being with HR, in a collective care session with a therapist, in a 1:1 session with a therapist, as well as with your line manager

Be flexible to staff needs for e.g. some people may need flexible working hours while others need more structured time boundaries to really 'switch off' after work. Others need help from managers to prioritise their tasks

Train staff to understand cultural context and the impact of intersecting vulnerabilities, such as caste, race, religion, sexual orientation, and disabilities, on survivors.

wider group in the synthesis stage who can help flag assumptions Notice how different identities, such as being trans or cis impact an experience of GBV. For e.g, our research lead noted that safety concerns for a non-cis person limited their options for dating in public and made them more likely to have a first date at home, where an assault then took place. This added further trauma and complexity to their healing experience			

Power sharing

Too often, the power to make decisions is concentrated in the hands of a few. Instead, power must be distributed more widely among communities and individuals who are impacted the most by TGBV. Interventions should be co-designed and co-created with survivors.

Survivors are often consulted after preventative and restorative measures have already been designed. We must ensure that the power to decide what prevention and restoration look like lies with the survivors, and that their input is valued through a form of compensation.

Chayn works across borders, and we firmly believe in giving space for new perspectives to thrive within the organisation. This creates a fertile environment for creativity, disclosure, collaboration, and cross-cultural learning.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
In consent forms, use simple language, make them easy to sign, centre the participant and their choices, and clearly explain your intentions and needs. For e.g, ours are easy Google forms Give adequate time to the participant to read and respond to consent forms. For e.g, we send them at least a week before Encourage participants to raise questions and concerns about consent forms, and be willing and ready to discuss these Openly acknowledge the power difference between the researcher and the participant Recognise that this may be the first time a survivor is being offered the space to share their experience. Emphasise that the researcher is there to learn from them	Give survivors the opportunity to make decisions when interacting with your resources. For e.g in Soul Medicine, survivors choose the timing and the subject line of the disguised emails that arrive in their inbox For reporting errors, offer users free text options so they can fully explain what went wrong Give survivors the power to make design decisions. For e.g volunteers at Chayn give their insights on the designs of all our services. In weekly work sessions, they also co-create our content.	Consult and co-create with relevant communities who have lived experience through different stages of research, design, and implementation Translate and localise content and policies Cite and share the work of all feminists and scholars who have influenced or shaped your decisions, especially from the Global South Give content moderators opportunities to feed into global policies	Create community-owned models and practices for governance and evaluation. For e.g, in Chayn's governance model, survivors volunteer in three-month-long cycles and tap in and out of working with us based on their preferences Give survivors decision-making power through compensated board or committee positions. For e.g, our community has access to board and budget meetings, can apply for our jobs, and give strategic input for the direction of our projects and organisation. Long-term, committed volunteers are invited to consult with our trustees. Make some or all of your resources open access, which will help others in your ecosystem. For e.g, all of Chayn's resources are openly licensed, so they can be used and modified by anyone for supporting survivors. We are also

Assure the participant they can stop the interview or change topics at any time. Our research lead makes it clear that they will not be letting anybody down if they do this Ask survivors what words or phrases they like or dislike, when referring to them or their experience. Ask again at the start of the interview, giving them the power to decide some of the language. Use this insight to guide your questions and language			generous in sharing our learnings from our projects through our [blog](#) Gather community feedback. For e.g, all our content for our upcoming [image-based abuse course](#) was open for public review for two weeks, and any organisations and experts could share their insights. For global firms, use local teams and networks to gather ideas for ways to improve services

Hope

Abuse can leave us feeling hopeless. Users do not need to be reminded of their own struggles, experiences, or difficulties with harsh words and sad pictures – many of which are triggering of abusive experiences and rooted in sensationalism rather than truth.

Interventions should be designed to feel like an oasis for users, by being empathetic, warm, and soothing. It should be motivating for people to both ask for and embrace the help on offer. Products and services should validate their experience by offering collaborative solutions and hope for the future.

In an effort to build rapport with users, some organisations mistakenly use traumatising pictures and words that can be dismissive and also transport survivors to times when they felt unsafe. For example, pictures of a man punching down on a cowering woman or a woman crying or covered with bruises are often used. These should be avoided.

By taking a grow-and-learn approach to building culturally diverse resources with survivors, Chayn has understood the power of words, design, and community to inspire hope and healing. We opt for a design and tone that builds trust for a long, mutually enriching and comforting relationship. Visual design that uplifts the mood of survivors and soothes them should be used because asking for help is difficult; and even if someone is not asking for help, online spaces that feel warm when someone is feeling unsafe in their physical world can be restorative.

Research	Design	Policy	Organisation
Show what you're building. Ask survivors for their preferences and feedback about your services. This helps them feel hopeful that sharing their story has been worth it, and that our services will continue to help them to heal Many survivors want to help others, which is a hopeful aspect of doing UX research with them Make space for survivors to just be as they are, acknowledge their suffering and don't make any big promises. For e.g. instead of saying "You'll be okay" which can sound dismissive, our research lead says, "We are with you, and we get it."	Use simple, warm, and visually appealing UX with a soothing colour palette that uplifts the mood of survivors and feels restorative. Design a space where survivors will feel like they want to spend time. For e.g, we use illustrations of plants in all our [Bloom](#) materials to signal growth Use warm, inviting copy with language and tone that is validating, affirming, empathetic, understanding, and non-judgmental. This can be seen from the way Chayn talks to survivors on all of our websites Nudge survivors towards self-compassion and seeking support with practical, actionable	Ensure visual assets are not retraumatising (e.g. depicting violence) Prioritise ethical considerations in corporate decision-making over shareholder priorities Provide realistic information about incident reporting processes. (For e.g, "We respond to requests in 2 to 48 hours, with 70% of reports getting an answer within 10 hours") Thank survivors for their decision to report through repeated messaging by the team handling their reports Take proactive and communicative	Use words that generate hope. For e.g, we use the word survivor rather than victim because survivor is more hopeful Create periods of rest, reflection and recharging. Our team works half their workload during the end-of-year 'winter wind down.' We use this time to learn new skills, read resources, and focus on our own and the organisation's development Create gratitude rituals. For e.g, at the end of the year, we ask our community to give anonymous compliments to each other in a Google document Share and celebrate the work of

| | and easy-to-understand resources. For e.g. Chayn has resources on setting boundaries, creating your own case without a lawyer, and managing your finances

Create empowering, diverse, and gender-fluid graphics

For any content with real people, use familiar, friendly faces that participants get to know and trust as they spend with your resources

Use a community newsletter to create a sense of camaraderie | steps to stop abuse. For e.g. in tech abuse, companies can flag and/or blur offensive content and create digital fingerprints to block the uploading of flagged content | others, such as activists, civil society groups, and innovators working to tackle challenges, instead of constantly competing

Acknowledge team effort and celebrate achievements regularly, both online and in-person |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

Hopes for the future

Shifting economic and social realities, as well as the rapidly developing pace of technology-facilitated harm, means that there is always an opportunity to take a principles-based approach to reduce that harm. Chayn's approach shows that these principles aren't just useful for designers and researchers, but for community builders, policymakers, and civil society too.

At Chayn, we've shown that it is possible to design technology and run an organisation in a way which facilitates cross-border solidarity, creates spaces for healing and solace, and uses language as a tool for change. All of this despite being bootstrapped for 7 years as a volunteer-run community and since 2020, as a tiny staff-volunteer hybrid working for and with survivors around the world.

We enter our work with a mindset of abundance while recognising that what is possible for us to do at any given time may be influenced by what resources are available. What has helped is accepting that despite all of our efforts, we may still fall short of the outcome we want. And that's okay. We're learning and growing with these principles.

If we have honoured these principles despite our constraints, platforms and institutions with more substantial income, a larger talent pool, and more resources should have no difficulty in at least working towards the same and shifting their approach.

Like our last principle of 'hope', Chayn's work on trauma-informed design is a commitment and offering to the world - to be more intentional and reflective. **Of not just what we do but how we do it.**

We leave you with these questions:

1. What would apps and websites look like if we centred safety?
2. How would legal systems of justice work if we centred agency?
3. What would support services feel like to use if we centred equity?
4. How would tech-industry policies guide us if we centred privacy?
5. How would corporations be shaped if we centred accountability?
6. What would surveys or discussion guides look like if we centred plurality?
7. How would a research interview feel to participate in if we centred power-sharing?
8. What could the web achieve if we centred hope?

About Chayn

Set up in 2013, [Chayn](#) is a global non-profit that creates digital, multilingual resources to support the healing of survivors of gender-based violence. Our focus is on empowering women and other marginalised genders who have experienced domestic, sexual, or tech-facilitated abuse. Every decision we make – and every resource we create – has lived experience at its core.

We're transforming lives by redistributing power to survivors of abuse from different parts of the world who remain involved with our work as both staff and volunteers. Most of our team is made up of survivors of abuse who draw on their lived experiences to create impactful, healing resources that can help others navigate their way through the same challenges. Our resources are openly licensed, multilingual, and intersectional so that organisations around the world can use, remix, and distribute our work.

Where we go next is led by what survivors need. Chayn (pronounced "ch-en") means peace of mind in Urdu. We believe every survivor deserves solace – and we won't stop until that's accomplished.

Further reading

[Orbits: A global field guide to advance intersectional, survivor-centred, and trauma-informed interventions to tech-facilitated gender-based violence](#) (2022)
[Safer, culturally-aware chatbots for addressing gender-based violence, a report by Chayn (2021)](#)
[UX research with survivors based on Chayn's trauma-informed design principles, a blog series by Jenny Winfield (Chayn blog, 2022-2023)](#)
[Trauma-informed design: an introduction for non-profits by Joe Roberson and Hera Hussain (Catalyst, 2022)](#)
[Trauma-informed design: understanding trauma and healing by Hera Hussain (Chayn blog, 2021)](#)