

# Breaking the cycle

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The human rights space, and the community of philanthropists and institutions that support it, is as complex as the issues it seeks to tackle. In the last two decades, investment in the sector has allowed significant progress. This is despite its frequent contradictions to global governments' conflicting priorities, and the influence of the incredible wealth of international criminal organisations involved in some types of abuse.



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**T**hat said, for philanthropists wanting to tackle human rights issues, there is an often-glaring omission in their giving portfolios. People can sometimes forget a vital part of ensuring violence and violations are stopped – caring for people who have already had their rights abused. In working together to achieve the greatest impact in the fight for human rights, it is essential not to ignore people for whom human rights abuses cannot be prevented – because they have already taken place.

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Outside of the basic law and morals involved, at the core of most preventative human rights responses is the understanding that people deserve to live without fear, repression, trauma, violence and neglect. Even within the many complex approaches using the law, diplomacy and justice, the human beings at risk are the main driving factor behind the work. With this in mind, it is vital to treat survivors of human rights violations with the same consideration as those who are at risk of them.

There are several ways donors can holistically approach funding in the human rights space. These options are intended as a part of a balanced giving portfolio that continues to address the essential

prevention work in the sector, while also ensuring survivors do not drop into an abyss of unprepared, non-specialist care facilities and hostile border agencies.

## Psychological support for survivors

Once someone has had their human rights violated, they often become a statistic to justify the need for prevention work. Prevention work often prioritises those most at risk of harm and intervenes more swiftly for those who will feel trauma more acutely, for example children, or those with mental health issues. By this logic, survivors of human rights abuses should be close to the top of the list of people needing to be protected: if someone survives abuse, even if they escape the danger, their trauma is often continued inside their mind until they receive psychological help. Human rights abuses are one of the strongest indicators of future vulnerability: for example, survivors of trafficking are more likely to be re-trafficked, survivors of physical and emotional trauma often self-harm or attempt suicide, and state or community violence creates displaced, destitute and vulnerable people with no power to shield themselves from exploitation.

To meet the philanthropic aim of stopping human rights abuses, one must support interventions before, during and after they occur, and care holistically (that is, physically, socially, psychologically and legally) for the needs of survivors, even if they do not visibly appear endangered. These expert interventions need to be, above all, victim-centred (led by, and prioritising the needs of victims).

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Organisations like the [Helen Bamber Foundation](#), are rare in providing unconditional, holistic support to those who need it most, and connecting vulnerable survivors with expert psychotherapists, psychologists, lawyers, psychiatrists and physiotherapists to help them overcome the physical and psychological scars caused by their experiences.

### Stopping the cycle of cruelty

Family structures and similar support systems are central to our ability to thrive, from childhood to old age. Through human rights violations, the families of victims are profoundly impacted now, and in the future. At the most basic level, having loved ones disappear or be killed is traumatic enough to require support, but the Helen Bamber Foundation and organisations like them see cases with many more complicated barriers to healthy family life – same-sex couples being tortured in front of one another as punishment for their relationship, children being trafficked and returned as adults unable to form

familial bonds, survivors of rape needing to raise a baby born out of their suffering, or parents so traumatised they cannot develop the parenting skills to prevent vulnerability in their own children.

These are just a few basic examples where the transgenerational impact of human rights violations can be seen but there are many more insidious effects that require expert interventions to spot and prevent. In every case, the family and children of the survivor are just as at-risk, and just as worthy of protection, as the survivors themselves.

### Supporting traumatised communities

The array of experiences covered by the term ‘human rights violation’ is huge, and not all are violent in the physical sense, but where widespread violence is experienced within a community, recovery is not just an individual or family matter – civil unrest can often be reborn from collective trauma. Even when ignoring the complexities of rebuilding trust in the government, or reducing the need to fight for resources, a community with deep psychological wounds is more likely to descend into conflict than rebuild. However, with the right kind of support, the process of recovering from such trauma can lead to empowerment and liberation work that prevent future violations.



One organisation working closely on this issue is [Vivo International](#): an alliance of professionals experienced in ‘psychotraumatology’, creating and providing innovative psychological interventions in frontline traumatised communities, while training and supporting locals (who may also be traumatised) to provide them.

### Making abuse abnormal

The understanding of human rights, the agency to advocate for them, the freedom to communicate about them, and the power to hold abusers to account are crucial components of prevention work in the human rights sector. But in many cultures, specific social groups – typically genders, sexualities, religions or classes – are considered less worthy of rights, or more deserving of abuses, and this is the accepted, perpetuated social norm. This can range from routine lack of access to education and children being expected to work from a young age, through to the widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage, as well as enforcement of dress codes and prohibition of social mobility (as with caste systems).

What disempowers people experiencing these violations is not just the violence and oppression, but the acceptance by the whole community (and often themselves) that this is the way things are, should be and will always be. If everyone understands a custom to be normal, and the impacts of it are not visible or challenged, then it is perpetuated: mothers who have experienced FGM subject their daughters to the same trauma, fathers who have been kept from schooling shame their children away into child labour, and religious minorities in sectarian societies face unchallenged hostility and violence with no recourse to justice.

The solutions to these issues are not quick, or simple, and some organisations (like [Tostan](#), [Girls Not Brides](#), and [Girl Effect](#)), do great work on tackling social norms by empowering people to advocate against them within their own communities. But with violent traumatic practices (like FGM), there is an important intervention needed alongside the political and social campaigns: again, the survivors need expert care to overcome their trauma. They need this in order to have the understanding, strength and power to challenge their communities and break the cycle.

### Navigating the system

The refugee crisis is front of mind for everyone lately, but organisations like the Helen Bamber Foundation would tell you that the situation has been at crisis level for a long time. Legally speaking, the immigration debate narrows the scope of ‘human rights’ discussions to only include human rights violations considered worthy of international protection (refugee status), and depends on the formal recognition by host governments of those violations happening at all.

For example, in 2015 Amnesty International found that 131 out of 160 countries it investigated had tortured or otherwise ill-treated people. These facts provide a very different perspective to the popular narrative on the sources of refugees in need of protection, the fairness of the systems assessing the ‘validity’ of their claims and the pressing need for post-trauma care.

### Conclusion

Many articles, papers and studies have focussed on the legality and morality of immigration policies in the face of such a huge displacement of people. Building on that, it is important to note that in many cases, survivors of violations are often only able to accurately recall, and provide an account of, their trauma once they have been given holistic, consistent psychological support and care. The process is not linear or supported by typical immigration processes, as often people will recall their experiences in fragments, out of order, or through distressing images and panic attacks. Prevention work needs to hear, document and react to the experiences of survivors to plan interventions, and they need to be supported to remember, and explain, in order to achieve that.

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