

# Transcending Sexual Violence: Providing Support for Survivors through the Nairobi Women's Hospital Gender Violence Recovery Centre



“The support group at GVRC is most helpful because when you come with your problems - thinking that it is too heavy for you and you are the only one - then somebody else comes with another story that is so serious and so heavy. So it makes you feel like, ‘I am not the only one, I am not going through this alone. We are many’. As we share in the support group, we encourage one another and we learn more. If you want to book an appointment with any of the counselors, you can come anytime, any day. At times you come, and your heart is so heavy but once you talk to a counselor and you go back home, at least you are relieved.”

**\*Sheila**

**GVRC Project Participant**

**Nelly\* is a survivor of sexual violence who has persistently resolved to overcome stigma, rejection, fear and suicidal thoughts that threatened to immobilise her after she was raped in 2014.**

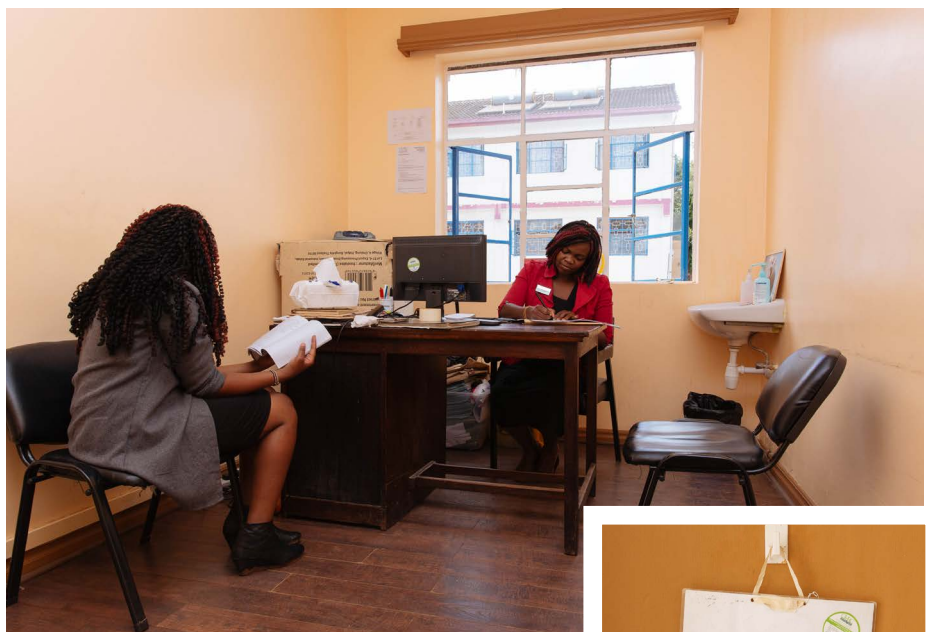
It has not been an easy journey. With the assistance of counselling staff and members of a sexual violence support group at the Gender Violence Recovery Centre (GVRC) in Nairobi, she has made tremendous strides in her recovery. Currently, Nelly is positively channeling her energy to transform the lives of survivors of sexual violence by supporting children who have undergone abuse in the school where she works.

## This is Nelly's story.

*"In August 2014, I went through something that was not good for me. I went out of town, to a school with two colleagues. Parents were expected to be there and we were representing them. After the event, one of the ladies suggested that we go to her place for tea...after sometime she left and went to the market to buy food to prepare lunch. There was a man in her house and he decided, now it's time. This is a man who had made advances on me in the past and I had rejected him because I was married. I did not think much of it. But the man raped me. I tried to resist but my right hand was weak because I had recently gone through surgery. I could not fight for myself. I hated it because the hand that had supported me all the time could not work for me. He said he did it because he loved me. It was too much for me. The lady who had gone to the market came back. I told her and it wasn't easy. I took a bath there and then had to look for other means to go back to Nairobi. I wanted to report it but I kept thinking to myself that this man was a colleague and he had seniority over me. To me it felt like trying to report the President to the Police. I was intimidated.*

*I thought of my future at work and my family. When I got home, I started to tell my husband that something had happened to me. But I saw his reaction. So I told him that something had almost happened. He asked me, "Are you sure it's not someone who you have been moving with at the office?" That shut me down. In the morning, he repeated his question making it seem like it was a plot with someone I had planned to have an affair with. I was just lying in bed, very stressed. I called my sister and told her a distant friend had raped me. She advised me to come to The Nairobi Women's Hospital GVRG.*

*I had two sessions with Harriet and then took up sessions with Roselyn. It was so traumatising for me to take ARVs. I thought of throwing them away but I thought of my children. At the time, I would always think of death. What I hated the most was that my husband was not bothered. Without my permission, he discussed my experience with his family members. The family members*



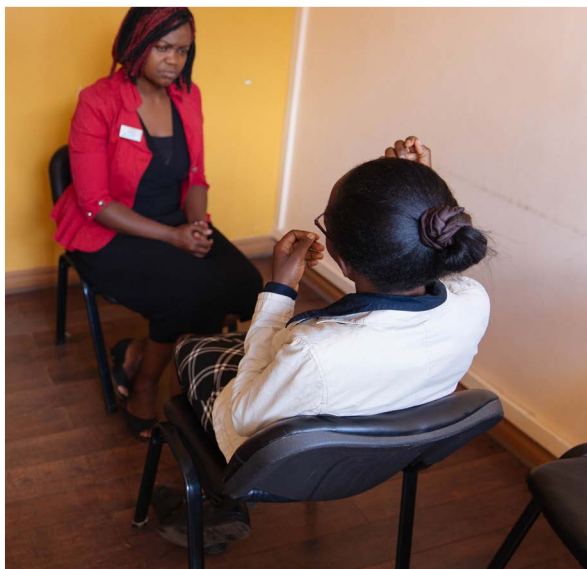


hated me.. I was confronted one time at a family meeting and I wondered, 'Why did you have to share this issue?' People would be so insensitive and they would advise me to be more careful.

And so a war started. Relatives started saying, 'You married the wrong wife.' It was at this time that I started experiencing hostility from my husband. He never supported me and never even came with me to the hospital for sessions. I would come on my own. During this time, my siblings noticed I was having a hard time and took me back to school. I enrolled at Africa Nazarene University. People started saying things like I should have been taken to the village instead of going to school and 'the kind of people I am walking with will make me mess (be unfaithful)'.

It really hurt me that my husband thought I was cheating. I nearly dropped out of university but people (such as Roselyn, a GVRG counselor and her peers in the support group) would tell me to go on. I have now finished the ten step programme (therapy support specifically designed for sexual violence survivors). It has not been easy. Through GVRG counseling, I got the courage to fight and face the world. At some point I had to face the person who raped me and I had to tell my boss. I had to say what really happened. But I did not want to lose my job and so, I had to put up with it. The issue was resolved through a social worker and my perpetrator asked for forgiveness. It was hard to be in the same working environment with him - I would feel pain in my hate. But then I thought to myself, "How long will you run away?" So I had to put on a brave face.

I would, sometimes, think that I was born with misfortunes because when I was in Class 1, I was raped by a neighbor and now this. This put a lot of fear in me. For some time, I would lock myself in my room. All I wanted was to be alone, with no noise and away from the children. My husband even started having affairs and moving out (of the marriage) with girls. He even reached a point of wanting to kill me and even decided to sell the family land. I took action and put out a caveat which meant he could not sell the land. In December 2016, he forced himself on me. That was it for me. I said, "No



more!" I just had to run away because of this and the threats to kill me were too much. I now live with my children. I have this outlook on men as beasts. I need that inner healing. I have turned to God and asked him to heal me so that I can reach out to others who have similar experiences. I feel I have nowhere else to run to but God.

I came for twelve sessions instead of ten, and although Roselyn has moved on to another branch, because we bonded, she is available on the phone throughout. I have managed to move on and through counseling, I have been able to survive. With the (support) group, I have been able to move forward. I have also become very strong. I had lost so much weight...I thought that people saw a tag on my face that I had been raped. But I had to pick up the pieces. I am almost through with my studies and I am happy that I achieved something through this trying moment. It has not been in vain. I think I can help others in the future. I am not the same shy one. At first, I was even reluctant to go to support group but going made me reflect on how people suffer in silence. I count it all joy that I don't need to live with that anymore. My desire is to leave the workplace and I want to see that man (the one who raped me) see me rising. I do not want people to take advantage of me. I want to be a woman who has her own dignity in her own special way.

They thought they had taken me down. But not anymore. I am a proud mother of four and I still have to live for them (the children.) In the school where I teach, there are cases where children have been violated. I talk to them and try to help them by referring them to counselors from Nazarene (my university). Although I get traumatised, helping also helps me find inner peace."

**-\*Nelly is a Nairobi-based survivor of sexual violence.**

**\*Not her real name.**

