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Pre-Interaction Communication as Ethical Orientation in NGO Support for Survivors of Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence continues to dominate reported cases involving women and children in Indonesia, placing sustained ethical demands on organisations that support survivors. While trauma-informed communication is often examined within direct interaction, limited attention has been given to the preparatory communicative work undertaken before engagement begins. This study explores how NGO practitioners conceptualise and enact pre-interaction communication when preparing to engage with survivors of sexual violence. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 NGO practitioners handling sexual violence cases. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, focusing on practitioners' accounts of communicative preparation and ethical positioning prior to first encounters. The findings indicate that pre-interaction communication functions as an ethical and relational orientation rather than a peripheral stage of practice. Four interconnected dimensions were identified: communicative restraint and ethical waiting; emotional reflexive preparation; spatial and relational preparation; and informational and procedural ethical orientation. Through regulating the pace of interaction, arranging the physical and relational environment, and clarifying rights and available support while preserving survivors' decision-making authority, practitioners seek to establish conditions for trust before substantive dialogue unfolds. By foregrounding the temporal dimension of communication, this study conceptualises pre-interaction preparation as ethical labour within trauma-informed NGO practice, highlighting its contribution to understanding how ethical and survivor-centred communication begins before direct engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence continues to dominate reported cases involving women and children in Indonesia, reinforcing concerns about the persistence and scale of this issue over time (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, 2025). Furthermore, data from the Catatan Tahunan (CATAHU) compiled by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) shows that the number of reported violence cases remains high across multiple years, indicating continuing prevalence

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and increased reporting trends. In 2023, CATAHU recorded 289,111 reported cases of violence against women, with sexual violence among the most frequently documented forms (Komnas Perempuan, 2024). Moreover, the subsequent CATAHU 2024 data showed a marked increase, with 445,502 cases of violence reported, reflecting an almost 10% rise compared to the previous year (Komnas Perempuan, 2025). These long-term records complement other national statistics, including police data for 2025 that documented more than 36,000 cases of gender-based violence involving sexual crimes against women, children, and other vulnerable groups (ANTARA News, 2025). Taken together, these figures demonstrate not only the persistence of sexual violence reports across consecutive years but also the ongoing conditions under which ethical judgement and communicative practice must be continuously negotiated in support work.

Communication plays a central role in shaping how support is offered to survivors of sexual violence and how care, recognition, and safety are experienced within non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in counselling, advocacy, and crisis response. Research on therapeutic communication in trauma recovery highlights that communication functions as a relational practice through which survivors begin to rebuild psychological safety and regain agency following experiences of sexual violence (Orwela, 2022). Rather than prioritising procedural efficiency, trauma-informed communication foregrounds emotional presence, responsiveness, and sensitivity to survivors' vulnerability as essential components of ethical engagement. From a broader communication perspective, these principles position communication not merely as a channel for delivering support, but as a constitutive process that shapes how care is experienced and negotiated within interaction. In this regard, trauma-informed responses should prioritise safety, trust, empowerment, and survivor autonomy as core principles of care (Peeren et al., 2025). Building on this, therapeutic communication contributes to trauma recovery by fostering trust, reducing psychological distress, and supporting survivors' meaning-making processes over time (Kurniyawan et al., 2024). From this perspective, communication cannot be reduced to the exchange of information; rather, it must be understood as an ethical and relational process.

Trauma-informed practice recognises that communication begins well before direct interaction with survivors. The preparatory work undertaken by practitioners, such as cultivating emotional readiness, engaging in reflexive awareness, and deliberately orienting counselling attitudes, shapes how they enter encounters marked by fear, uncertainty, and heightened vulnerability, influencing how they position themselves ethically within supportive relationships (Yazıcıoğlu & Sarıbey, 2025). A study on emotional labour in qualitative and professional contexts demonstrates that such preparatory practices influence relational dynamics and ethical engagement, particularly in roles centred on care and support (Fisher & Monahan, 2023). These insights imply that communication is already underway before any verbal exchange.

Moreover, for survivors of sexual violence, the ways in which NGO practitioners prepare themselves prior to an encounter carry significant ethical and relational implications. Decisions related to emotional readiness, timing, and communicative stance influence how survivors are approached and how their experiences are received. Research on therapeutic communication in support settings indicates that practitioners' preparatory orientations, particularly attentiveness, empathy, and reflexive awareness, play a crucial role in fostering trust and reducing the risk of retraumatisation during interaction (Mufaridho et al., 2025). Study on emotional labour in qualitative and professional contexts demonstrates that such preparatory practices influence relational dynamics and ethical engagement, particularly in roles centred on care and support (Fisher & Monahan, 2023). Pre-interaction preparation, therefore, constitutes a form of communicative labour that shapes the quality of engagement rather than merely serving as contextual background.

This article approaches communication as a process that unfolds across time and examines pre-interaction preparation as a meaningful dimension of communicative practice. Drawing on qualitative data from informants who are NGO practitioners supporting survivors of sexual violence, the study explores how practitioners conceptualise and enact communication in the period leading up to their first encounter with survivors. The analysis is guided by the following research question: How do NGO practitioners conceptualise and enact pre-interaction communication when preparing to engage with survivors of sexual

violence? Through this focus, the article aims to contribute to communication scholarship by foregrounding pre-interaction preparation as an integral component of trauma-informed communicative practice within NGO settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws on communication scholarship that engages with trauma-informed practice in professional support settings (Dinoso & Baudoin, 2023; Grossman et al., 2021). Rather than treating interaction as a collection of communicative techniques, work in this area understands communication as a process shaped by ethical judgement, emotional labour, and reflexive awareness (Fisher & Monahan, 2023; Place et al., 2023). From this standpoint, attention is directed not only to what practitioners say or do, but also to how they orient themselves communicatively in relation to survivors. This makes such perspectives especially relevant for understanding pre-interaction communication, understood in this study as an ethical orientation through which NGO practitioners prepare themselves before engaging with survivors of sexual violence.

Viewing communication in this manner shifts ethical considerations to the centre of professional encounters. Communication is approached not as a neutral or purely procedural activity, but as a relational practice in which vulnerability, power, and responsibility are continually negotiated as part of the support process. In contexts involving sexual violence, practitioners' communicative orientations are closely linked to how they anticipate interaction, manage emotional demands, and position themselves in relation to survivors' experiences, even before direct engagement takes place.

This orientation is especially relevant within trauma-informed practice, where communication is inseparable from concerns about safety, trust, and the prevention of harm. Viewing trauma-informed work through a communication lens allows closer attention to how ethical awareness and relational sensitivity are enacted in professional support settings. The following sections, therefore, review key discussions on communication and trauma-informed practice, ethical orientation, reflexivity, emotional labour, and listening, providing a conceptual foundation for understanding pre-interaction preparation as a meaningful dimension of communicative practice.

2.1 Communication and Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed communication foregrounds the relationship between communication, emotional safety, power, and vulnerability in professional support settings. Communicative choices, including tone, timing, silence, and responsiveness, may influence how safety and trust are experienced in supportive interactions. Miller and Rollnick (2023) emphasise the importance of responsiveness to individuals' needs and autonomy, while Grossman et al. (2021) highlight the importance of recognising and resisting re-traumatisation in healthcare. Although these perspectives address different aspects of professional practice, they share an emphasis on the responsibility of practitioners to consider how their actions may affect individuals who have experienced trauma. Taken together, they suggest that ethical communication involves more than the appropriate delivery of information; it also requires sensitivity to how communication is experienced within relationships characterised by vulnerability and unequal power.

However, an emphasis on responsiveness during interaction does not, by itself, explain how practitioners develop the ethical readiness required to respond sensitively. While attention to autonomy highlights the importance of respecting individuals' choices, preventing re-traumatisation focuses on the conditions under which support is provided (Grossman et al., 2021; Miller & Rollnick, 2023). These concerns are closely related, but they also raise a question about how ethical principles are translated into communicative practice before direct engagement begins. In NGO settings, where practitioners may encounter emotionally demanding situations and complex relational circumstances, ethical responsiveness requires consideration of how practitioners prepare themselves, anticipate the demands of an encounter, and position themselves in relation to survivors. This suggests that communication should be understood not only through practitioners' responses during interaction but also through the orientations that inform those responses beforehand.

The organisational and procedural dimensions of trauma-informed support provide a further perspective on this issue. Yazıcıoğlu and Sarıbey (2025) propose a volunteer-based counselling framework that incorporates certified training, trauma-informed communication, ethical guidelines, and standardised intervention protocols. Their proposed model highlights the importance of preparing counsellors and establishing organisational arrangements to support consistent and survivor-centred services. Professional responsibility and ethics are also central to professional practice, as practitioners are expected to comply with established ethical requirements and applicable legal obligations (Nabirye, 2025). However, organisational preparation and individual communicative orientation represent related but distinct dimensions of professional practice. While training and protocols establish a framework for service provision, they do not fully explain how practitioners interpret ethical responsibilities and regulate their communicative stance before meeting a survivor. This distinction is important because ethical principles must be translated into situated decisions about how, when, and under what conditions communication should begin.

These considerations are particularly significant in work with survivors of sexual violence, where disclosure may involve uncertainty, emotional distress, and concerns about whether survivors will be believed or respected. A systematic review by Peeren et al. (2025) highlights the importance of respectful communication, continuity of care, and recognition of survivors' preferences in trauma-informed healthcare. The World Health Organization (2021) similarly emphasises listening, validation, safety, and support when responding to women subjected to violence. Together, these findings underscore the importance of considering not only what information is communicated but also the timing of questions, the management of emotional responses, and the conditions necessary to protect survivors' privacy and autonomy. Communication is therefore a relational practice shaped by ethical judgement and sensitivity to survivors' circumstances, making pre-interaction preparation a useful focus for understanding how trauma-informed principles are translated into professional practice.

Building on these discussions, the present study approaches pre-interaction communication as an ethical and relational dimension of trauma-informed NGO practice. Existing literature highlights the importance of respectful communication, validation, safety, and survivor-centred care, while also documenting gaps between these principles and survivors' reported experiences in healthcare settings (Peeren et al., 2025; World Health Organization, 2021). However, these sources do not specifically establish how NGO practitioners prepare themselves before substantive dialogue with survivors begins. The present study addresses this area by exploring how practitioners prepare themselves and orient their conduct before direct engagement. In doing so, it directs attention to the temporal dimension of therapeutic communication: the preparatory period in which practitioners consider ethical responsibilities, exercise communicative restraint, and attend to relational and environmental conditions before interaction begins. This perspective offers a conceptual basis for understanding how NGO practitioners understand and enact pre-interaction communication when preparing to support survivors of sexual violence.

2.2 Ethical Orientation, Reflexivity, and Emotional Labour

Radbill and Bemis (2023) emphasise that reflective practice enables practitioners to recognise how taken-for-granted responses may shape interaction in subtle yet consequential ways, especially in work involving survivors of sexual violence. They further argue that reflexivity does not operate only at the level of abstract reflection but also comes into play during interaction itself, shaping communicative judgement as encounters unfold. Fisher and Monahan (2023) highlight the importance of reflexive awareness in guiding responses within emotionally charged encounters. Practitioners draw on such awareness when deciding whether to speak or hold back, how to respond with care, and how to remain ethically responsive in situations marked by uncertainty or emotional intensity. In this way, reflective practice supports practitioners in navigating emotionally demanding encounters while maintaining ethical sensitivity and relational presence, allowing responses that prioritise survivors' safety, dignity, and agency even under conditions of emotional strain.

Ethical communication is not limited to practitioners' outward actions but also involves internal processes of reflexive awareness and emotional regulation. Practitioners may reflect on their assumptions, monitor their emotional responses, and consider how these may influence their interactions with survivors (Fisher & Monahan, 2023). Reflexivity enables practitioners to recognise how power operates within interaction and how their own positioning may shape the encounter (Radbill & Bemis, 2023). At the same time, emotional labour supports practitioners in remaining attentive, composed, and responsive, even in emotionally demanding situations (Fisher & Monahan, 2023). These practices help maintain communication that is empathetic and attentive to survivors' safety and trust. Ethical communication, therefore, may begin prior to direct engagement through practitioners' preparatory work and continue beyond the encounter through ongoing reflection on how interaction unfolds and how future responses may be shaped with survivors' well-being in mind.

2.3 Trauma-Informed Listening as Communicative Readiness

Listening within trauma-informed practice is increasingly understood as an ethical and relational orientation rather than a passive act of hearing or a purely technical skill. Scholarship on trauma-informed care emphasises that listening involves attentiveness to emotional safety, restraint in response, and sensitivity to how power and vulnerability shape interaction, particularly in encounters with individuals who have experienced trauma (Grossman et al., 2021). This form of readiness involves remaining present, avoiding interruption or premature interpretation, and staying attentive to survivors' emotional signals as interaction unfolds. It is also connected to practitioners' internal orientation, including emotional regulation, tolerance of silence, and awareness of how their responses may shape survivors' sense of safety. From this perspective, readiness to listen is not limited to what occurs during conversation; it may also be shaped by an orientation that precedes interaction and influences how practitioners remain present, responsive, and non-intrusive when engaging survivors.

Although trauma-informed care highlights the importance of emotional safety and sensitivity to survivors' experiences, these principles do not fully explain how practitioners develop their readiness to listen before direct engagement begins. Listening is commonly discussed in relation to the quality of responses during interaction, whereas less attention is given to how practitioners prepare themselves to manage their assumptions, regulate their emotional responses, and avoid imposing interpretations on survivors. This distinction is relevant to NGO practice, where practitioners may need to respond to sensitive disclosures while remaining attentive to survivors' autonomy and emotional boundaries. Understanding listening as communicative readiness therefore directs attention to the preparatory processes that shape how practitioners approach an encounter, complementing existing discussions of trauma-informed care by foregrounding the ethical orientation that precedes direct communication.

2.4 Pre-Interaction Communication as Ethical Orientation

Building on these ideas, this study views pre-interaction communication as more than preparation. It is understood as an ethical stance that shapes everything that follows when practitioners engage with survivors. Before meeting a survivor, practitioners may regulate their emotions, reflect on their assumptions, and consider how to align their approach with the ethical principles of care. This preparation is not merely a background step; it may influence how practitioners approach the interaction and respond to survivors.

Research on trauma-informed care highlights the importance of organisational practices that promote safety and prevent retraumatisation (Grossman et al., 2021). Dinoso and Baudoin (2023), by contrast, focus on therapeutic communication as a means of supporting positive encounters in critical care settings, while Yazıcıoğlu and Sarıbey (2025) propose a structured counselling framework incorporating certified training, ethical guidelines, and intervention protocols. Although these studies approach trauma-informed support from different perspectives, they primarily address care frameworks, professional communication, and service provision rather than explicitly conceptualising preparation before direct engagement as a dimension of communication. This distinction highlights the need to explore how practitioners interpret

ethical responsibilities and prepare themselves communicatively before meeting survivors. Such preparation is particularly relevant in NGO settings, where practitioners may need to respond sensitively to emotionally demanding situations while working within organisational and resource constraints.

Looking at pre-interaction communication in this way changes how ethical practice is understood. Emotional readiness, reflexive awareness, and intentional listening are not limited to what occurs during interaction; they are practices that take shape beforehand and influence everything that follows. This perspective provides a lens for exploring how NGO practitioners prepare to engage with young women survivors of sexual violence. It frames ethical communication as a relational process with a temporal dimension, extending beyond the immediate interaction.

3. METHOD

This section describes how the study approached the topic of pre-interaction communication as an ethical orientation in the work of NGOs supporting survivors of sexual violence. Furthermore, this approach goes beyond simply looking at what happens during interactions. It also considers how practitioners prepare themselves beforehand, reflect on their assumptions, and align their actions with ethical principles of care. In doing so, the study explains the research design, how informants were selected, the methods used to collect data, the ethical steps taken to protect both practitioners and survivors, and how the analysis was conducted to interpret the findings. The methodological choices were shaped by a focus on practitioners' own reflections and ethical orientations, rather than on the outcomes of interactions or the direct experiences of survivors, allowing us to explore how ethical preparation and reflexive awareness guide practitioners in their work and influence the relational space before any conversation begins.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how NGO practitioners make sense of communication prior to direct engagement with survivors of sexual violence. Rather than treating communication as a set of techniques or observable behaviours, the study approaches it as a reflexive and ethical practice through which practitioners interpret their roles, anticipate interaction, and position themselves in relation to survivors. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate for this aim because it seeks to explore how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and how they interpret social processes within specific contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such an approach enables close attention to practitioners' accounts of judgement, ethical reflection, and communicative orientation, all of which often remain implicit in everyday professional practice (Tracy, 2020).

From a communication perspective, qualitative inquiry makes it possible to explore how practitioners articulate preparation, responsibility, and relational positioning as communicative work in its own right. In line with interpretive traditions in communication research, the study prioritises understanding how meanings are formed, described, and negotiated through narrative accounts, rather than measuring behavioural outcomes or therapeutic effectiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis therefore centres on practitioners' reflective narratives to illuminate how assumptions, emotional readiness, and ethical considerations are negotiated before interaction takes place. Accordingly, the study does not examine survivor narratives or therapeutic results but focuses specifically on pre-interaction communication as an ethical and relational process shaped by practitioners' professional experience and organisational context.

3.2 Research Participants

The study involved 17 informants, all of whom are NGO practitioners engaged in handling cases of sexual violence. Informants were selected based on two main criteria: (1) having direct experience handling at least two cases of sexual violence, (2) active professional involvement within an NGO setting.

The informants included practitioners with backgrounds as psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and other professional support roles within NGOs. Gender was not used as a selection criterion, and both male and female practitioners were included. This selection strategy was intended to capture diverse

professional perspectives on communicative preparation while maintaining a shared experiential foundation in trauma-related work.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with NGO practitioners as informants in this study. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to maintain a consistent line of inquiry while allowing informants to elaborate on their experiences, communicative reasoning, and professional reflections in depth.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher at the NGO offices, in private rooms provided by the organisations. Conducting the interviews within the informants' own professional environment allowed them to speak in a setting that was familiar and contextually relevant to their daily work. Each interview focused specifically on pre-interaction communication, including how informants regulate their emotions, reflect on personal assumptions, and orient themselves ethically before meeting survivors of sexual violence.

The discussion centred on informants' internal processes and professional judgement rather than on survivors' narratives or case details. The interview protocol was carefully structured to ensure that the conversation remained focused on communicative preparation. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian to enable informants to articulate their experiences in a linguistically and culturally familiar context. The data were subsequently translated into English during the analysis and writing process. Particular care was taken to preserve semantic meaning, tone, and contextual nuance to ensure that informants' voices were represented as faithfully as possible in the reporting of findings. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and depth of the data for analysis.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) through the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All procedures adhered to established principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and informants' right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Before taking part in the study, each practitioner received a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the nature of the interview process, data management procedures, and the measures implemented to protect confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all informants. It was clearly communicated that participation was entirely voluntary and that refusal or withdrawal would not affect their professional roles or relationships within their organisations.

Given the sensitivity of sexual violence, the study did not involve direct engagement with survivors. By focusing exclusively on NGO practitioners' reflections, the research design aimed to minimise the risk of indirect disclosure or retraumatisation. Throughout data collection and analysis, all informants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying organisational details were removed or generalised to safeguard anonymity. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis was situated within a constructivist epistemological stance, which assumes that meaning is co-constructed through interaction and interpretation rather than discovered as an objective entity within the data. In line with qualitative research design principles (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the analysis prioritised depth of interpretation, contextual sensitivity, and reflexive engagement with informants' accounts.

The analytic process began immediately after each interview was transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion and familiarity with the data. During this stage, initial notes were written in the margins to capture early impressions, recurring expressions, and moments when informants described their internal preparation before meeting survivors. Particular attention was given to how informants articulated emotional regulation, ethical reflection, communicative hesitation, and decision-making before interaction took place.

Open coding was conducted manually across the dataset. Codes were generated inductively, drawing closely on the language used by informants rather than applying a predetermined framework. Segments were coded when they reflected preparatory orientations, ethical considerations, emotional work, or communicative positioning prior to engagement with survivors. As coding continued, earlier transcripts were reviewed again to refine the meanings of the codes and ensure consistency across informants, enabling a detailed comparison of common patterns and subtle differences in understanding pre-interaction communication.

After the initial coding stage, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual clusters. The researcher examined connections among codes and considered how they might be organised into higher-level interpretive categories. Analytical memos were written throughout this process to document decisions to merge, separate, or redefine codes. Through sustained engagement with the dataset, four interconnected dimensions were identified in relation to pre-interaction communication: communicative restraint and ethical waiting, emotional reflexive preparation, spatial and relational preparation, and informational and procedural ethical orientation. These themes were identified based on their interpretive relevance to the research question rather than on frequency of mention.

The development of themes required careful reconsideration of earlier coding decisions. Draft themes were examined against the transcripts to determine whether the extracts grouped under them genuinely reflected a shared pattern of meaning. In several instances, extracts were reassigned, labels were adjusted, or thematic boundaries were clarified to better reflect the nuances in informants' accounts. In addition, the dataset was revisited as a whole to ensure that quieter, less dominant, or even slightly divergent accounts were not unintentionally overshadowed during abstraction. This careful return to the data helped prevent premature closure. Rather than treating themes as categories that simply emerged on their own, the analysis recognised that thematic development involved judgement, interpretation, and theoretical sensitivity. In this sense, the analytic process reflects the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, in which themes are shaped through ongoing engagement with the data and the researcher's interpretive work (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

It is also important to situate this analysis within the wider scope of the doctoral research from which it is drawn. The thesis as a whole generated multiple thematic strands concerning therapeutic communication and trauma-informed practice in NGO settings. However, the present article narrows its analytic focus to one specific dimension: pre-interaction communication as an ethical orientation. By concentrating on this strand, the article offers a more detailed analysis of how practitioners conceptualise and enact communicative preparation prior to direct engagement with survivors of sexual violence. The themes elaborated here represent a distinct analytical strand within the wider dataset, selected for their conceptual contribution to communication scholarship.

Throughout the analytic process, reflexivity was actively maintained. Reflective notes were written to record how interpretations developed over time. These notes included questions that arose during coding, moments of uncertainty, shifts in conceptual focus, and reflections on how prior theoretical engagement with trauma-informed communication may have influenced analytic attention. Keeping such records did not aim to eliminate subjectivity; rather, it helped make visible how interpretations were shaped in dialogue between the data and the researcher's positioning. The thematic structure that emerged is therefore the result of sustained engagement with the transcripts, careful comparison across informants' accounts, and ongoing refinement of interpretive decisions.

Attention was also paid to the study's trustworthiness. To ensure analytic rigour, the study maintained clear documentation of coding decisions and theme refinement throughout the research process.

Interpretations were continuously compared with the full dataset to confirm their grounding in informants' accounts. Rather than positioning objectivity as detachment, the analysis emphasised transparency in how meanings were constructed and how interpretive decisions were reached.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how NGO practitioners conceptualise and enact communication prior to direct engagement with survivors of sexual violence. The findings show that communication in trauma-informed NGO work is not limited to what happens during interaction. It begins much earlier, shaping how practitioners position themselves emotionally, relationally, spatially, and procedurally. In other words, the way they prepare beforehand sets the tone for everything that follows. From the analysis, four interconnected dimensions became clear: communicative restraint and ethical waiting, emotional reflexive preparation, spatial and relational preparation, and informational and procedural ethical orientation. Together, these dimensions illustrate that pre-interaction communication functions as a foundational ethical practice rather than a preliminary or incidental phase.

4.1 Communicative Restraint and Ethical Waiting

Restraint can itself function as a communicative act. In certain situations, choosing not to ask questions at the outset carries meaningful significance, as the deliberate pause signals that emotional safety is prioritised over procedural progression. Rather than moving directly into fact-finding, practitioners intentionally slow the pace of interaction and create space for survivors to regulate their emotions and establish a sense of comfort. Such intentional deceleration is not a passive absence of action but an active communicative strategy through which care, sensitivity, and ethical awareness are conveyed. Care is conveyed through pacing, and the practitioner allows the conversation to unfold gradually. This approach recognises that readiness develops over time and cannot be assumed at the beginning of an encounter. The survivor is given room to decide when and how to speak. Within trauma-informed practice, such ethical waiting reflects sensitivity to timing, vulnerability, and the subtle operation of power in interaction (Place et al., 2023).

The practitioners also indicated that they considered survivors' prior experiences when shaping their communicative stance. Informant 16 described how past negative encounters with law enforcement influenced her decision to withhold case-related questions during the initial meeting, particularly when the survivor had experienced scepticism and discrimination that led to fear of being judged or disbelieved.

> "*At the first meeting, I did not ask about the case at all because I was worried it could worsen her condition*." – Informant 16

Awareness of this history influenced the practitioner's initial approach. Rather than proceeding directly to case-related questions, the practitioner positioned herself carefully, creating conditions in which the survivor might gradually experience safety. In this way, pre-interaction communication extends beyond procedural preparation and becomes anticipatory ethical work shaped by the survivor's social and relational context.

During the treatment sessions, the practitioners also indicated that they would pay close attention to small changes in gesture, tone of voice, or eye contact. These shifts often indicate comfort, hesitation, or emotional strain. At times, a brief prompt is offered to support continuation. At other times, silence is deliberately maintained so that the survivor can shape the exchange. Preparation, therefore, does not end once the meeting begins. It continues in the form of ongoing judgement and adjustment. Through steady pacing and reflective awareness, practitioners seek to cultivate trust and a sense of safety. Silence and restraint, in this context, function as practices of care, expressing respect for the survivor's autonomy and emotional state before any detailed questioning begins. While previous discussions of trauma-informed practice emphasise responsiveness and the prevention of retraumatisation (Grossman et al., 2021; Miller & Rollnick, 2023), this finding extends that perspective by showing how ethical responsiveness may begin before substantive dialogue, through the decision to delay questions and allow survivors to determine their readiness to speak.

4.2 Emotional Reflexive Preparation

Emotional reflexive preparation emerged as an important aspect of practitioners' readiness to engage with young women survivors of sexual violence. Before an interaction, practitioners described the importance of preparing themselves mentally and emotionally to ensure that their personal feelings did not interfere with the support they provided. This preparation involved recognising their emotional state, regulating personal feelings, and remaining aware of how their emotional condition might influence communication with survivors. One informant described the importance of emotional regulation before a session:

> *"I have experienced days when I was going through a difficult time personally. However, before a session, I took a moment to calm myself so that I could be fully present for the client."* – Informant 8

This account illustrates how emotional readiness involved a conscious effort to manage personal feelings before an interaction began. By taking time to regain emotional composure, the practitioner sought to remain attentive to the client rather than allowing personal difficulties to affect the session. Emotional preparation also involved reflecting on personal assumptions and recognising that each survivor's experience was unique. Practitioners needed to remain aware of how previous experiences or personal judgements might shape their responses. Such awareness helped them approach each interaction with greater sensitivity to the survivor's individual circumstances. This finding is consistent with Fisher and Monahan (2023), who highlight the role of reflexive awareness in guiding responses within emotionally demanding professional encounters, suggesting that emotional preparation forms part of the ethical work required before engaging with survivors.

These findings suggest that emotional reflexive preparation is part of the ethical orientation underpinning therapeutic communication. It begins before direct engagement, when practitioners reflect on their emotional readiness and consider how their personal feelings may influence the interaction. This preparation allows practitioners to approach survivors with greater awareness of their responsibilities and the sensitivity required in trauma recovery support. Therefore, ethical communication is not only reflected in how practitioners respond during a session, but also in how they prepare themselves before meeting survivors. This finding is important because it positions practitioners' emotional readiness and reflexive awareness as part of pre-interaction communication, highlighting that the quality of therapeutic communication depends not only on how practitioners respond to survivors but also on how they prepare themselves before engagement.

4.3 Spatial and Relational Preparation as Communicative Practice

Beyond verbal restraint, pre-interaction communication was enacted through spatial and relational preparation. Informant 17 highlighted the importance of creating a physical and social environment that supports survivors' comfort and openness. When counselling took place in the survivor's home, the practitioner negotiated the use of space, such as conducting sessions in the living room or the survivor's bedroom, depending on where they felt most at ease.

> *"I try to make sure the survivor feels comfortable first, including choosing a place where they feel safe and at ease before we begin talking."* – Informant 17

The preparation also extended to managing relational boundaries to ensure privacy during sessions.

> *"Sometimes I ask family members to give us some space for a while, so the survivor can speak more freely without feeling pressured or observed."* – Informant 17

Such actions demonstrate that communication is not limited to spoken interaction but is embedded in how space and social presence are arranged. The deliberate absence of family members functions as a communicative signal that prioritises privacy and autonomy, even within close relational networks.

Scholarship on trauma-informed care underscores that survivors' experiences of safety and trust are shaped not only by verbal interaction but also by the environmental and relational conditions surrounding

the encounter (Grossman et al., 2021). In trauma-informed contexts, spatial preparation becomes part of communicative readiness. Decisions about where counseling takes place, who is present, and how privacy is maintained convey respect and attentiveness without relying solely on spoken reassurance. These findings support the conceptualisation of pre-interaction communication as an ethical orientation enacted through deliberate environmental and relational adjustment.

4.4 Informational and Procedural Ethical Orientation

The findings further reveal that pre-interaction communication includes informational and procedural preparation that enables survivors to make informed choices about available support pathways. Informant 11 explained that NGO services may involve complaint handling, counselling, psychological recovery, legal accompaniment, and medical referral.

> *"Our services can include receiving complaints, providing counselling, supporting psychological recovery, accompanying survivors through legal processes, and referring them for medical assistance when needed."* – Informant 11

This informational preparation is not directive but ethically oriented toward supporting survivors' autonomy. Practitioners inform survivors about the possibility of legal proceedings and provide accompaniment only if they choose to pursue this option.

> *"I explain what rights survivors should have access to first, then ask them if they wish to pursue legal proceedings. The decision is always up to the survivor."* – Informant 11

This form of communication positions practitioners as facilitators rather than decision-makers, aligning with trauma-informed principles of autonomy and consent. By explicitly returning decision-making authority to survivors, practitioners help restore a sense of control that is often disrupted by experiences of sexual violence. This approach also reduces the risk of re-enacting power imbalances within support processes, as survivors are not directed toward predetermined outcomes but are instead supported in making choices that reflect their readiness and priorities. Furthermore, such communicative positioning fosters trust, as survivors are more likely to feel respected and heard when their agency is acknowledged. In this way, informational preparation functions not only as a means of providing clarity but also as an ethical practice that reinforces dignity, self-determination, and relational safety within the early stages of engagement.

When survivors decide to enter legal processes, practitioners provide accompaniment from the initial reporting stage through court proceedings. Such support is not initiated abruptly but is preceded by communicative preparation that clarifies expectations, possible procedures, and potential emotional challenges. This preparatory dialogue enables survivors to anticipate institutional dynamics and consider their readiness before formally engaging with the legal system. Scholarship on ethical communication in care-oriented professions suggests that reflexive and transparent communication prior to engagement can help mitigate uncertainty and emotional burden (Fisher & Monahan, 2023). Consistent with this perspective, the findings indicate that informational preparation operates as a form of ethical alignment: it equips survivors for institutional encounters while preserving their authority to decide whether and how to proceed. In doing so, practitioners not only facilitate access to justice but also safeguard survivors' voice and decision-making authority within processes that might otherwise reproduce hierarchical power relations.

4.5 Pre-Interaction Communication as Ethical Orientation

The findings further demonstrate that pre-interaction communication is explicitly enacted through the articulation of ethical commitments prior to engagement. Informant 6 emphasised the importance of adhering to professional ethical codes as a psychologist when accompanying survivors of sexual violence. Before commencing any form of assistance, the practitioner explained the ethical principles that would guide their work to both the survivor and the family to foster clarity and trust.

> *"At the beginning, I explain the ethical principles I follow as a psychologist, including confidentiality and professional boundaries, so the survivor and their family do not feel anxious or uncertain about the process."* – Informant 6

By making ethical commitments explicit at the outset, practitioners reduce ambiguity and establish a transparent relational framework for the engagement. This early clarification functions as a communicative signal of accountability and professionalism, reassuring survivors and their families that the support process will be guided by clearly defined ethical standards. In this way, ethical articulation becomes part of the preparatory communication that shapes expectations, builds trust, and stabilises the relational environment before substantive intervention begins.

This communicative practice illustrates how ethical orientation is not only internally cultivated but also verbally articulated as part of pre-interaction preparation. By explicitly outlining ethical boundaries, confidentiality, and professional responsibility, practitioners position ethics as a communicative resource that reassures survivors and their families. Miller and Rollnick (2023) similarly argue that ethical engagement in professional contexts rests on transparency, careful disclosure, and communicative responsibility, which shape relational expectations prior to direct interaction.

In trauma-informed settings, making ethical commitments explicit before or at the beginning of engagement is particularly important. Survivors of sexual violence may come to professional encounters with uncertainty about how their stories will be received and whether their disclosures will remain confidential. A systematic review of trauma-informed healthcare indicates that women who have experienced sexual violence consistently emphasise the need to feel believed, respected, and given control over decisions affecting them (Peeren et al., 2025). This suggests that trust does not automatically emerge from professional roles alone. Rather, it develops through concrete communicative practices that demonstrate accountability and respect.

When practitioners clarify confidentiality, explain procedural boundaries, and emphasise that decisions remain with the survivor, they are not merely sharing information. They are shaping the relational climate of the encounter. Such early clarification can reduce anxiety linked to past experiences of being dismissed or harmed in institutional settings. In this way, ethical communication functions as groundwork. It prepares a space in which survivors may feel safer to speak, knowing that their autonomy and dignity are recognised from the outset.

Moreover, the findings also suggest that ethical communication extends beyond the survivor to include family members as part of the relational context. Informant 6's practice of addressing ethical principles to both survivors and families reflects an understanding that trust must be negotiated collectively, particularly in cultural contexts where family plays a central role in decision-making. Pre-interaction communication, therefore, operates as an ethical alignment process that prepares multiple relational actors before engagement.

Taken together, this finding reinforces the conceptualisation of pre-interaction communication as an ethical orientation that is actively communicated rather than merely assumed. The practice of explicitly articulating confidentiality, professional boundaries, and ethical responsibilities illustrates how NGO practitioners translate professional principles into communicative practices before substantive engagement begins. This finding contributes to understanding pre-interaction communication by highlighting ethical disclosure as a relational practice through which expectations are clarified and the conditions for trust are established. It also underscores the importance of recognising ethical preparation as an integral dimension of trauma-informed support for survivors of sexual violence.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored how NGO practitioners conceptualise and enact communication prior to direct engagement with survivors of sexual violence. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that pre-interaction

communication is neither peripheral nor merely technical. Instead, it constitutes an ethical and relational orientation that shapes how practitioners position themselves before substantive dialogue begins.

Four interconnected dimensions emerged from the analysis. First, communicative restraint and ethical waiting illustrate how practitioners prioritise survivors' emotional safety over procedural urgency. By slowing the pace of interaction and allowing survivors to determine their readiness, moments of silence and pause become intentional communicative acts that safeguard comfort and control. Second, emotional reflexive preparation reveals the internal reflexive work undertaken by practitioners. Through monitoring their assumptions, tone, and emotional responses, they seek to remain present without imposing judgement. This ongoing self-regulation forms a crucial part of the ethical groundwork of engagement.

Third, spatial and relational preparation demonstrates that communication extends beyond spoken exchange. Decisions about the physical setting, the presence or absence of family members, and the negotiation of relational boundaries function as communicative signals of privacy, dignity, and autonomy. Fourth, informational and procedural ethical orientation enables survivors to understand their rights and available support pathways. By emphasising that decisions ultimately remain with survivors, practitioners position themselves as facilitators of agency rather than directors of action.

Taken together, these findings suggest that pre-interaction communication operates as a process of ethical alignment that encompasses emotional stance, relational positioning, environmental conditions, and procedural transparency. Trust does not automatically derive from professional authority; it is gradually cultivated through deliberate and responsive communicative choices.

This study contributes to communication scholarship by foregrounding the temporal dimension of ethical engagement in trauma-informed contexts. It extends understanding of therapeutic communication by highlighting how ethical practice begins before formal dialogue and is shaped by practitioners' emotional readiness, relational decisions, preparation of the environment, and provision of procedural information. This perspective positions pre-interaction communication as an integral dimension of ethical and survivor-centred communication, rather than merely a preliminary stage before direct engagement. Practically, the findings indicate that professional training for practitioners supporting survivors of sexual violence should explicitly address emotional reflexivity, spatial sensitivity, ethical transparency, and non-directive informational communication. Recognising pre-interaction communication as ethical labour may strengthen survivor-centred practices and enhance trust-building processes within NGO settings.

Future research could build on the four dimensions identified in this study by exploring how young women survivors of sexual violence experience and interpret practitioners' pre-interaction communication. Such research could clarify whether practitioners' efforts to establish emotional safety, respect autonomy, prepare the environment, and provide procedural information align with survivors' own expectations and experiences. Further studies across different NGO settings could also explore how organisational practices and resource availability shape these four dimensions. These directions would extend understanding of pre-interaction communication and inform the development of more responsive and survivor-centred support practices.

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests throughout the research.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mega Ardina: conducted the fieldwork, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the manuscript; **Tengku Elena Tengku Mahamad:** contributed to the development of the conceptual framework and methodology, provided academic supervision, and ensured the academic rigour of the research; **Yuslinda Mat Yassin:** contributed to the development of the literature review, provided academic guidance, and reviewed the manuscript. All authors contributed to the refinement of the research, analysis, and manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

9. DECLARATION OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of Gemini and ChatGPT for literature identification and general proofreading. These tools supported the authors in reviewing and refining the manuscript. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final version of the manuscript submitted for publication.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all informants, and data anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study.

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