

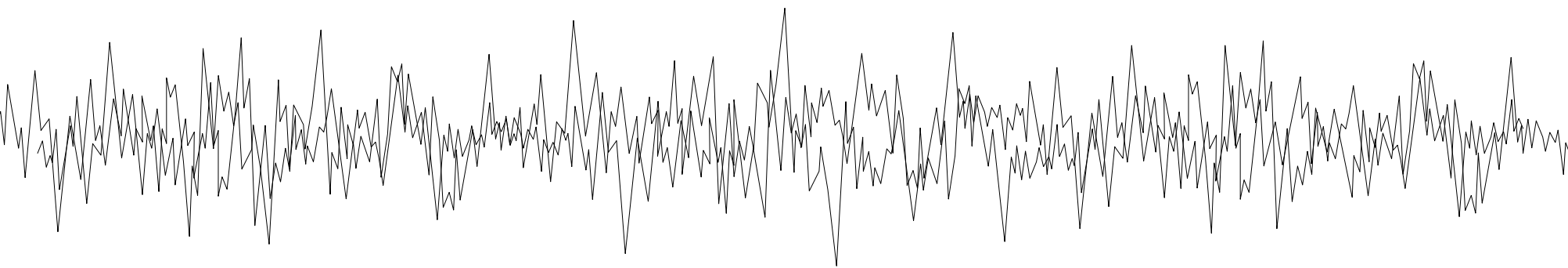
Breaking the silence

Turning pain into power



Breaking the silence

Turning pain into power



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When one survivor has the courage to break the silence and to stand up for her rights, she will inspire others to do the same.

Dr. Denis Mukwege

Nobel Peace Prize Co-laureate 2018

Founder of Panzi Hospital & Foundation DRC

Special Advisor to the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation

FOREWORD

Breaking the silence about sexual violence in conflict is essential if we are to confront this scourge and to address its many harms. I have long been convinced that we need to hear from survivors themselves, to hear their voices, see their faces and witness their power.

When I founded Panzi Hospital I expected to support mothers giving birth instead of treating victims of the most brutal sexual violence. These patients taught me to actively listen to their diverse needs. Without their input, I might still be busy proposing medical solutions as the only prescription to their problems. Beyond physical healing, survivors deserve our support to heal spiritually, to reintegrate in society, to become financially independent, to obtain justice - and to be heard. These patients inspired me to walk alongside survivors in addressing the root causes and consequences of wartime sexual violence.

When one survivor has the courage to break the silence and to stand up for her rights, she will inspire others to do the same. This is why it is so important to connect survivors so that they can strengthen each other's healing and activism. The global survivor network chose the name SEMA, the Swahili word meaning 'speak out'. The experience of being silenced and ignored was a common theme in survivors' experiences - not only in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but across the globe and through time. Breaking the silence was recognised as the first, crucial step towards reclaiming the rights denied to so many of them.

As presented in the book you are holding now, some of the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have taken steps to speak out and to reclaim their power. Ángela, Esperande, Grace, Hala, Jaqui, Leesa, Mama Lambert, Maria, Mirsada, Prisca, Suzy, Sylvia, Tatiana, and other SEMA members invite us to understand how they have overcome their fears and struggles to break the silence. They highlight the importance of placing survivors at centre stage to determine their own recovery, the needs for safe spaces that enable survivors to share their pain as well as their power, and their hopes that they will witness an end to impunity in their lifetimes.

The work that these inspiring women are doing is not solely for themselves. Nor is it to seek revenge, or to point the finger of blame. Their purpose is for the world to know that survivors have rights that must be respected. It is to ensure that their daughters and granddaughters never have to go through the experiences that they have suffered.

I would like to congratulate all of them - and the many other survivors that they represent - for challenging the perceptions and myths that societies perpetuate about victims of sexual violence and reclaiming their rights. They have chosen to speak out, and to change the narratives of conflict with their own stories. I believe that the portraits and stories compiled in this book will touch the hearts of other survivors still living in isolation and change the way we perceive victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence.

Dr. Denis Mukwege

INTRODUCTION

The SEMA story began in June 2017, when the Mukwege Foundation facilitated the first international survivor retreat in Geneva, bringing together 22 survivors of conflict-related sexual violence from 14 countries. The aim was to explore ideas towards initiating a global survivor movement – one that would be survivor-driven, centred around survivor needs and leadership.

During that week survivors shared their experiences, learned from one another's advocacy, followed music therapy sessions and wrote a song together. They presented a public exhibition, 'Hidden Voices,' using music, video and poetry to share their strength and healing journeys with an audience of more than 200 people and they performed their song, 'Little Bird', on stage. At the end, a Liberian survivor summed up the power of that experience: *"We began to sing, and I saw the crowd. I saw many people came to watch our performance. And I felt that we begin a new life again. Yes, we begin a new life again."*

The drive to create a global survivors' movement is rooted in the conviction that it is crucial that the silence around sexual violence as a weapon of war is broken. Conflict-related sexual violence is not random or opportunistic. It is a strategy used by armed groups fighting in conflicts worldwide for a range of reasons: to terrorise a civilian population, to persecute and destroy an ethnic group, or as a 'reward' for combatants.

Perpetrators target civilians – and particularly women and girls – with grotesque violence and yet, of all the atrocities and cruelty that take place in conflicts, sexual violence is the most underreported and hidden. Victims not only carry a lifelong burden of physical and psychological harm, but they also face the double burden of being silenced and excluded – by stigma within their own communities, and by authorities who routinely deny the gravity of these crimes.

Stigma can have lasting - sometimes lethal - repercussions, including 'honour killings', suicide and high-risk survival behaviour. It prevents survivors from seeking medical care or justice, excludes them from their communities, and often leaves them to care for themselves and their children without any support. Silence is sometimes the best protection that they have against stigma, and so the pain and the devastating consequences of these crimes remain hidden. Coming forward, breaking the silence, and claiming their rights is often an insurmountable task that cannot be achieved alone.

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“It is time that survivors break the silence:
but mostly it is time for the world to hear
their voices.”

Yazidi survivor,
2017

It took tremendous courage for survivors to come together to speak out, tell their truths, and to seek solutions for themselves and their communities. Their global network, SEMA – which means ‘speak out’ in Swahili – provides a safe place for them to share the experiences that have for so long been hidden and ignored. It brings together victims and survivors of war-time sexual violence and their allies from four generations, five continents and more than 22 countries together to fight for their rights. The global network is rooted in local survivor activist groups representing thousands of survivors of wartime sexual violence.

Their journey so far has been incredible. United, these survivors draw global attention to the continued use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and call for the changes needed to end such violence and achieve justice. From joint statements to unprecedented mass demonstrations and inspiring speeches at international events, survivors are speaking out powerfully and acting together.

This book celebrates some of the individual journeys that make up the collective story of **SEMA, the global network of victims and survivors to end wartime sexual violence**. It features the stories of survivors and allies who are members of the SEMA network and the incredible achievements that have been reached in their first five years of activism.

This book also honours the multitude of victims represented in this global network who are not yet able or ready to speak out, whose pain remains hidden. It pays tribute to the survivors who are no longer with us whose memory and activism live on.

The Mukwege Foundation is proud to accompany SEMA’s survivors as they pursue their collective dream of a world without wartime sexual violence.

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"I have to sit down and think about what I have experienced, about my future as a survivor of sexual violence. The story of survivors must change, and we must begin the fight."

Aline,
the Democratic Republic
of the Congo





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“I became an activist for the rights of victims of sexual violence in armed conflict when I became aware of the impacts of this crime on the lives of girls and women and the stigmatisation they face. For more than ten years I have been working with them to support their empowerment and leadership because the courage of these victims to survive is unique.”

**Pilar,
Colombia**



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You need to let people know they are not alone, that we deserve to live!

Name: Hala

Country: Iraq

Member of SEMA since: 2019

Hala joined SEMA after the Mukwege Foundation reached out to Yazda, an Iraqi NGO working with Yazidi survivors of genocide. She first met her SEMA sisters at the retreat in Luxembourg in 2019, but Hala was not new to activism: she had already been encouraged to speak out to the Iraqi Parliament about survivors' rights. However she credits SEMA with helping her reach the level of influence that she has today. After all, it was seeing SEMA in action that inspired her to start the Yazidi Survivors Network, which is now advocating for reparations on behalf of all Yazidi survivors and for the implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? "When I first came to SEMA, I wanted the same for Yazidi survivors – that they would be like one and stand up together for their rights. I started the Yazidi Survivors Network in order to share what I learned from SEMA with other survivors – to teach them to trust themselves, be strong, and advocate for their rights."

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? "Before joining SEMA, I did not know that I would ever reach this level. SEMA has given me inspiration and information. I saw that there are many women and girls who have suffered. If I had not been helped by somebody, I would not be here now. You need to let people know they are not alone, that we deserve to live!"

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? "All of it, from the beginning to the end. These girls and women are my family. They know how I feel, and I know how they feel. I was in touch with some of them throughout the pandemic, especially survivors from Nigeria. We do not share the same language, but we could turn on the phone camera and wave at each other through the video. It was amazing to have this connection."

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? "SEMA has given me confidence to speak out. I took part in an exhibition called 'Nobody's Listening', about gaining recognition for the Yazidi genocide, which travelled across Iraq and Europe and was shown to some influential people. It was very powerful, and being part of SEMA has given me the confidence to do these kinds of new things."

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? "Last year, the Iraqi Parliament passed the Yazidi Survivors Law which focuses on reparations for survivors. Working for this law to be implemented is now very important. Although the Yazidi Survivors Network is very small, only 15 people, I hope that in the future SEMA will do a retreat in Iraq and come to see the way we work on advocacy at the national and international level."



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There is magic
in coming
together and
being buds
of the same
flower

Name: Grace

Country: Uganda

Member of SEMA since: 2019

For years before joining SEMA, Grace had been hoping to find a truly victim-centred organisation. It is this – survivors being put centre stage – that makes SEMA stand out for her among the many organisations she has worked with as a social worker and researcher since her release from captivity. Only a few months after joining SEMA, Grace applied and was appointed to the board of the Global Survivors' Fund, where she is one of three SEMA members representing survivor voices. Though challenging, Grace makes sure to always speak out about what she knows best, namely, survivor needs and how to improve access to reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence around the globe.

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “On my first day at the 2019 retreat, I found myself in a safe space with other survivors from all over the world. It was unbelievable. It was so sad to hear the stories, but the feeling that you are coming together to do something good is just great. Since then, I have participated in lots of trainings and advocacy. I travelled to the UK and had meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about establishing the Global Survivors Fund. I have received coaching on communications and how to engage with the media. I used to be very afraid to answer the questions that were asked to me, but now I don't shake before public speaking. Through SEMA, I have also become involved in training UN Peacekeepers about how to work with survivors.”

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “To me, it means five years of amazing experiences with strong women working tirelessly to eliminate sexual violence and change the world. This makes me feel good and gives me courage. I am not afraid to speak out. And I am so inspired when I hear Dr. Mukwege say, ‘So long as you know what you are doing is right, keep doing it.’”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “There are a number of advocacy projects that I have been involved in that I feel really reflect our slogan: Nothing About Us Without Us. If the world wants us to own all these initiatives, survivors have to be at the centre. Speaking personally, reparations is my song – not just any kind, but a holistic kind of reparations. I have learnt this word ‘holistic’ through SEMA, and I fully believe in it.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “The fact that everything is victim-centred is my favourite thing about SEMA. This is what I have been looking for since 2011, and what I advocate for back home. SEMA takes into consideration everything about victims. SEMA gives us the space to speak, even to dignitaries and high officials. No office is too big for SEMA!”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “The wealth of knowledge that SEMA members have will determine what we do as a network. Now we are launching the Red Line Initiative, and I am learning things I didn't know, like what a convention is, what a declaration is. SEMA is ready. As long as we continue to stand as one like in the past five years, I think we will be great. Just look how far we have come already. I am very optimistic about the future.”

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"Everything that is done
for me without me is
done against me."

Guillaumette,
the Democratic Republic
of the Congo





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"In 2018, we participated in the second global retreat of the SEMA Network where we met allies and where the stories of each other made us stronger. We have this space to continue empowering women so that history does not repeat itself and that new generations of girls and women can have a life free of violence throughout the world. We continue the search for justice, even though we know that this is a slow, re-victimising journey, and that our state does not guarantee a life of dignity for women."

**Isabel,
Guatemala**



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We must continue to be interested in the lives of those who have suffered.

Name: Beata (Mama Lambert)

Country: Rwanda

Member of SEMA since: 2018

“We must continue to be interested in the lives of those who have suffered,” urges Mama Lambert – a living example of her own words. Among her many achievements – as an author, SEMA member, and Top 10 Finalist for the Women Building Peace Award – she considers her chief calling to be counselling. Now Head of Counselling with Solace Ministries in Rwanda, she has worked for more than 20 years supporting women and girls traumatised by rape and genocide. Key to this work is “Really taking the time to listen to and comfort people who have suffered.” As a survivor herself who lost her family, home, and livelihood during the Rwandan genocide, she is well placed to help others. To SEMA, she brings this listening ear and experience supporting other women. In turn, she attributes her increased engagement with advocacy to joining SEMA.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “When I think about what SEMA has done for us, it is hard to express. The first time I came to The Hague in 2018 I sat and observed only. I saw survivors from Libya, and survivors from Iraq, and was shocked. I looked with big wide eyes. We cried and cried – for the past, but also tears of joy. We comforted one another and became a family. Now we walk hand in hand fighting for peace and justice. SEMA woke us up. Before we were thinking about our own countries, but we know now that there are many who are struggling.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “It is so important that women participate. You can’t help someone unless they participate in their own recovery. Victims must know that they are in charge and be educated to know what to do for themselves and why. I have worked with survivors for years, but I didn’t take time for advocacy before. But now I am starting to speak out so that the people I work with can access justice.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “Being welcomed by the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg into her home was a gift, a miracle. She was so compassionate. She treated us with dignity, like human beings. The value of that welcome was immeasurable.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “SEMA has taught us to be proud of ourselves. I have received coaching through SEMA and continue to learn new things that I am able to apply to my counselling work. It is never too late to learn new things! Counselling is about looking at the whole person in the context of their life. It starts with trauma healing. From there, they may need education, a livelihood, or a small business loan. Counselling is not easy, but with the fruits that I see, I am encouraged to keep going.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “It is all about bringing an end to the use of rape as a weapon of war. We will continue to knock on the doors of the authorities, to improve the socio-economic situation of those whose lives have been so harmed by rape. It is very important that SEMA continues to bring us together. And we need training, including in finances, so that we can get funding to continue our work. The coaching programme offered by SEMA is fantastic, so we want that to continue.”



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The Mukwege Foundation is like a home for someone like me. I have found a family.

To the eight children under her roof, all of whom were born in captivity, she is a loving mother and adoptive parent. But to the rest of the world, Sylvia Acan is the winner of the inaugural Kim Bok-dong Peace Prize, for her activism for peace and justice for survivors of sexual violence. No stranger to the ravages of war and displacement, Sylvia has lived through long, dark moments in her life. But she has come through those times and found her voice – and now regularly uses it on her own radio programme. She says, “I feel there will be change in the world, in each one’s life. There is no condition that will always be permanent. I feel we have a step to take, always.” Sylvia started her organisation, Golden Women Vision in Uganda, under a tree with five survivors. Today, the organisation supports around 300 survivors through income-generating activities like cake-baking and sewing stuffed toys. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the women started making liquid soap to support hundreds of households and fight the pandemic.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “The SEMA network is really a home for a survivor like me. I learned about SEMA when I went to get my award in South Korea. I won the Kim Bok-dong Peace Prize. When I met with the Mukwege Foundation there, I realised I was not alone in this fight. I found a family at the Mukwege Foundation. Together with all the survivors, who come from different countries, we built the global network. We are a voice for the voiceless. By coming together and sharing different stories and experiences, it made my stigma and trauma come down.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “Without the Mukwege Foundation, my message could not be heard and my engagement with different communities could not be realised. I was having very dark thoughts during my suffering. But after hearing all these stories from survivors, bringing us together, I found a role to play. The SEMA network made me a strong woman. I have a vision now.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “Being together and meeting survivors from different countries.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “In Uganda, we have a major issue with sexual and gender-based violence in communities. We bring cases to light and teach people about how to access justice. I have a radio programme at the local station, which is a powerful tool to broadcast the message. During Covid-19, it is difficult to gather people but when I talk by the radio, it is heard for many miles.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “We want the SEMA network to go to the next level. We pray for more funds so more survivors can come together. If the SEMA network could bring more people together, that would be good.”

Name: Sylvia

Country: Uganda

Member of SEMA since: 2018

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“Life doesn't
ask us to be
the best but to
try the best
we can.”

**Semka,
Bosnia and
Herzegovina**





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“SEMA has allowed me to make visible the violence experienced by women in my country in an armed conflict that has been going on for more than 70 years. We are fighting to eradicate sexual violence from the territories.”

**Carmen,
Colombia**



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There's some leadership that you do not go to school to learn. You've got it inside you.

Jaqui is a powerful public speaker who believes passionately in meaningful engagement with survivors, making her a natural fit for SEMA. She set up the organisation Grace Agenda after she felt that survivors were being used as 'guinea pigs' in different forums. Her organisation invokes the strength of women, and advocates for self-agency, reparations, and memorialisation in Kenya. Jaqui had followed the network on Twitter before being invited to join the 2022 Retreat. Now from the inside, she looks forward to taking SEMA to the next level in the coming five years, bringing her own ideas and experiences to the table, and in turn taking advantage of what SEMA has to offer her and her organisation in Kenya.

You are new to SEMA. How do you see five years of SEMA so far? "SEMA as a global advocacy platform lets you speak out without being judged. It gives a sense of security, and as a meeting space goes far beyond the 40 minutes you have on Zoom. There is so much more listening space. And there is real value to be had in joining together, amplifying our voices, and sharing skillsets in the way that SEMA allows."

What does joining SEMA mean to you? "The first day was an emotional one. Relating what you hear on the news to the people here, to whom these atrocities happen, develops a sense of compassion inside you. It takes you out of your own misery and a sisterhood develops and you want to do anything you can to support them. Specifically the Yazidi girls, they are so young. You hear about what happened on Al Jazeera or CNN and they make a horror of it. What they do not show is the strength and resilience of these young girls, the pain they have carried, and how they persevere under extremely difficult circumstances. It is extremely inspiring."

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? "Meeting Dr. Mukwege. He is the most compassionate man. I had to ask myself, 'Is there really a man who can be this committed to women's issues?' He inspires peace inside you and makes you want to go on. And he has time for everyone. Sometimes it can be tiring to work in an organisation and respond to everyone's demands on you. You can start to withdraw. But Dr. Mukwege inspires me to be more like him and find the time for everyone."

As a SEMA member, what makes you proud? "The strength that we give each other is incredible. We have among us so many kinds of people. One member from Ukraine is a police official, commanding a troop of 100 officers. She is an officer, and a protector of her country. She gave us flowers as an emblem of healing and strength. And the Indigenous Guatemalans are of small stature, but they have such power, wisdom, and resilience."

What are your hopes for the next five years of SEMA? "I hope to see a lot more advocacy on the global stage. I want the strengths and capacities of the members to be increased. We need bigger, more inclusive forums. I would like to see exchange visits to different countries and advocacy at the African Union, the African Commission, and The Hague platforms. There are many places we can influence, like why not the G7? In these places people talk about saving the environment, but who are we saving the environment for if not people?"

Name: Jaqueline (Jaqui)

Country: Kenya

Member of SEMA since: 2022



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This must all have a purpose – which is the fight for justice.

Colombia can be a dangerous place to speak out, but Ángela – head of the *Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales* (Network of Women Victims and Professionals) – insists on fighting for access to justice for herself and fellow survivors. SEMA, of which she is a founding member, has helped Ángela broaden her horizons about what kinds of strategies from around the world can be used to change politics and policies in Colombia. Currently, she is recording the medical and legal histories of victims of sexual violence so that crimes against them will be taken seriously, and also advancing the need for holistic reparations within the Colombia Peace Accord. The goal is to establish specialised holistic care centres serving the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of survivors, as modelled by Dr. Mukwege at Panzi Hospital in DRC.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “For me, the significance of SEMA is that women from many countries break their silence. At the beginning, I got to know women with lots of pain and sadness. Five years on, I see improvement, that they now speak up. We talk of solidarity, and of course we share our pain, but this must all have a purpose – which is the fight for justice. In SEMA, we find things we have in common, and this leads to common strategies to materialise our shared priorities.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “SEMA has given me the opportunity to share ideas with survivors from different countries and contexts. I am learning about the practices and challenges that people face in other countries not only for the network that I lead, but also personally as a survivor of conflict-related sexual violence. We talk a lot in SEMA about recognising the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of survivors, and I want to take this to push for reparations not just in Colombia, but at a global level – not as something we ask for, but as our right.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “I do not have a favourite moment, because everything is so beautiful! But some things have touched me, including the creation of the song, ‘Little Bird’, and meeting the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg. She not only hosted us at her home, but really listened. It is very important for us to lift our voices and be heard by high-level people at an international level, to send a message that they must support the causes and priorities of survivors.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “All of SEMA’s actions are important. But one of the most important is the creation of the Global Survivors Fund. For me, I perceive the SEMA network to be the source of inspiration for Dr. Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad to create the Global Survivors Fund. It is our conversations that helped to frame the holistic approach to reparations that recognises the consequences of sexual violence on our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “My dream, my hope is that all states will commit to the Red Line Initiative. The Red Line Initiative is our effort to propose an international convention to take a zero-tolerance approach to conflict-related sexual violence. This convention will place survivors at the centre, and it is we, the survivors of SEMA, who will be advocating for this in front of our respective states.”

Name: Ángela

Country: Colombia

Member of SEMA since: 2017

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"Life is worth
living."

**Tetiana,
Ukraine**





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"SEMA allows me to flow, to converge, and to mutually influence and exchange with other sisters and brothers to eradicate all types of violence against women's bodies. It is an honour to be within this circle of courageous, powerful women who have contributed to the history of humanity and who have left seeds of love, reconciliation and emancipation for all the diverse young women, children and adults."

**Rosario,
Guatemala**



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I feel good
with SEMA.
I speak without
fear.

Name: Prisca

Country: Central African Republic

Member of SEMA since: 2018

Prisca is the only survivor from Central African Republic (CAR) who attended the 2022 Global Survivors Retreat. She is the director of the organisation Femmes Béoko, founded in Bangui in 2013, which is one of the six organisations that came together to form the *Mouvement des Survivantes de Violences Sexuelles en Centrafrique* (MOSUCA). A vibrant network, MOSUCA works across the 16 prefectures of CAR and is active running awareness raising and advocacy events, including marches and exhibitions on national and international days. Through Femmes Béoko, Prisca supports and leads 203 women and is particularly interested in fighting against the appointment of perpetrators of violence to government positions.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “SEMA has really touched my life by changing how I express myself. I did not know before that there were other women, even from Europe, who had experienced this. And it is so wonderful that SEMA continues to evolve. Every year things change and develop. We have left our fears behind.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “Since being part of SEMA, I tell people what happened to me. SEMA has provided me with a lot of trainings, including online. I speak out to my family members, to the authorities, to everyone – and now they respect me. Before joining SEMA, if I went to speak, especially in front of the authorities, I would be afraid, I would cry. I used to stay in the house from morning to night. It can be difficult to find work, or for our children to go to school due to the stigma. But now, when I speak out, I feel that SEMA is next to me, that no one can touch me.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “I feel good with SEMA. I speak without fear. We’re like a big family. Through the connectivity initiative during Covid, I was able to remain in close contact with other members of SEMA online or on the telephone. This connection was important in order not to fall back to the way I was before.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “SEMA gives me a higher standing, a status that supports my work. It was SEMA that explained to me that it was my right to speak out about what happened. Before, we had fear. The authorities would come and take you away. But now, we do marches, go on the radio, and speak out. We work without fear. There are 203 survivors in my organisation *Femmes Béoko* and I feel I can represent them all.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “I would like to see us overcome the stigma we face. In five years, I hope that we will be living without fear. Our lives will have changed. We want so much for our country, our office, and our family. We want our children to grow up well. But currently we don’t have the means for school fees. I have ideas about how to help our members, for example in starting small businesses making shoes or opening a hair salon. But we need the means to do these activities and to build a school. The next years are about making it possible for members to live comfortably, and earn the respect of people in the community.”



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SEMA lets me say, 'I am here' and be counted.

Maria is the leader of an organisation that works for the rights of Indigenous Guatemalan survivors of sexual violence. Participation in collective activism is, for her, critical and she acknowledges the value of the space created for her and her colleague Ana Pacheco (who died earlier this year) within SEMA. But she does not hesitate to point out how the barriers to taking part are much greater for some and urges that access be facilitated for everyone. For example, her own rural, indigenous community is seven hours from the nearest town, and many do not speak Spanish, making it difficult to participate in trainings and consultations. But she is ready to fight on despite the struggles and defeats. She is proud to share the specific experiences of Indigenous women with the SEMA network and hopes that she can open the door for others like her.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “I thought that this violence only happened in Guatemala, but I see that every country has similar issues, especially where there has been conflict. Together, we will fight to bring an end to violence against women. We won't stop until we have achieved it.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “There is a weight that SEMA brings to me and to actions in my country. When I go back to Guatemala, SEMA lets me say, 'I am here' and be counted. The Mukwege Foundation co-financed some sessions on reparations where we talked about what it means from an Indigenous perspective, for example, the importance of medicinal plants and a healing approach based on our belief system and culture. We suffered not just mass rape, but an attempt to kill off our communities, a kind of genocide, and we have presented a document on reparations that the state has consistently ignored. But the name of SEMA carries weight.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “Just being here brings joy to my heart. It is like another world to be surrounded by my sisters and to listen to their stories, to learn about their struggles and successes. Back home, it is night and my family is sleeping. Here, it is day and I am working. It is strange, but good. And I appreciate that everyone makes an effort to communicate with me here even though Spanish is not my mother tongue.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “I am proud of participating in SEMA as an Indigenous woman and of having the chance to open a space for others like me to share what we know. Sometimes it feels like there is no hope, but we always find new ways to resist. In the absence of state support, we have needed to heal our own communities by preserving our beliefs, our clothes, our plants, and our language. It is a form of justice that I am proud to share with SEMA.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “We are very grateful that this space has been created and that there is space for Indigenous women. But it is not enough. We want more room at the table for Indigenous communities like ours. Language is still an enormous obstacle. It is not that I lack words or ideas. On the contrary, I have so many things I wish to say, just in my own tongue.”

Name: Maria

Country: Guatemala

Member of SEMA since: 2019

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“Unbearable brutality, not daring to look into the eyes of a rapist, obliterating religious identity, and facing a fate in which death is the only obsession. That is what captivity means.”

**Nadya,
Iraq**





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"Before being a member of SEMA I was heartbroken, indoors all the time.

Now I am happy and free. Before I couldn't even go to communities but now I can. SEMA is my world of happiness. After all, now I also give comfort to my community."

**Christine,
Rwanda**



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The world's priorities lie with the perpetrators. That needs to change.

Name: Leesa

Country: Bangladesh

Member of SEMA since: 2017

Award-winning documentary filmmaker, playwright, and actor Leesa is passionate about bringing the forgotten stories of the Birangona to light. 'Birangona' (meaning 'brave women') is an honorific title given to women survivors of sexual slavery in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Although hundreds of thousands of women were raped and tortured, and over 50 years have passed, the international community has not acknowledged the impact of the 1971 war on women and girls in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, after a lifetime of ostracism, the Birangona are dying before they gain recognition of what they went through. Leesa is preserving their stories through works of film and theatre and has been bringing her creativity to the SEMA network since 2017.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? "It means so much. SEMA is an opportunity to bombard the world with survivor stories. I think that this is the way forward. Mostly we should do this in order that these things do not happen again, and so that we do not forget the unimaginable suffering of these women. For people to think that 'these things will not happen to me, it will not touch me' is wrong. We must face up to this."

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? "To be part of SEMA is very important. It is my passion to help get Bangladeshi survivors what they want, it's like a calling. SEMA is part of this. When the Mukwege Foundation invited me to be part of SEMA, it was incredible."

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? "I am so proud to have simply participated. It is one of my life's achievements. I accompanied two survivors, Jabeda Khatun and Anora Begum, to the retreat in 2018. I cannot tell you how amazing that experience was for them. It was the first time that they had left Bangladesh and the first time they had spoken out about what happened to them. After decades of being ignored, Jabeda publicly participated at a high-level symposium with world leaders asking for recognition and reparations. And when they returned home, they had respect from their communities having been stigmatised for decades. They both had their visas refused to join the SEMA retreat this year and were crushed. Countries tell the world proudly that they will stand by these women and put them at the centre of this fight, but then reject their visas for the very events that enable survivors to come together. It calls into question the commitment and conviction of countries to this cause."

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? "SEMA has done something for survivors from Bangladesh that they have never had: it gave them the chance to speak out and say what they want for the first time in their lives. That was a breakthrough for them. That was priceless. I don't think it is possible to truly understand what that means for these women."

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? "Many of the Birangona are in their 70s, frail and old. And they haven't even been acknowledged yet. So this remains the most pivotal issue. And it is connected to reparations, which is a strategic priority for SEMA, although there are still so many obstacles for survivors before we get there. I am also interested to work on inter-generational trauma. SEMA helps with this by providing a platform for advocacy and sharing ideas."



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After all these years, I have a smile on my face.

When Suzy was approached about joining SEMA, she thought it sounded “too good to be true.” Now, four years later, it is clear that Suzy has seized the opportunity and made the most of it. Her participation in SEMA has helped her personally to heal from her trauma, and in turn has boosted her mentorship of over 30 young women and girls in South Sudan – survivors for whom the risks of prostitution and HIV are high and who have difficulty to access education. Additionally, Suzy has travelled to Uganda to work with refugees in desperate need of medical care, livelihood support, housing, and education. While in the DRC, she helped draft the Kinshasa Declaration, which calls for urgent, life-saving reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. And after all these years, she says she now has a smile on her face.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “Many organisations start a programme and they do not reach five years. But SEMA did, so we should celebrate this. You see, I do trainings for international organisations and UN Peacekeepers in my country to teach them how to handle survivors when they come across them. But sometimes I ask myself, ‘What are they really doing?’ SEMA is different. We work hand in hand with survivors.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “Coming to the retreat in Luxembourg was the beginning of my healing journey. I cried a lot that first day. But amidst the crying there was also laughter. Some of us had never laughed for so long! Since then, I have learned a lot about how to rise up and speak out. My journey has enabled me to speak about my own story, and now I can use my own journey as an example for other girls in my country.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “As a SEMA member, I receive coaching from a French gentleman, which is so great. I talk about my mentorship work with girls in my country, and he helps me to improve how to talk with them, how to coach them and offer social support. The key is to really listen, not just collect their data. So now, I tell the girls my story and then I say, ‘It is not necessary for me to know your story. But when you are ready, I will be here to listen.’”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “I travelled to Uganda to facilitate a training with the Mukwege Foundation. I also had the chance to work with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Their needs are so many. They fled the war and had to start the process of living in a new country. Some of them still do not have a safe place to sleep. They are raped at night.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “I pray to let this programme continue. Whatever it takes, let it continue. We are a sisterhood of ‘queens’ from different continents and growing more day by day. When we come together, we are telling the world, ‘We are human. We are like other people. These are our names. We did nothing wrong. We can get an education, take jobs, and get married if we want. It is up to us.’”

Name: Susan (Suzy)

Country: South Sudan

Member of SEMA since: 2018

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“Being a part of SEMA gives me the courage to speak up in my country and break the stigma that surrounds the survivors. SEMA brings survivors from around the world together to fight for justice and end the stigma. It's a sisterhood beyond anything we could achieve alone. Through SEMA we are heard by the world leaders and international community.”

**Vasfije,
Kosovo**





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"The sky is the limit to those who thrive to win, but it's only through unity, love and support that we reach the goal."

Mildred,
Zimbabwe



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When you sing alone, no one will hear you. But when you sing in a group, the volume becomes higher and people hear you.

Esperande came to South Africa in 2003 as a refugee from Burundi. It was while at university that she started to think critically about sexual violence, "I felt intimidated and frustrated", she says, "and I realised I needed to break the silence." She published articles and went on to work with Tearfund on a research project on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), pushing for greater awareness of the connection between sexual violence and disease transmission. She established the Phephisa Survivors Network, bringing together both South African and migrant survivors of SGBV, who, she remarks, have shared common experiences despite being of different nationalities. The Mukwege Foundation invited Esperande to join the global network in 2017. Since then, she has come full circle, deciding to work to set up a survivors' network in her home country, Burundi.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? I will never forget the first retreat. It was a healing moment to sit, cry and listen to other stories from all over the world. We had a platform to discuss things that had never been discussed before. SEMA has also provided me with professional coaching for my work in South Africa. After Geneva, I also thought about Burundi. People are raped every day and no one cares. I decided to start a network there too, working with Tearfund.

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? I wrote on my notebook at the retreat that I am no longer defined or scared by my past and that, actually, I am happy for my future. Sexual violence isn't something that is going to disappear today or tomorrow, though SEMA is a platform that will give power to our children and grandchildren.

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? The first retreat – my first day in the network. It was so powerful to listen to survivors from different parts of the world. They took away my fears and empowered me by listening. It gave me courage.

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? I am the worst in singing myself (laughs). But I see a huge change in survivors from music therapy. There are some who never talk, who keep quiet. Then, when the music comes, they are the first to dance! It is also a valuable advocacy tool. We perform our music at workshops and conferences and people ask where we get the songs from, and we can tell them that these songs are our stories. It really makes people aware. There are the individual successes too: I met a young lady in Burundi last year who had been raped, but was unable to get the medical and psychological support she needed. No one understood her and her condition got worse. Thanks to SEMA, I was able to organise for her to travel to DRC for treatment at Panzi Hospital.

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? It is also important that SEMA realises the reparations fund – this will be a tool of accountability for perpetrators and give credibility to survivors. We also need to think about the sustainability of the network. The role of SEMA is to empower and help activists do advocacy at an international level. What has been achieved by SEMA already is huge - though we are still only at the beginning.

Name: Esperande

Country: Burundi

Member of SEMA since: 2017



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Through SEMA, survivors have come together and demanded a line to be drawn.

Name: Mirsada

Country: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Member of SEMA since: 2017

For Mirsada, the survivor-centred approach is key to why she joined SEMA in 2017. As a long-time activist and director of the Bosnian organisation Our Voice since 2018 (which gathers male and female survivors of the Bosnian War together) Mirsada is familiar with the ways in which survivors can be used and exploited to serve the purposes of others. However, SEMA is different. As she explains, “At SEMA, we are the ones who are centre stage...and through SEMA I have been connected to relevant organisations to help us progress our cause.” Among other things, this includes reparations. Through SEMA, Mirsada was brought into contact with the Global Survivors Fund, Vive žene and TRIAL International who have collaborated to shed light on the obstacles to recognition and reparations that survivors of sexual violence continue to face in Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 30 years since the conflict.

What does five years of SEMA mean to you? “I only have words of praise for SEMA. I have been a member for the full five years since it started, and it has totally changed my life. Through SEMA, survivors have come together and demanded for a line to be drawn. And while we are aware that we cannot stop wars, we can stop the use of the female body as a weapon of war. We have defined our needs together, such as reparations. And through SEMA, I have been connected with the right people and organisations to work on these topics in Bosnia.”

How has being part of SEMA had an impact on your life? “In advocacy meetings that I take part in, I always mention SEMA. I speak with my heart full of SEMA. The other SEMA members are an inspiration, and I learn from them, and I feel so much stronger after the retreats. When I heard about this retreat [in the Netherlands in 2022], I couldn’t sleep for days. And while I have been here, I haven’t needed to take my usual sleeping pills. I don’t know if it is because I am far from home where everything happened, or maybe it is because I am totally fulfilled.”

What has been your favourite SEMA moment? “Every moment is a favourite moment. The difficult parts are when we have to say goodbye to each other and go home, not knowing whether we will all meet together again. SEMA has given me so many memorable opportunities, like being able to visit Luxembourg and meet the Grand Duchess. I would never have seen Luxembourg if not for SEMA.”

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? “Mostly I am proud of my sisters and their energy! It’s really difficult to describe this in words. But I see them and it’s inspirational.”

Looking forward, what do you hope for in the next five years of SEMA? “I can see how Dr. Mukwege has had an impact in other countries, and I want to see the same support and acknowledgement for the 20,000-50,000 women who suffered sexual abuse in the Bosnian War, who have been forgotten. How I see it, SEMA could play a role in helping to speed up war crimes trials in Bosnia. Our authorities turn a deaf ear when bringing perpetrators to justice and everything is very slow, even when there is full documentation of cases. Perpetrators leave for Russia because Russia won’t extradite them. Through advocacy and bringing victims together, SEMA can work to realise progress on these judicial processes.”

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"The extreme violence suffered by girls and women in times of conflict is not only linked to the contexts of war, but to a culture of violence against girls and women in times of peace."

**Assetou,
Mali**





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“Me, as a woman,
a mother,
a survivor
from Kosovo,
being used as a
weapon of war;
unquestionably I
can call myself a
heroine.”

**Shyrete,
Kosovo**



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Nothing about us,
without us - I ascribe
to this ethic 100%.
Not for survivors,
but with survivors.
It is so important
that survivor voices
are heard. Survivors
tend not to be
consulted, but no
one knows their pain
better than they do.

Name: Tatiana Mukanire

Country: DRC

Member of SEMA since: 2017

Tatiana believes passionately that survivors should be the principle actors in the fight against sexual violence. She is an outspoken activist and advocate on the international stage, travelling globally to speak on behalf of survivors. It was her engagement with SEMA that inspired her to become this force for change: "At the first SEMA retreat in Geneva I met people who had achieved things in their own countries - who were also survivors. I realised that I could do the same." With support from SEMA, Tatiana and her colleagues founded the national survivor network in DRC. The network now has 3500+ members across four provinces, and has carved out a space for survivors in Congolese society. It's a great achievement. Here is her story, in her own words.

Describe your experience with the SEMA network. I first heard about the global network of survivors in 2017. I was invited to the first retreat to discuss the concept, although at that stage I wasn't ready to talk about my experiences. But, when I was there I encountered other survivors who were willing. It was amazing to listen to them and it gave me the courage to speak out myself. Upon doing so, I had a feeling of great release and felt like a normal person. Despite the language barriers I can truly speak freely with my SEMA mothers and sisters. We keep in touch on Whatsapp using Google translate. One of the survivors in Ukraine has a daughter called Tatiana!

How has your membership in the SEMA network changed your life? I find the spirit of solidarity the greatest therapy for me. After I returned home from that first retreat in Geneva, I wanted to try to make people understand, starting with my own family. We were also inspired to start the survivors network in DRC - we do advocacy work, we write memoranda for the Congolese state. I am also very engaged in international activities - I went to Washington for the launch of the film SEMA, which was written and acted by 60 survivors from DRC. I have travelled to South Korea to meet Comfort Women, who are my heroines, and to New York and Geneva to present at the UN. I am a community leader, respected for my work. I have come to realise that I am important for my community and that I can speak in the name of people who, like me, need a voice.

As a SEMA member, what are you most proud of? There are many things that I am proud of, but the greatest is to have confidence in myself. It is to walk with my head held high, to have the respect of other people, and to be able to carry the voices of other survivors.

What is your dream for the future of the SEMA network? The network must remain as it is - a simple network with the goal of raising awareness. As a network we are united by our links, connected by pain and determination, and it is not about money or other interests.

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"I have lost my mother, father, and brothers during the oppression of Daesh. SEMA is my family and I am very happy to be at the SEMA retreat among the sisters of survivors from other countries. Hand-in-hand, we are one voice and united, saying no to violence. Let peace be upon the woman. Our hope is justice."

**Zina,
Iraq**





dr. Denis
Mukwege
Foundation

Colophon

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To Rachel Corner, thank you for capturing the immense strength of these women.



Listen to the song of the Global Survivor Network,
which brings together survivors of sexual violence
from conflict-affected regions worldwide.



SEMA

Global Network of Victims and Survivors
to End Wartime Sexual Violence

dr. Denis
Mukwege
Foundation