Structures Surrounding *the* 'User' *in* User Engagement: Gender-based Violence Design Engagements

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ABSTRACT

User engagement is a dynamic social process influenced by who is involved and how. Here we argue that designers must account for the structural conditions of users' lives, as they may have safety, accountability, and political implications. We review current scholarship in the area of user configuration and engagement from a 'structural' viewpoint of gender-based violence (GBV), to better understand such considerations. We propose three dimensions that might support designers in deepening their engagement in this area, namely: construction of the user, engagement within the context, and the designers' position. We combine these dimensions as a framework to review and compare examples of designed outcomes for GBV prevention. This article suggests thoughts and questions to be considered by designers for thinking more structurally about GBV design, and for other contexts involving people experiencing vulnerability.

Keywords

User

Engagement

Social structures

Gender-based violence

Inclusive design

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Structures Surrounding the 'User' in User Engagement: Gender-based Violence Design Engagements

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INTRODUCTION: DESIGN'S 'USERIZATION' IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

It is no longer the norm to design without understanding and engaging with the intended user of a proposed design. As Redström stated, "if design used to be a matter of physical form, its subject the material object, it now increasingly seems to be about the user and her experiences" (2006, p. 123). By designing closely with users, design has centered the user in the process (user-centered design). This seems like an ideal formula: if designers focus on people's needs, the outcomes will be successfully adopted. But, as some have argued, by adopting a design ideology of configuring people into users, designers can: constrain social groups from participating (Oudshoorn et al., 2004), ignore people's diversity of interactions (Baumer & Brubaker, 2017), depoliticize people (Keshavarz, 2020), and more. As Gonzatto and Van Amstel (2022) have highlighted, such 'userization' can be oppressive by nature. In contexts where oppressive mechanisms of violence are prevalent, designers may even put people at further risk through their 'userization'. As such, as Escobar (on whom we base our understanding of design) concluded: "design thus generates humans' (and other Earth beings') structures of possibility" (2018, p. 111), which condition ways of being in the world.

Still an emerging field, the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and design scholarship has mostly studied design outcomes through digital technologies across the fields of social sciences (e.g., Gendera et al., 2021), criminology (e.g., Segrave & Vitis, 2019), and HCI (e.g., Bellini & Westmarland, 2021), among others, focusing on methodologies to design digital tools and the outcomes

produced. The output of digital technologies has created opportunities for data activism (e.g., D'Ignazio et al., 2020), trauma recovery services (Gloor & Meier, 2020), perpetrator programs (Bellini & Westmarland, 2021), and more. Another upcoming area of study has been the mechanisms for perpetrating violence through technologies. For example, cyber-stalking (sharing intimate photos or videos without consent) and harassment (Lopez-Neira et al., 2019; Sultana et al., 2021), whereby technologies have become the very tools of oppression—also known as technology-facilitated abuse. There are myriad ways in which users and their experiences are (not) being considered, where designers' actions might prevent or develop conditions for violence to occur. Thus, it is critical to question who designers are turning into users, and how.

Overall, this article is an indicative critical review to share symptomatic insights from the doctoral study of the first author. We have taken this approach to offer thoughts and questions that might be important for those engaging in GBV design to think about. Situated in the United Kingdom (UK), the doctoral study explores how designers engage with users in intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention and response design globally. The study has been documenting the practice-based knowledge of practitioners' engagement with users when developing interventions for IPV.

In this article, we aim to engage with current scholarship in *user configuration* and engagement to critically question how structural conditions of GBV are built into the *structures of possibilities* emerging. As a result, we highlight three dimensions of design engagement within structures of GBV: (1) construction of the user; (2) engaging within the context; and (3) the designer's position. To do this, we provide a brief literature review of the current state-of-knowledge, and relevant examples of technologies to provide a 'real life' case study of the implication of these three suggested dimensions. Situated in the area of inclusive design, we aim to contribute to this upcoming field with an exploration into designers' positions and the way they engage with users in their processes and outcomes. Our analysis of design, therefore, focuses on designs intended to end GBV rather than the consequences of design used for violence. However, we believe this article may be valuable for designers in other contexts involving people experiencing vulnerability.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender-based Violence: Thinking Structurally

Gender-based violence (GBV), as defined by the European Commission (n.d.), is: "violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately." Generally, GBV is an umbrella term that includes acts of violence such as sexual violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), and gaslighting. If oppression is understood as the point of

contact between the oppressed and the oppressor, where the oppressed are denied their agency (hooks, 1984, p. 5), GBV, then, is a mechanism for the enforcement of gender oppression.

To understand GBV as a structural form of violence is to recognize violence as part of a spectrum of socialized behaviors. Yet, society often talks about women who *are* raped, assaulted, and so on, as if they were isolated incidents rather than a pattern of behaviors. A pattern that is deeply embedded within our institutions of education, politics, and media (Bates, 2022). As Black feminist Lola Olufemi expands:

> At a structural level, sexual violence is a deliberate occurrence. It is not an accident that across the world, most survivors of sexual violence are women and most perpetrators are men. (...) what is dangerous is the assumption that sexual violence only occurs because of a lack of understanding consent and not because men are socialised to constitute themselves and their masculinity through aggressive domination, among a number of other dehumanising practices. (2020, p. 98)

Still, it should be recognized that all genders can support and perpetuate violence (hooks, 1984, p. 118). At an intersectional level, Bailey and Burkell (2021) call our attention to how unpatterned understandings of violence can further expose people to violence across different systems of oppression. For example, women with disabilities are twice as likely to experience IPV than abled-bodied women, yet due to the marginalization of their experiences, have been left ill-equipped to recognize and respond to abusive behaviors (Save Lives, 2017). As such, ignorance of the structural conditions of GBV can lead to "responses that may look like 'solutions' to the structurally privileged but can be unhelpful or dangerous to the structurally marginalised" (Bailey & Burkell, 2021, p. 533). Liberation then requires us to be in solidarity with the structurally marginalized and become a "movement to end all forms of violence" (hooks, 1984, p. 130), where "we all need to make a conscious break with the system" (hooks, 1984, p. 161); designers included.

GBV requires a collective response. In *Fix the System, Not the Women*, Bates (2022) suggests interconnected approaches: teachers could be trained to better understand how to address sexual harassment in the classroom, police officers could be trained to be trauma-informed, and more. These suggestions reveal the possibilities for designers to 'design for', that move beyond users who experience/perpetuate violence. Given that, as noted above, design ideologies that tend to shape people into users can be oppressive by nature. Thus, we must examine the implications of design acting in this area, and how it sits in wider social contexts. Through thinking structurally about GBV, we may begin to question the state-of-design in this context. Such understanding calls for a

deeper reflection on how behaviors are socialized across our society, including in designers' ideologies and processes.

Three Dimensions of Designers Engaging within GBV

We will now briefly make a short review of the well-established scholarship around 'configuring the user' (e.g., Woolgar, 1990), engagement, and designer positions. We will then contextualize these within GBV to highlight the implications these theories can have in the field. The aim is to develop a theoretical framework for which we may critically question what *structures of possibilities* are emerging, and may emerge from design's engagement in GBV contexts.

The user is often considered to be the representation of the person that has a relation to the design: "there must be something there for us to 'use' in order to become 'users'" (Redström, 2006, p. 129). Use then becomes what designers study to understand what to design for (e.g., particular people's needs and desires) (Baumer & Brubaker, 2017). Yet, the person does not necessarily equate to the user. Rather, it is through active mediation of the designed space that the person becomes the user (Vindenes & Wasson, 2021). For the person to participate in the designed outcome, they must fit into what has been preconceived by the designers as the 'ideal user' (Bardzell, 2010). Those who then fall out of the boundary are excluded. There exists, therefore, a dual dimension of the user: the user as imagined or constructed by the designer, and the 'real' user who will interact with the outcome. Inevitably, there are differences between the two, which may implicitly reinforce oppressive structures onto their 'real' users. For example, in male and female public toilets, constructing users as two separate sexes affects queer and trans user identities (Canli & Martins, 2016; Criado Perez, 2019, pp. 47–52). Designers may use an implicit representation of themselves (I-methodologies), projecting their perspectives onto users (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2004). As such, the source of oppression here is not the design itself, but rather the social group behind the technology, including the designers (Gonzatto & van Amstel, 2022).

To mitigate this, there has been an attempt to increase user inclusion in the design process through participatory design methods, qualitative approaches, and workshops (Spiel et al., 2020). The aim is for people to engage as if they were the user of the design, the 'user representative' (Muller et al., 2001), through methods and tools that may elicit further understandings of their lived experiences within the context. Engagement here is not static but rather a dynamic social process influenced by who is involved and how, experienced in a hybrid state between the user's and designer's domain (Zhang & Zurlo, 2020). Often, it is designers who are engaging in people's domain rather than *vice versa*. In this regard, these approaches have been critiqued for the power dynamics they produce, and

for extractive processes that claim inclusivity while mainly benefitting designers and organizations (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

In contexts of trauma and highly marginalized communities, "the configuration and temporary nature of the design workshop as it has been conceived can leave participants without an actual resolve to deeply important issues and may, at worse, be intrusive or harmful to certain communities" (Harrington et al., 2019, p. 3). For GBV contexts and others involving trauma, being asked to recount personal experiences through design methods—such as user journey maps and sensitive memories—might retrigger trauma. Designers, who are rarely trained to deal with such issues, risk putting people in a position of disclosing trauma with no vehicle to recovery (Hirsch, 2020). Thus, trauma-informed practices (see Dietkus, 2022) are needed to counteract this. Furthermore, we must also think structurally about how users understand their experiences and how that, in return, may impact what outcomes arise from the engagements. For example, in a recent survey from UN Women UK (2021) that sought to understand the prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces, 55 percent answered "I didn't think the incident was serious enough to report." It could be then expected that in a workshop environment user representatives might lessen their experiences. Designers should take that into account when informing their work.

In exploring further designers' positions concerning engagements, we will question the designer themselves. Suchman's work on 'located accountability' called for designers to understand that "our vision of the world is a vision from somewhere" (2002, p. 96). She draws on Haraway's (1988) work on situated knowledges; that is, that we are born from the positions we hold in our societies, which shape the ways we claim knowledge. Such a view cannot separate the designer from the context, where the designer becomes accountable for the ideas and experiences brought into the design system (Suchman, 2002). Here, the designer must become accountable to the harmful ideologies they might have of GBV (i.e., isolated incidents), but also aware of how the design systems might impact their own experiences—e.g., the emotional work involved in researching in sensitive settings (Strohmayer et al., 2020).

When one in three women globally has experienced either physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021), it is likely that a designer will have lived experiences and traumas. In return, this can shape how they understand the contexts which might be used to justify design decisions (Oudshoorn et al., 2004), and/or put them in a position for re-traumatization. Even for those who might not have lived experiences, it can also put them at risk of vicarious trauma (Bellini, 2021, p. 217). Accountability to designers' position in GBV contexts thus can impact how engagement is performed with not only users but also themselves.

In this short review, we have focused on the interpersonal engagements between the designers' position and the user, and how these can be built on the structural conditions of GBV (Figure 1). Agid highlighted this as an important site of inquiry: "how the relationships through which designing happens are made in these complex contexts and how that, in turn, shapes the stakes, conditions, and imagined or hoped for possibilities for designing" (2016, p. 82). We are sure that many more relationships are emerging in these complex contexts, but we hope that by briefly expanding on a few we might highlight the importance of considering and researching the dynamic relationships that emerge from these engagements. As such, we propose three dimensions that might help to deepen designers' critical self-reflection in these contexts:

1. *Construction of the user*. The dual dimension between the user as socially constructed by the designer, and the 'real' user that interacts with the product.
2. *Engagement within the context*. What conditions are being made? Who is involved and how? How does the structural condition of GBV affect such engagements?
3. *The designer's position*. From what ideologies does the design come and is produced? In what ways is the designer accountable to the context and themselves?

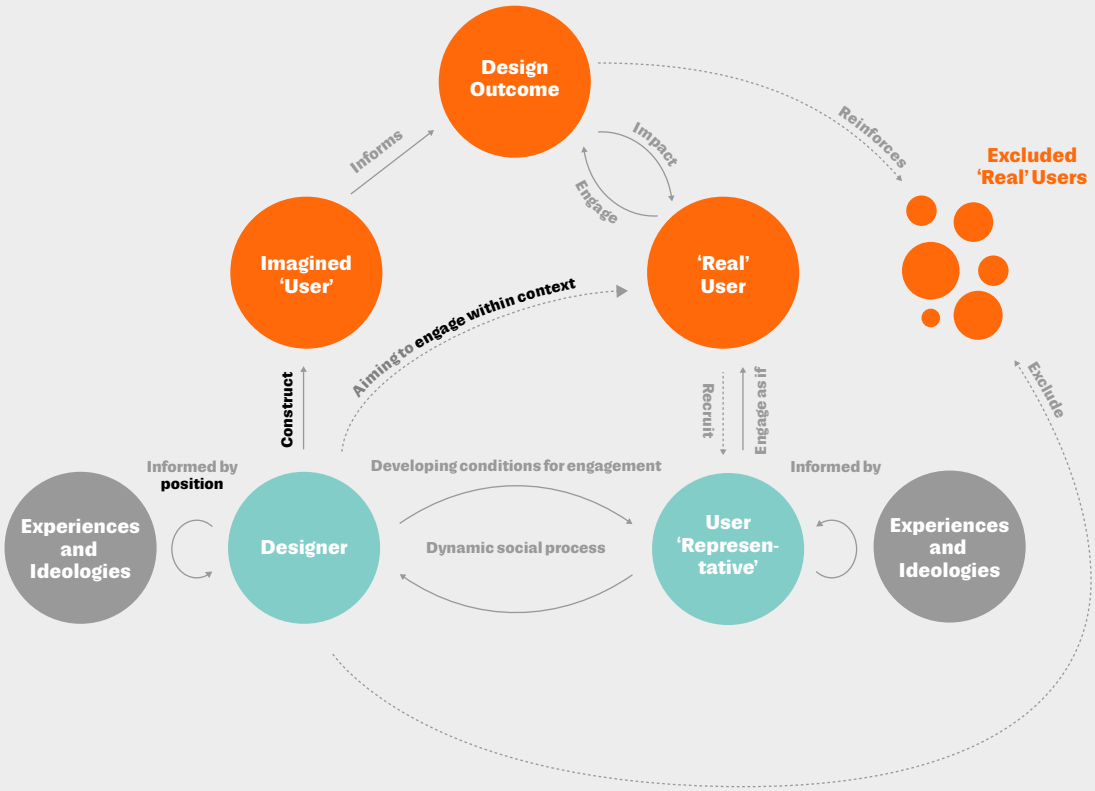

Figure 1: Exploration of the system behind user configuration and engagement. Initial exploratory diagram visualizing the theoretical background literature presented in the text. It shows the designer and user dynamics, the conditions that influence engagement, and the possibilities it creates. Source: Elaborated by Rute Fiadeiro.

To fully explore these dynamics in this context is beyond the scope of this article; however, we highlight important considerations for designers to deepen this discourse and build an understanding of what it means to design, engage, and be a designer.

A STUDY OF USERS IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Turning Gendered Bodies into Surveilled Users

In exploring the user, we will first turn to scholarship that has critically analyzed relationships between the ideologies of sexual violence and the technologies born from interactions between designers, organizations, and devices. While interviews would help us understand designers' intent (Bivens & Hasinoff, 2018) and their process, we hope these insights from scholarship might help designers understand what outcomes emerge if the aforementioned stakes, conditions, or imagined possibilities are (not) taken into account.

Bivens and Hasinoff (2018; also, Eisenhut et al., 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; White & McMillan, 2020) assessed current technologies for sexual violence and revealed how ideologies about users and the context were embedded in them. White and McMillan (2020) found that these technologies took the form of (1) corporeal devices (e.g., anti-rape underwear); (2) communication devices (e.g., apps for monitoring journeys); (3) hybrid corporeal/communication devices (e.g., wearables that, when triggered, alert people), which most commonly aimed at monitoring, alerting, and sounding alarms, and all aimed to prevent sexual violence. Furthermore, Bivens and Hasinoff (2018), in their analysis of mobile phone apps, also found that 87 percent took a victim-centric approach and generally targeted women.

According to the studies, while many may think these designs are empowering women to walk in public spaces, what they do is the contrary. They reveal that these technologies reinforce common rape myths and notions of 'stranger danger', normalizing a culture of sexual violence by placing the emotional labor on women to prevent these through personal vigilance, risk reduction, and intervention. These technologies disregard how people of color are disproportionately criminalized for defending themselves. For those that ask for paid subscriptions, these technologies commodify women's safety, where only those who can afford it may 'defend' themselves. These technological positions negate the empirical evidence of how the majority of violent acts towards women are perpetrated by someone they know in familial locations.

Consequently, these monitoring devices then might become tools for partner and familial abuse, thus designing into the world more ways for women's bodies to be constantly surveilled and disciplined (Bivens & Hasinoff, 2018; Eisenhut et al., 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; White & McMillan, 2020).

From a designer's perspective, it is suggested that they view individual actions as the most practical solution design can offer (Bivens & Hasinoff, 2018). White and McMillian equally found that the marketing material that accompanied these products revealed the self-image designers had, with some claiming to be 'saving lives', 'empowering women', and 'solving a social problem'. Thus, this reflects the implicit views designers have of women and violence.

Who is Truly the User?

What we can see from these studies is how, through the 'userization' of women's bodies, they become surveilled. By *constructing the user* as an individualized vulnerable pedestrian woman, experiences of sexual violence are imagined as various isolated incidents. This has socio-political consequences that deny that sexual violence is indeed a pattern of violence (Bates, 2022) reinforced across society, community, relationships, and individuals, rather than occurring due to a lack of safe communication and monitoring tools. Designers seem to be trying to *engage within the context*, driven with an intent to fix the immediate concerns of the matter (*position*): that women do not feel safe walking in the street (*construction*). It is understandable that by adopting common methods of design engagement (such as user journey maps and interviews with women) designers would lead to a solution that closely mirrors one that women already take today—that is, texting their partners/friends about their journey (Manne, 2021)—rather than finding the root cause, which women themselves might not be equipped to understand.

These technologies in return may become political tools for governments. In the UK, after Everard was raped and murdered by a former police officer in March 2021, then UK home secretary Priti Patel backed a proposal for a safety service for monitoring journeys (Badshah, 2021). The government shirked its responsibilities and expected the design to act in its stead, while further placing the *burden* on women to protect themselves. Bates speculated: "Unlike the tracking app that would do nothing to protect victims in the moment they were attacked, a similar scheme that tracked the movements of men previously convicted of, say, stalking or serial domestic abuse might actually prevent women's deaths in future" (2022, p. 147). In this case, men become the users. However, given that only 1.6 percent of rape cases lead to a charge or summons in the UK (Barr & Topping, 2021), it would still not prevent violence.

These accounts question who the user in design should be. If designers claim that users are those who have a relation to the design that supports the user's needs and desires, then governments and men are the users here. Not to mention the people who use these devices as tools for abuse. Bellini suggests: "We must always be mindful of whom we are holding responsible for the violence of others, as well as how we permit responsibilities around retribution and preven-

tion for current and future generations" (2021, p. 223). Building on this, we call for designers to recognize the burden and risk of taking on the role of user 'representative' or 'real' user, and not to assume victim-survivors should bear that responsibility. The underlying question becomes, should designers design for victim-survivors or perpetrators? But do they have to be opposing? By engaging in the social structures that surround the users, designers might better understand: (1) how violence is socialized; (2) how needs come from a pattern and what perpetuates that pattern; (3) whose needs design truly enables.

If sexual violence is characterized as caused by women's behavior, (e.g., 'women are raped in the streets because they walk alone'), then designed outcomes will be limited and reinforcing. Yet by reframing sexual violence as a behavior that is enforced through our social structure through socialized aggressive masculinities (Olufemi, 2020), completely different outcomes are foreseen. So, the *construction of the user* needs a reconstruction of the *designer's position* through their *engagement within the context*.

Structural Engagements

Now, we may think: where should we start when trying to design structurally? To begin to answer this we will extract key features from current evidence-based programs to prevent violence against women (VAW) elaborated by Prevention Collaborative, a group of practitioners and researchers connecting local and global preventative knowledge in violence against women (Prevention Collaborative, 2021). Figure 2 is a representation of how these programs sit against the socio-ecological model. Programs include couples' programs to promote healthy relationships, and media campaigns to promote new behaviors and norms. As these programs don't come from a design-focused process and therefore don't come loaded with design configurations of the 'user', we will refer to those who interact with them as 'people'. We equally note that this might be a weakness in our study.

These programs focus on a deeper *engagement within the context* by having key features such as engaging people to critically reflect on their social structures, increasing discussion around the social issue, promoting positive behaviors, building knowledge and skills, and raising awareness. Most of these programs included intensive participatory sessions with trained facilitators, which is quite unlikely in design practice. But essentially, these programs asked people to either engage with each other, engage with facilitators, or engage with themselves; aiming to change behaviors, whereas the safety apps discussed above engage the user in an isolated manner of self-surveillance.

As such, by investing in people's potential, they *construct the people that interact with their design* as agents capable of changing their own situations. For example, programs that provide cash transfers to households have been shown

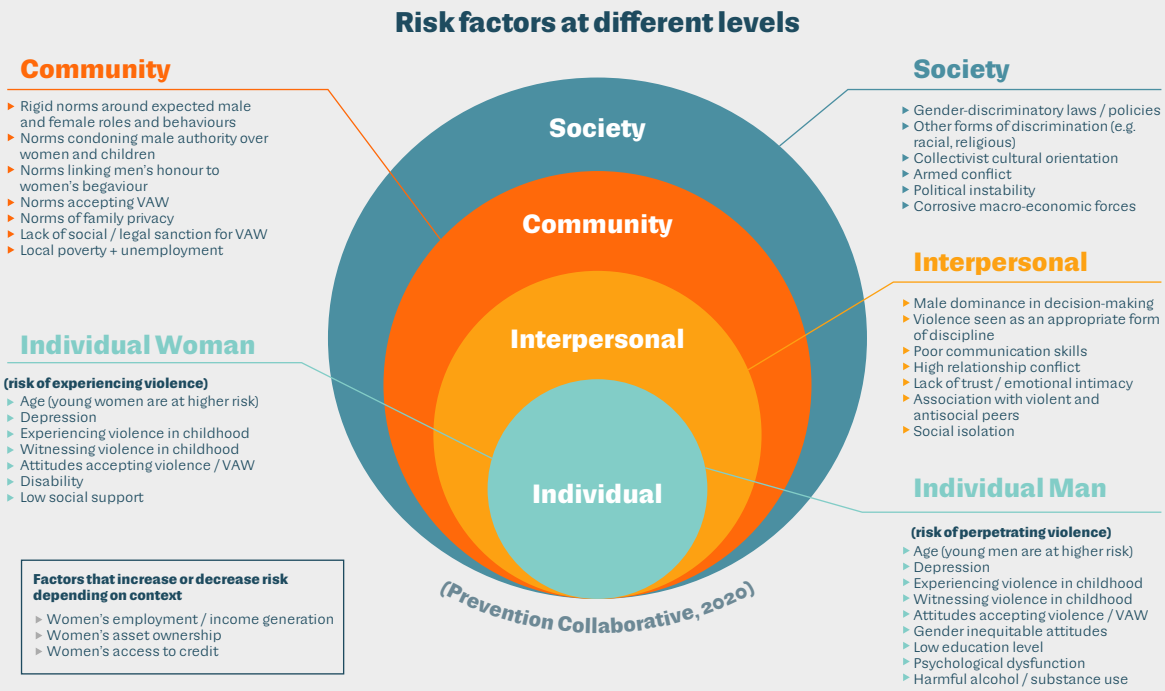

Figure 2: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Violence against women and children (VAW/C) prevention programming across the socio-ecological model, and the risk factors at different levels. The diagram developed by Prevention Collaborative shows that risk factors can increase or decrease the possibilities of violence across the different levels from individual to society, and how they have developed prevention programming in response to these risks. Source: Prevention Collaborative, 2020, 2021.

to increase economic security and emotional well-being, reducing some forms of intimate partner violence. Perhaps, the question we are left with after observing these programs is: what can't design do? As is evident, if designers were to take a similar *positional* understanding of the user in relation to behaviors that are patterned and deeply embedded in our structures (Figure 2), a different approach might emerge. Finally, we would like to note that while we have focused on preventative work, we don't want to reduce the response services that are critical to any work in GBV. For example, Chayn implements trauma-centered practices (Naidoo, 2021) to help survivors overcome trauma through self-reflective courses.

In following the accounts of 'who is truly the user' and evidence-based programs that are born outside of 'userization' spaces, we may wonder whether the word 'user' is still applicable in GBV. The words we employ can impact the dynamics between designer and user, thus impacting how designers engage and understand their positions. Equally, this conversation has been raised in humanitarian contexts; their equivalent word to users, 'beneficiaries', has been highlighted to justify extracting and 'othering' (Hendrix-Jenkins, 2021). In design, Baumer and Brubaker (2017) developed a post-userism concept as a way to represent subject positions that sit outside of the classical user.

Does the word 'user' inherently ask designers to look at individuals? Would 'citizens' fit better, as it would ask us to think about interpersonal interactions between people and with the state? However, as Gonzatto and van Amstel argued, "simply replacing 'user' for 'person' (...) while maintaining the same production relations can even intensify the oppression by covering up userism" (2022, p. 770). They noted that this could be counteracted by claiming users as a political category (Gonzatto & van Amstel, 2022). For example, for VAW this could look like "positioning women as autonomous agents who do not invite rape and in doing so expose the social and cultural logics that maintain 'rape myths' and victim-blaming attitudes" (Loney-Howes, 2020, p. 118).

GOING FORWARD

We are optimistic about designs' capabilities to intervene structurally in GBV if the aforementioned considerations are in place. We suggest to designers already involved in or taking up this area to familiarize themselves with the concepts and literature we have referenced in this article, to inform their *design positions*. In return, this might influence how designers *construct users* and *engage within the context*. These three dimensions can provide a self-reflective site for designers. As briefly discussed above, there is much work happening in the field that looks to work structurally. Designers should seek to partner with organizations where needed (while acknowledging the funding and time constraints NGOs are often under), and should critically question what their role is (Agid, 2016). We however

see that there is still a gap in developing a deeper understanding of the stakes and conditions of designers working in this area; indeed, what design can and can't do. To do this, the doctoral study on which this article is based will be engaging with the practice-based knowledge of designers in the field of intimate partner violence (IPV), exploring who is behind the designs, how they are implementing/changing design practices, and what engagement looks like in their contexts. We hope the outcome might offer a framework of design IPV that future designers can use to shift their perspectives to think structurally before they engage within the context. D

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