MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS | POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE
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Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programming in human trafficking and modern slavery: reflections from Middle East and North Africa (MENA), East and West Africa.*

*Regional report for the project *Promising practices in the engagement of people with lived experience to address modern slavery and human trafficking*

**Azadi Kenya
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Introduction

In efforts to assess the nature and effectiveness of survivor empowerment and engagement mechanisms in international policies and programmes on human trafficking and modern slavery around the world, University of Liverpool commissioned us at Azadi Kenya to conduct interviews to contribute to the research. The objectives of the research were: 1) to examine evidence of existing promising practice and learning in relation to survivor engagement in modern slavery international policy and programming; 2) to explore the understandings and perspectives of varied stakeholders on this issue; 3) to explain the benefits of meaningful survivor engagement and make recommendations for policymakers and; 4) to explore some of the factors that hinder survivor inclusion and how these can be addressed.

Azadi Kenya is a survivor-led anti-trafficking organisation that focuses on providing long-term support to survivors of trafficking, supporting them to heal, thrive, and claim agency. As an organisation we are intentional about capturing survivor voices, honing survivors' lived experience and other expertise and integrating these into our programming thus giving us a unique perspective when speaking to other relevant stakeholders about their own experience being included or including survivors.

In this report, you will be introduced to our methodology, specifically recruiting, and interviewing six relevant stakeholders as well as a focus group discussion, then observed themes or key findings from the six interviews and focus group discussion analysed and discussed in the context of the others, and finally a conclusion of our findings.

Methodology

We interviewed six stakeholders in modern slavery for this research project. For recruitment to these interviewees, we were mindful from the beginning about capturing different perspectives and voices in our research and thus sought out relevant stakeholders in a multitude of different sectors, from different parts of the African continent, and who would provide different perspectives. We decided to seek out stakeholders from government entities, from IGOs, from civil society, and survivors. The expertise of interviewed stakeholders also ranged widely with some being experts on migration and domestic work, survivors who have been trafficked in different sectors, a lawyer, and stakeholders on trafficking broadly. We particularly wanted to speak to survivors about their involvement in the field after exiting trafficking and non-survivors who have worked in contexts

where survivor engagement was expected. Having all of these voices represented meant a more nuanced, clear picture of how survivor engagement has been conducted through different sectors across the continent.

The recruitment process was mostly smooth and most interviews went without hitches. A few had to be postponed or rescheduled due to emergencies, others became unavailable and had to recommend colleagues for us to interview instead. There were also occasional obstacles with the network issues, given that all of our interviews were conducted via Zoom. Overall, the interviewees all brought in different perspectives, and good rapport was established thereby creating room for candid discussions on the topics at hand.

The interviews were moderated by Caroline Adhiambo who was shadowed by one of our two survivor leaders per interview. The survivor leaders not only got to shadow Caroline throughout the interviews but also received hands-on training on different aspects of research which aided their learning process. This therefore made it possible for them to work on the transcripts and give their reflections at the end of every interview which was essential as it gave the basis of what was to be included in the final report.

For the focus group discussion, we decided to invite the same six people we had interviewed. Having our former interviewees there meant that the same people who had made contributions to the findings would be able to reflect on the conclusions drawn in the context of their own experience and have further discussions on some of the gaps that emerged from the different interviews thereby creating grounds for them to question and deeply analyse some of the data that was collected during the different interviews. The discussion was conducted in a semi-structured, informal manner, moderated by Caroline Adhiambo, and supported by the same two survivor leaders.

Following each interview, the transcript was analysed, picking the different codes, categories, and themes that were reflected. As that had been done with all the transcripts, an analysis of all the categories and themes were analysed in the context of the others, and they formed the basis of the findings below.

Key findings

i.   Current context: Limited engagement with survivors

As we were seeking to look at meaningful survivor engagement in policies and programmes, it was essential for us to not only look at avenues in which survivors are to be engaged but also the terminologies that are used to refer to survivors and the measures that are put in place to ensure that they are not exposed to the risk of re-traumatisation. It is essential for us to acknowledge that though in recent times survivor engagement is picking up pace, it has often been very limited thereby leading to the creation of policies and programmes that were at times out of touch with the divergent needs of survivors. This also led to the creation of policies with which survivors were to work, instead of creating policies that worked for them through meaningful survivor inclusion.

Intentionally not including survivors meaningfully in policy and programming, as has been evident, has been indicative of wider problems with how survivors have been perceived in the anti-trafficking movement. A perceived injustice is that survivors have been viewed as mere beneficiaries of programmes and services and this has often led to them not being actively and meaningfully engaged. As one of our interviewees observed, part of this may be because survivors were only viewed from the lens of their lived experience and the trauma that it wrought.

ii.   Complexities around terminology

Though there are conflicting opinions on who should be engaged and how they should be engaged actively in the field, it is essential to recognise that survivors should not be required to identify themselves or have any pegged identification for them to be actively engaged in the field. The issue

of terminologies and how survivors want to be engaged should be left solely as the decision of the survivors without the risk of them losing any support or form of engagement. Despite having different terminologies that represented where survivors were in their healing journey, they were still viewed under one blanket term of victimhood and lacking agency.

The contradictory and conflated meanings of the different terms that are used in the field made is confusing for not just stakeholders but also the survivors themselves who could at times not tell what the different words meant, as one interviewee expressed:

> *"Do you know even people in programming sometimes don't know the difference between all these terms because they are interconnected and linked. Most people have a conflated understanding of what they mean and even survivors themselves sometimes don't know the meaning of some of the phrases." (Migration Consultant, IGO, East Africa)*

This means that if there was a gap in the understanding of terminologies by those engaged in the field, the wider community amongst which survivors live may lack understanding on the same thus exposing them to the risk of stigmatisation and societal alienation.

> *"Most often you will get somebody with all those terminologies, and put together you are just reciting one definition you have maybe crammed from the trafficking in persons report … that will not make sense to that person". (Director, NGO, Central Africa)*

It is therefore essential to make sure that a different approach is employed when designing, implementing, and evaluating policies and programmes. If a project specifies a certain term only, e.g. victim, but the survivors themselves may not identify that way, those individuals are then excluded. Taking a more open approach helps ensure that projects are receptive and understanding of survivors and it also helps reduce the risk of trafficking as awareness will have been raised.

It is also important to focus on using the right terminologies per context and meet the survivors where they are, understanding the way they identify and, in a language they understand, so as to avoid contradiction. By doing so we will be able to prevent the confusion that emerges due to the contradictory nature of the terms and we can be more inclusive as we are allowing survivors to self-identify, not forcing them to subscribe to certain terminologies. In fact, one interviewee insisted that a universal approach is inadequate, as people may assign different values to the terms thus making it difficult to use the terms in one single way across cultures, languages, and contexts, saying instead that:

> *"You can call it whatever, but once we agree that we're referring to the same thing, then we are good to go…" (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)*

Recognising that the realities and challenges experienced by people are different from one region to the next is important to provide adequate support to the people in that particular region. A specific point raised was that if such a universal standard is framed on human trafficking terminology, chances are that it would be drafted in the West, which would likely prove inadequate and inconsistent with local contexts, at least in Africa. This also highlighted the gaps that exist in research and the adaptation of policies that are mainly borrowed from the Western context but are not fully applicable in Africa. For instance, it emerged that most of the data we have in research is based on sex trafficking and this informs the approaches and mitigative measures that are put in place to combat human trafficking and modern-day slavery.

> *"[the] bulk of the research is focused on sex trafficking interventions and best practices tend to go the same way and I think that is skewing the discussion and also the interventions". (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)*

iii. Gender dynamics: a barrier to survivor engagement and inclusion

Similarly to how sex trafficking is the type of trafficking most thoroughly researched, a notion that women are more commonly included in survivor representation also emerged. Though statistically

women and girls are the ones that are more vulnerable to exploitation, there is little or no inclusion of male survivors regardless. Patriarchal structures and the societal perspective of men were quoted as two main reasons for the low number of male survivors in the anti-trafficking movement. Regardless, it has become quite evident that human trafficking in the public eye has quite a narrow focus: women who have endured sex trafficking. While those should definitely be represented, focusing on a minority margin as a representation of human trafficking as a unit and survivors as a single entity, can damage the public's perception of the issue of trafficking and modern slavery significantly. One said:

> "you begin to realise that when we talk of trafficking, and it's not just about women being trafficked for sexual exploitation". (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)

This disconnect emerged as one of the barriers to survivor inclusion as survivors in some contexts may not be able to relate to this data.

iv. Accepting additional time and costs to include survivors on an equal basis

Another barrier that emerged that hindered meaningful inclusion of survivors was the fact that most projects are time bound and involving survivors may elongate the process, thus claiming efficiency to be the excuse when not involving survivors. One interviewed stakeholder said:

> "There's also the issue of time. Most projects usually are very timeline based. You want to do something and you want to do it. You want to accomplish a project or a programme in a span of one year or six months. You think of engaging these people like survivors, migrants on the ground. It takes time". (Migration Consultant, IGO, East Africa)

This, however, raised divergent opinions across the board and whilst there are those who agreed that for the 'help me help you' approach to work, timelines need to be adjusted. Others viewed this as perpetuating stereotypes about survivors being viewed as lacking agency and having less capacity which is not the case and could be harmful to the anti-trafficking movement if such opinions span widely.

Another challenge to survivor inclusion that we identified was the vision of the one or the very few specific survivors that are accepted or welcomed into conversations and decision-making processes. We, at Azadi Kenya, have often identified the same few survivors being represented in the anti-trafficking movement continuously, without giving spaces for other survivors with different voices and who represent a different margin of survivors. One interviewee attributed this to the narrow vision the ones sending out the invitations have on who should be represented. They said:

> "I mean people have a lot of different experiences and a lot of different ideas about how we approach something but unless somebody has that image of [...] a leader and speaks English well, you're not going to be chosen for those spaces". (Editor, NGO, MENA)

It thus often ends up being a narrow space for survivors with specific stories, voices, and opinions, leaving out a significant cohort of survivors who will then not be represented on an equal footing.

v. Avoiding tokenistic, extractive engagement

On the other hand, when survivors are invited to the table, tokenistic participation, where survivors are to be seen and not heard, also emerged as a barrier to engagement. One interviewee said:

> "I can be included in a choir, I just go to the practice but they don't really engage me like they don't really get me into action like I'm just there to add the population" (Director, NGO, Central Africa)

This coupled with survivors being engaged to only tell and retell their stories often exposes survivors to the risk of re-traumatisation. This has often meant that survivors are hesitant being engaged.

Though our interviewees had observed many problems with meaningful survivor inclusion, some success stories also emerged. One participant in particular made it clear that their organisation makes active choices in ensuring survivor representation, inclusion, and oversight through every layer of the organisation. They specified:

> "So survivors are included in our programming at all stages. The first stage has to do with our implementing partners. Usually we'll give grants to implementing partners who will provide technical support and capacity building to implement the programmes. We ensure that survivors are part of their team in terms of developing their strategic plan or in awareness raising campaigns. And so we form what we call survivor networks. These are groups of survivors who need to contribute to our awareness raising efforts, but also at the global level … We have appreciable number of survivors in the room contributing to the formulation of global policies to combat modern slavery". (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)

By actively including survivors meaningfully throughout the organisation's levels, they have ensured that survivors are not just there for the sake of being there, to tick a box, or to report back to their funders that survivors were in fact present. No, the survivors are so deeply ingrained into the organisational structure that they are the ones making all the decisions. The perceived gap of decision makers being very far removed from the survivors themselves thus becomes void. It also means that the programmes and policies they make and contribute to will have survivors' opinions as central aspects meaning that the change that the policy or programme is meant to invoke will be with survivors' best interests at heart.

vi.   Safety, safeguarding, and being trauma-informed

The same interviewee then commented on the sensitivity involving survivors. They said:

> "You need to do due diligence before you even consider bringing a survivor to an event or not. And if the disadvantages outweigh the benefits that you don't even do it at all because it's not all just about you. You absolutely need to bring a survivor. Therefore, at all costs you bring a survivor. No." (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)

Through being sensitive to the safety and wellbeing of a survivor – e.g. employing a trauma-informed approach and putting in the necessary safeguarding measures to ensure that safety and wellbeing is observed – we are not only creating an environment that will allow for survivors to be empowered, but also one where they can thrive.

However, a concentrated focus on the individual survivors' wellbeing, their journeys, and their ability to thrive have not been the consensus in anti-trafficking policies and programmes, which has been evident in the safeguarding measures imposed, or maybe more realistically, the lack of any kind of safeguarding approach. Safeguarding measures are essential as they lay precedence and offer guidelines on the ways in which survivor engagement is meant to be conducted, thereby ensuring wellbeing and preventing harm. Significant change is then also in store to ensure that these measures are observed through policy and programming and all its involved steps when survivors are being engaged.

It is essential to recognise that necessary measures are in place, as our interviewees indicated. It was, however, evident that in some contexts some of the observed safeguarding measures were not necessarily applied practically, especially when the wellbeing or security of the survivor was at stake. One interviewee said:

> "We are really careful to try to do that [employ safeguarding measures]. It looks different depending on what exactly it is we're reporting on and how we're reporting. It's obviously a lot easier if we're able to do it from countries of origin because there's a lot more space there to be able to openly talk to people in the Gulf countries that we work in. It's less, it's much more difficult to, you know, interview people, even if it's remote, because one of our biggest concerns is security and safety". (Editor, NGO, MENA)

The technicalities that come with the ways in which safeguarding protocols were fulfilled, especially when the survivor is still in the host country, was outlined as a major challenge especially in regions where the governments are not supportive of the approaches taken. For several interviewees, this often left CSOs with limited mandate for what they can do to ensure that safeguarding measures are followed and getting a survivor's perspective is achieved. One said:

> *"We definitely tried to create the opportunities for their involvement from the very beginning. And then when it comes to the actual implementation of, you know, programming or policy, again, what is kind of the main question on our heads at all times is security. And so, I'm trying to think of a good example. But it's just so much easier to do it when the programme is in countries of origin". (Editor, NGO, MENA)*

There were, however, certain organisations that had seemingly mastered the art of safeguarding, most specifically by making sure consent is captured every step of the way. They said:

> *"We have the child protection policies that are usually signed by our stakeholders and we also have consent from their parents as well. But ultimately, we look at the stage and how risk that could potentially come as a result of that activity. So those are some of the measures that we put in place". (Regional Director, NGO, West Africa)*

It is important to recognise good practices when we see them. Making sure that risk is avoided, safety is ensured, and that the survivors have fully consented to what they are getting themselves into with any project, activity, service, and opportunity provided and any policy or programme with which they take part.

Conclusions: The path forward

While our interviewees highlighted challenges and hurdles with meaningful survivor engagement, a clear path forward was highlighted by several. It is imperative for organisations to work together to not only ensure effective capacity development but also share vital information that will be essential in advising any changes that need to happen in policies and how they can be effectively adopted in the region. Gatekeeping knowledge, expertise, and best practices have sadly become the norm, however the potential for improvements in the field spans widely if organisations were better at collecting and fighting the battle together. As one of the interviewees put it,

> *"there is power in numbers and a lot can be achieved when working as a collective as compared to when working in a silo" (Department Head, Government Agency, East Africa).*

Generally, a lot of work has to be done to ensure more meaningful, more diverse, and more integrated inclusion of survivors in policy and programming. We have discovered quite a few hurdles to this, including tokenistic practices, only including survivors from a specific background and gender, only including very specific survivors while excluding others, and survivors themselves being hesitant to participate. However, there were positive examples of survivor inclusion through every layer of processes and operations discussed by interviewed stakeholders.

Similar trends were evident with regards to safeguarding. Most of our interviewees expressed that safeguarding protocols were limited to non-existent, yet more and more focus is put on receiving full, prior, and informed consent from involved parties, assessing risks, and overall prioritising the safety and comfort of the survivors participating.

While the road to get to here has been rocky, the moral of the story is very clear: for the gaps in research and policy to be addressed and for survivors to regain their power and agency, it is essential for them to be meaningfully involved in policy and programming. For this to happen, it is essential for both donors and stakeholders to prioritise their meaningful inclusion and having their input right from the conceptualisation of a project, to the implementation, and to the evaluating and reporting. By doing so, we are not only building their capacity but it also allows room for better insights, better and more inclusive approaches, and above all reduction in the risk of re-traumatisation and re-trafficking for survivors. Hopefully, the discoveries we have made and those

of our fellow regional consultants will result in a re-evaluation of approaches to engage survivors meaningfully, to be adopted across organisations, governments, research, and any other actor working with policy and programming on human trafficking. Without meaningful inclusion, survivors will continue to not be recognised as the experts they are.

For Azadi, we are highly keen on promoting meaningful survivor engagement, which is something we have actively practised for this consultancy ourselves. Our methodology with hands-on practice conducting research partnered with training went well and presented wonderful learning opportunities and outcomes, especially for the survivor leaders with whom we worked.

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