

Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programming in human trafficking and modern slavery: reflections from North America.*

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

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Introduction

This report was prepared by Chris Ash, an anti-trafficking professional in the southeastern United States whose work centers around empowering survivor leadership and public health approaches to violence prevention. Currently the Survivor Leadership Program Manager for the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, Chris's work brings together graduate study in gender and postcolonialism, over a decade of direct service crisis response with survivors of sexual violence, experience as a community organizer, and work as a Centers for Disease Control-funded training and technical assistance provider for statewide sexual violence prevention programming. This report is part of the Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre's research on survivor engagement in international development programs and policies to address modern slavery and human trafficking. This research project was commissioned by the United Kingdom's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office to explore the benefits of different types and levels of survivor engagement in order to translate these into evidence-based recommendations for policymakers. This regional report offers a brief summary of guidance offered by anti-trafficking professionals and experts working in the United States anti-trafficking context. Themes that emerged include: storytelling and tokenism, the need for professional development and career mobility, existing problematic sector and organizational frameworks and norms, and a need to better manage sector-wide and cultural power dynamics. Participants also offered recommendations for evaluation of meaningful survivor engagement.

Research methods

Seven participants were identified within the professional networks of the research consultant. All engage in anti-human trafficking professional leadership on the national level within the United States and four were foreign-born (three in Central America and one in Central Africa). The participant pool consisted of two direct service providers, two trainers, a nonprofit director, and two professionals in nonprofit middle management. The participants engage in multiple roles in the

sector. Thus, the seven also included six survivors, two clinicians, and one lawyer. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants – two in person and the remainder over Zoom – and two of the interviewees participated in an additional follow-up Zoom feedback session. Interviews were then transcribed, and thematic analysis conducted.

Key findings

i. Storytelling and tokenism

All interviewees noted a problematic perception in the sector that survivor leaders' work primarily consists of (or should consist of) telling their trafficking story. In general, storytelling for peer support in survivor-centered spaces was viewed favorably. Interviewee 06 shared: "I think with my storytelling with survivors - it's good because it empowers them to see where I'm at now and what work that I've done for myself." Three interviewees noted potential positive outcomes of public storytelling, which included public benefits and personal benefits. Public benefits included opportunities to influence policy, educate professionals in the field, and provide hope for others. Personal benefits included empowerment from speaking your truth and large-scale personal validation. Regarding validation and praise, one interviewee noted the complex relationship between praise, healing, and exploitation:

So you're just like you're not really aware of the ways that this can kind of become harmful after a while. But for the first time ever, I was someone's success story, right? Like, someone's inspiration porn. It was like, "you're so resilient, you're so incredible..." And I never had anybody tell me that before. (Interviewee 03)

This interviewee noted the downside to this validation: the continuing expectation to be seen as a success story puts professionals with lived experience "under the microscope," and they may be held to a different standard than other professionals in the field: "Survivors, we are going to make mistakes... We're human just as much as they're human. They're not perfect... They make mistakes. But because we're under the microscope, we always have to be perfect." (Interviewee 03). Interviewees expressed concern that survivors may begin telling their story before they are ready, and that they may do so out of pressure, coercion, obligation, or not knowing their options. When survivors share their stories without adequate preparation, coping strategies, and self-management skills, they may dissociate, possibly prompting over-disclosure. One survivor shared: "So I was just kind of like spewing all kinds of stuff that I hadn't even told the therapist... I'm telling like a group of this massive public about stuff that I haven't even discussed with a therapist yet." (Interviewee 03)

Survivors may be unaware of or unprepared for how public storytelling might impact them over time. For example, they may not know how their story will be used, how disclosure of trauma details might impact the arc of their career, or that it is a norm in many industries for models, performers, or authors to receive royalties when their work is used over time. Interviewees also noted that survivors have little control over how their story is framed and shared, and that it can feel exploitative or like a betrayal when their story or images are used either without their consent or in ways that they did not approve of or do not support. Interviewee 07 shared: "So a lot of the power is with those who run these organizations who don't have lived experiences, and while they are leveraging a lot of the experiences that we have..., they also have the power to cherry pick what they want to put in and what they don't want to put in." Storytellers may also experience responses to their stories that are invalidating, infantilizing, or that reinforce stereotypes.

Interviewees with lived experience described how their perspectives on public storytelling had changed over time, becoming either ambivalent or negative. Given this, the immediate and long-term mental health impacts of public storytelling is recommended as a locus for additional research, as are the ways in which survivors' perceptions of public storytelling may change over their time in the sector. Interviewees recommended only engaging storytelling when necessary to the work, and only with survivors' informed consent, adequate preparation, and an awareness of how survivors' perspectives on storytelling often change over time. Before a survivor's image or story is used in print, online, or in other media, the survivor should understand how the images will

be used, for what purposes, and for how long their consent applies. Survivors can be offered the opportunity to edit what is being released with their images and story, editorial control over the story itself, and instructions on how to rescind consent should they no longer want their stories being used.

The perception of survivor leadership as storytelling is closely related to tokenism, which was named as a concern by all interviewees. Even interviewees who named potential positive impacts of survivor storytelling noted that the United States has a high number of survivor leaders engaging in the sector, but a low level of systemic and organizational change as a result. Interviewees agreed that storytelling must lead to change rather than be a substitute for it, and that survivors' opportunities for meaningful engagement must go beyond storytelling to include other forms of leadership. Organizers and agencies can be conscious that sometimes survivors agree to tokenizing jobs out of obligation, gratitude, or economic necessity, and should take steps to mitigate these power dynamics. For example, ensuring that non-storytelling work is also available will increase the survivor's economic access to choice.

The expectation that survivors' role in the sector is storytelling limits the types of positions people with lived experience are expected to do.

I think that our movement has made being a leader very prescriptive. It's either you're a public speaker, you're a policy advocate, [or] you're a direct service provider. And that's pretty much the hats that we wear. If you've got some academic chops, maybe you're a researcher. Maybe you're somebody who has a niche – like you're a labor trafficking survivor, a child labor trafficking survivor, or you are LGBTQ – and then they ask you to do stuff specifically to that niche. But beyond that, it's like if you're not a speaker, if you're not a policy person, and you're not doing direct services, then you're like not a leader, right? But really being a leader is about what being a leader is to you. (Interviewee 03)

Conversely, survivors who work professionally in the field in roles comparable to those filled by non-survivors may be discouraged from disclosing survivorship. One interviewee currently working in a general sector position shared, “I was told by my supervisors to no longer share that I was a survivor because people would no longer deem me as appropriate or believe my ability to manage a project.” (Interviewee 01)

Interviewees also noted ways in which “survivor leadership” can be used to justify poor practices, when a focus on a “singular survivor experience” is used by non-survivors to justify harmful practices when non-survivor allies use a story they heard from one survivor out of context to justify programmatic changes. This emphasis on singular survivor experiences may also normalize the same practice for survivors in sector leadership when they use only their own experiences to inform their work and are not equipped with broad skills to advocate for survivors whose experiences may be different from their own.

There's harm of only listening to singular survivor voices that may also not understand their own experience and the larger anti-trafficking movement, because I think you should really do this work because you have an investment in social justice, not just because you experienced trafficking. And I think if you're doing this work as an extension of your own healing, you can do harm. (Interviewee 01)

ii. Survivors are professionals

All interviewees indicated that survivors can be and are professionals in individual fields whether they engage in personal storytelling or not, like any other people, and that this is not currently reflected in sector norms around tokenization, professional development, and career mobility. Interviewees also pushed back against an assumption that survivors will want to work in the sector, noting that the goal of survivor engagement “should not only be offering how to become a leader in the trafficking movement.” (Interviewee 01)

Thus, mentoring, development, and opportunities provided to survivors as part of their healing and growth should be focused on the goals of the survivor, rather than dictated by the needs or expectations of the organization. Ongoing professional development is essential to empowering survivors who are, or hope to be, engaged in movement or sector leadership. Interviewees spoke to the importance of mentorship – both from peers and from other professionals – and of sharing your professional networks to help people with lived experience become better connected in the sector. Interviewee 02 shared: “Hiring people and developing them is literally one of the best gifts that we can give people... [My mentors] were the stones to which I set my foundation. And what was cool about that is that they saw me. They asked me what I wanted to be... They provided me training to do all these things.”

Survivors engaged in sector leadership also need opportunities for advancement both in their organizations and in the sector. Interviewee 05 shared: “It also would have been nice to see myself as growing... because they hired this person to be a director of diversity and inclusion. I would have loved to have that type of position if I had the right person to help me to grow, to be able to see myself in that position.” Survivors should be compensated (like any other professional) for their time, and with a focus on equity and access. Professional development can be included as part of the compensation package. For example, interviewee 03 indicated that a company they have worked for set aside a certain number of hours in each regular employee’s work week for professional development and learning based on the survivor’s interest. Interviewees noted that survivor-friendly workplaces would include a strong benefits package, including paid personal and vacation time off, as well as comprehensive health insurance that covers mental health treatment, to account for the significant stresses of working in the field.

Another concern was the economic inaccessibility of work, as many survivors may not have savings or even disposable income to cover additional expenses or financial flexibility to wait for them to be reimbursed. Interviewee 03 shared: “You’re working with marginalized people... Some people have to wake up 4 hours before they need to be anywhere so they can make sure they pack a lunch because they don’t have... disposable funds to be able to eat or that they are taking three buses at a time.” Contract work is even more unstable and unpredictable. Reimbursement delays on expenses like gas money, childcare, and meals out may be prohibitive for some survivors. Additionally, when doing work in which they will be engaging directly with their own trauma (such as storytelling or answering personal questions about their experiences), survivors may miss other work income due to needing additional time to recover or incur costs from additional therapy sessions to process these work experiences.

Interviewees suggested organizations can mitigate these challenges by paying for survivors’ expenses upfront rather than reimbursing, by paying contracts in a timely manner, and by accounting for additional recovery time and professional support in the compensation package.

iii. Power dynamics

Organizational, sector, and cultural power dynamics influence survivor engagement. Organizations and non-survivor professionals highly curate those survivors who get to engage in leadership. Those survivors are chosen to present an appropriate image and say what the organization wants. Interviewee 01 shared: “So many agencies want to be survivor-engaged, they sometimes will only look for survivors that align or will see what’s helpful for their program versus what’s helpful for the *people*.” All interviewees noted ways that organizational and interpersonal power dynamics affect who is heard and what they say. Factors shaping these power dynamics include narrative conformity, type of trafficking, education, citizenship status, race, culture, and funding or organizational support. These dynamics make sector-wide survivor engagement norms-change difficult: as survivors’ expectations around storytelling, leadership, and best practices develop and they advocate for themselves, they may simply lose income as organizations find less-seasoned or more compliant survivors to take their place.

Interviewees indicated that the anti-human trafficking sector is divided. One key division is between sex and labor trafficking survivors. Historically, American politicians (including the sponsor of the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act) have posited sex trafficking as “the most brutal form

of trafficking,”¹ and interviewees noted that sex trafficking survivors dominate survivor leadership spaces, with interviewee 05 saying, “a lot of the survivors that do training on trafficking they’re sex trafficking survivors, and the ones that even handle the hotline.” The sector’s emphasis on commercial sex and historical conflation of sex trafficking and consensual sex trading has also led to federal limitations on funding to organizations and strategies addressing trafficking and other violence within the sex trades. Federally-funded non-profit organizations are required to sign the “anti-prostitution pledge,” which prohibits them from advocating for the practice or legalization of prostitution, which was added to several kinds of government funding criteria as a result of anti-trafficking efforts. This pledge is often interpreted in ways that restrict funding for harm reduction, STI prevention, and many practices which people in the sex trades have developed to keep themselves safer.² This then prevents survivors who oppose end demand from engaging fully in sector leadership when their personal experiences or recommendations contradicts funding-codified sector norms.

In addition to power dynamics around narrative control, interviewees noted that formal education can create a power dynamic that impacts survivors in hiring when their skills are overlooked in favor of applicants who have degrees. All interviewees with lived experience spoke of the importance of education, although they used “education” broadly to include skills and knowledge gained outside of formal degree programs. A common theme was frustration with degreed professionals in sector leadership who lacked appropriate education on how to work with survivors.

Undocumented citizenship status also creates a strong power dynamic in which survivors are especially dependent upon the government and non-profit agencies that assisted them. Survivors who are more dependent on assistance in this way, such as children or undocumented survivors, may be more likely to perceive their relationship with the responder as a “rescue” or “saving,” and might thus be more likely to feel compelled to assist the organization with storytelling out of gratitude. Interviewee 03 shared: “although [an anti-trafficking non-profit] is extremely awesome and so are all the other organizations that do this work, this is what they exist to do,” explaining that survivors do not “owe” agencies for providing a service.

Racial dynamics in the United States also impact survivor engagement in the sector. Child welfare, immigration, and criminal legal systems – all of which are integral to the governmental response to human trafficking – are regularly critiqued by anti-racism activists and organizers as sites of systemic racism. Additionally, the modern anti-trafficking sector in the United States arose not out of organizing for abolition of chattel slavery but out of the white slave panic, and the racial stereotypes that fueled the passage of early anti-trafficking laws like the Page Act of 1875 and the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910 persist in anti-trafficking narratives today.³ Thus, systemic and racially-charged dynamics within the sector, as well as the emphasis on white, cisgender, female survivors, may make sector leadership less appealing, more frustrating, and more traumatic for survivors of color.

Unfortunately, we operate in systems that work against us. And if that is the case, then... we need to be able to deconstruct some of these systems... We can't keep going back or coming to a system, giving this same type of advice and expecting for things to change when we're working with this system that is built to work against us... We (survivors) want to say social justice. You want to try to help survivors. We want to push for that. But in reality, we live in a country that does not facilitate any type of positive outcomes for those who are at the bottom of the bottom. And so the fight right now is educating and holding systems and organizations accountable. (Interviewee 07)

¹ Chris Smith quoted in Alicia Peters, *Responding to Human Trafficking: Sex, Gender, and Culture in the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 49.

² Masenior, N., & Beyrer, C. (2007). The U.S. anti-prostitution pledge: First amendment challenges and public health priorities. *PLoS Medicine*, 4, 1158–1161.

³ Nelson-Butler, Cheryl, *The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking* (2015). *UCLA Law Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1464, 2015, SMU Dedman School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 179, 1495. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2655840>

Cultural differences around the ways people process trauma may also create a power differential when some survivors' cultural norms do not normalize disclosure of traumatic experiences. Interviewee 06 shared: "you don't tell those type of secrets and you keep that to yourself, especially in the Hispanic community when you're like kind of mixed with Indigenous and stuff like that. We just don't say those kind of things." In addition to personal hesitance to enter forms of survivor leadership that normalize disclosure, these survivors risk losing important family or community support if they speak publicly.

These power dynamics mean that sector leadership is often inaccessible to people whose identities and communities have increased statistical risk of experiencing trafficking. Interviewee 02 shared: "People in positions of power... definitely do not look like survivors or like people who are experienced trafficking. The people... at the middle level? They do not look like survivors of trafficking, and even people at the implementation level - They do not look like survivors of trafficking." Intentional effort and funding allocation is required to get feedback from and empower leadership from survivors with diverse experiences and identities.

iv. Frameworks and norms

Interviewees provided insight into the ways the sector's frameworks and norms impact meaningful survivor engagement including language around "slavery," service provision norms, and trauma-informed workplace practices.

Referring to all forms of trafficking as "modern-day slavery" can be divisive in anti-trafficking work in the United States. Because many Americans think of slavery as the historical form of chattel slavery that existed in the United States, this language can be misleading when they fail to recognize human trafficking that does not look like chattel slavery. Interviewee 04 shared, "We had a case involving teachers where defense counsel stood up and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, you know what slavery is. There was no slavery here.'" This confusion impacts prosecution; it also impacts survivors' self-identification when they do not recognize their own experiences as trafficking. Interviewee 02 shared: "They see everybody in their community being exploited by big companies making clothing in Honduras. But yet, to them, it's not slavery because it was abolished." Nonetheless, some survivors, particularly those whose experiences more closely mirrored historical slavery, indicated a preference for "modern day slavery" to describe their experiences.

Interviewees named service provision as a locus for shifting norms around meaningful survivor engagement. Interviewee 02 said: "I think that effective survivor engagement is... [engaging] at the victim level, including them in their service plan, really being able to... work in full synergy." While trauma healing is not linear, it is not uncommon for anti-trafficking organizations to require clients to be successfully out of services for a pre-determined period of time before being engaged in programming feedback or leadership. While this may be intended to prevent organizations from exploiting survivors' vulnerabilities, it also rests upon two assumptions: First, that trafficking survivors are only capable of knowing what they need well after service delivery, and second, that there are limited forms of engagement open to them, all of which focus on the survivor's experience of trafficking. In reality, survivor engagement starts with asking current clients about how well the program is meeting their needs and what could be improved.

Domestically, we have seen a pretty big deficit of programs that are actively engaging with their clients that they are currently serving, which is like the easiest way to get survivor engagement. But they look for survivor experts outside of their program to provide feedback and they don't talk to the folks they're working with. So [survivor engagement is] every kind of diversity of voice in all areas of program development, engagement and planning, but also thoughtfulness around working with those that are inside the program. (Interviewee 01)

Outside of their trafficking narratives, survivors can be engaged to do non-trauma work while building skills and income. Interviewee 02 shared a story of a time a client found that the service documents

were poorly translated, and the organization offered to hire the client to create better translations. Any such work opportunities should be voluntary and well-compensated.

Survivors may find that paternalistic perceptions which infantilize or dehumanize survivors impact sector leadership as well. Interviewee 06 shared: “a lot of survivors are put down and they’re not able to grow or people just want to keep them small.” Another interviewee noted the ways in which paternalistic treatment of professionals with lived experience is rooted in a belief that survivors are not capable of real healing:

The question really should be for communities to think about: can survivors of trauma heal? Do you really believe that they can heal, that they can have full functioning ability to connect and make choices and live the lives that they want to live?... We are still defining what's most relevant for them by how they can seek services or be a leader... And so I think we need to be maybe not even person-centric, but that we are just people providing services for people and not have to overly define what the most pressing victimization is to seek a service... The same dynamic plays out in [survivor] leadership... If we don't understand how trauma can be healed and that it's possible, then we don't have hard conversations about why we are excluding people from their ability to heal and from connection and leadership... We're saying a certain people can't choose their own pathways to live and then their own pathways to heal. (Interviewee 01)

Interviewees agreed that practices in the anti-trafficking sector are inconsistent and can cause harm to survivors, causing survivors to leave the anti-trafficking field for other sectors. Sometimes, successful survivor engagement challenges sector and organizational norms.

I think sometimes [the] success [of survivor engagement] is defined by the happy kind of Hollywood narrative of, “this person received services and then everything was fine,” versus sometimes positive survivor engagement is when survivors are like, “This is awful, and this is not effective, and nothing about this should be continued,” and then there's change from the program perspective. So if a person leaves the program or relapses, that doesn't necessarily mean that is a failure. That's an activation of choice. And we have to put less pressure on only making choices that an agency feels are successful. (Interviewee 01)

All interviewees noted that safeguarding is a gap in this region, even in survivor-led organizations. Safeguarding is a less-familiar phrase in this region; one interviewee suggested “trauma-informed engagement” as a more familiar alternative. Trauma-informed workplace practices can be implemented agency-wide to ensure that human trafficking survivors have access to adequate support in the workplace without the requirement of disclosure. Applying these principles and norms throughout the sector means that all professionals in this field are well-supported, even those who have experienced other forms of non-trafficking trauma, and ensures that all sector professionals have access to the support needed to continue their personal healing work. Interviewee 07 shared: “The same type of internal work, internal healings [expected of survivor leaders], a lot of the social service providers... need to do the same type of work. Because if we’re all going to come to an actual solution or being able to move forward, we all need to work on ourselves.” This highlights the ways that a survivor’s disclosure may subject them to additional assumptions about their behavior and intentions in ways other employees do not experience.

Interviewees reinforced that safeguarding should be about respect for the survivor’s agency, not about controlling or othering them, and that survivors should have labor rights and opportunities to organize in the workplace. Interviewee 01 added: “I don't believe an organization should determine a person's readiness to engage... However, I do believe an agency should determine their own best practices to engage, just as you would with any volunteer or any staff that may have experienced trauma.” All interviewees reinforced the importance of honoring survivors’ agency and voice as part of trauma-informed engagement, in both service provision and leadership, and transparency was also highlighted as essential to preventing survivor harm and burnout. This includes processes for receiving critical feedback or grievances as well so that organizations may hear about and repair harm they may have caused to survivors in their employ.

v. Meaningful survivor engagement

Interviewees suggested that non-survivor professionals may think of survivor engagement as a box that they check rather than an essential element of a healthy sector, and felt that having people with lived experience in leadership positions throughout the sector, at every level of the sector, leads to more effective programming. Interviewee 02 shared: “We need to move away from bringing people in because they’re survivors into bringing in people because they have experience, and they will help us unlearn outdated practices and learn new practices.” Meaningful survivor engagement is not tokenizing or prescriptive; rather, it is responsive to the diversity of ways in which survivors can show up professionally in this or related sectors to improve policy, programming, and outcomes.

Interviewees recommended evaluation of survivor engagement efforts with a goal of implementing sector, policy, or programmatic changes that can support improved outcomes for survivors. Success of any individual survivor’s engagement and development should be measured based on the personal goals of the survivor, and the overall success of our survivor engagement efforts should be based on measuring impact (thriving, quality of service relationships, employment, economic security) rather than measuring extractive outputs that only benefit the organization or sector. An organization’s success can be measured in terms of retention, pay scales, and advancement for survivors compared to organizational averages, and can include equity audits as well as similar audits measuring workplace satisfaction of employees who have lived experience. When survivor input is measured, diversity of input can be quantified based on demographics of survivors engaged (to include type of trafficking experienced). Additionally, survivor engagement can be measured through its tangible outcomes, which can include systems change and community support that come from effective survivor engagement.

Conclusion

While there has been an increase in survivor engagement, experts in the sector do not believe existing engagement leverages the skills and wisdom of survivors for measurable change toward preventing and responding to human trafficking. Meaningful survivor engagement improves anti-trafficking efforts through building mutual and equitable (rather than extractive or paternalistic) relationships with survivors to support their efforts to address their communities’ needs. The quality and impact of survivor engagement can be measured to inform the continuous improvement of organizational and sector strategies to address the historical power dynamics that excluded survivors from sector leadership. Survivor engagement strategies, their impacts on the effectiveness of our policy and programming, and their impacts on the wellbeing, mental health, employment and staff retention, and financial security of survivors would benefit from additional research and evaluation.

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