

Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programmes in modern slavery: reflections from Southeast and East Asia.*

*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 and context

Too often, survivors of modern slavery are asked to share a testimony of their traumatic experiences, but then are excluded from conversations about the impact and effectiveness of relevant programmes and policies. Hierarchical relationships among actors, language barriers, and cultural differences further complicate survivor engagement, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of the global counter modern slavery strategy. The University of Liverpool is addressing this issue by launching this research project with the objective of finding the best ways to engage survivors (or, more precisely, survivor leaders) in international policy and programming.

The objective of this project is to review and learn from best practice in survivor engagement within international development policy and programming on modern slavery worldwide. As a researcher focussed on bride trafficking and forced labour in Southeast and East Asia, I was contracted to cover the data collection and analysis in Thailand, Cambodia, and China. My interviews and analysis aim to provide a comprehensive and easily accessible knowledge of the terminological complexity, cultural context, barriers, good/bad practices and power dynamics of counter modern slavery work in the mentioned region. Attention is paid throughout to the impacts that current policies and programmes have on survivors and their communities.

Research methods

Semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIs) were used to get insights in relation to current counter modern slavery activities operated by different stakeholders in the region. The selection of eligible respondents focused on those individuals knowledgeable about counter modern slavery policies, survivor engagement, or the implementation of relevant projects.

A **Focus Group Discussion** was also conducted to gather survivor leader perspectives of current practices in relation to survivor engagement. To ensure the quality of discussion and appropriate safeguarding protocols, the FGD was supported by the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) social workers with the head of its women/children section serving as a translator, and the whole discussion was two hours in length.

i. Interview recruitment

Through discussion and agreement with the project team, it was decided to recruit participants from different backgrounds through my network to form a variety of data sources to ensure the

triangulation of results and robust recommendations which would be feasible and useful for addressing the project objectives:

	Name (pseudonym)	Title	Sector	Country	Name in the report
1	ZC	Case Management officer	Consulting Company (child labour)	China	No, neither the organisation
2	Matthew Friedman	Activist/CEO	NPO (forced labour), has direct personal experience working to address sex trafficking	Regional	Yes
3	Sa Im	Deputy head	Medium size grassroots NGO (forced labour, bride trafficking)	Cambodia	Yes
4	SP	Legal Consultant	Small grassroots NGO (sex trafficking, child labour)	Thailand	No, neither the organisation
5	Project Manager	Project Manager	UN agency (forced labour, child labour)	Regional	No, neither the organisation
6	Yuko Kawai / Ratikorn Norasethaporn	Country Representative/ Senior project officer	Japan International Cooperation Agency (human trafficking)	Regional	Yes
FGP 1 - 4	Four Survivors (females)	Survivor leaders	Bride Trafficking Forced Labour Supported by ADHOC	Cambodia	No

As demonstrated in the chart, the main categories of modern slavery that my interviewees addressed were forced labour, child labour, and sex (including bride) trafficking. I chose these categories because I have a certain knowledge of sex trafficking and forced labour issues in this region, which allowed me to better understand participants' responses and pose more valuable questions. The interviewees worked in either modern slavery prevention or protection, which are the two aspects of anti-trafficking efforts that have historically been more open to survivor engagement in project implementation. All participants had more than five years of experience in their area of expertise. In addition, gender balance (three males and four females) was ensured in the selection of participants.

All recruitment was through referrals via pre-existing contacts in my professional network. I tried to send some invitations on LinkedIn, but none of them worked. However, the positive impact of this referral recruitment method is that all interviewees were very relaxed with me. They felt comfortable and safe to share, and the interaction level was relatively high.

The focus group participants were recruited directly from ADHOC. All of them have participated in workshops or led peer support groups before. Considering that the presence of the other gender might intimidate certain participants, since especially in Asian culture, males could be very dominant, we decided to conduct a homogenous focus group with six female participants. But in the end, only four were able to come.

ii. Limitations and Challenges

A number of challenges were encountered throughout the study. Where possible interviews were conducted in the interviewees mother tongue, but in some cases, where interviews had to be conducted in English the language barrier posed challenges. The 4th and 6th interviewee, for example, were not as at ease in expressing themselves fully since English is not their native language. Also, in order to protect participants' privacy, the head of the women and child section in ADHOC acted as the translator for the focus group discussion (Sa Im could not join the discussion due to scheduling conflicts). However, since the translator did not fully understand the project's objectives and her position unavoidably affected her choice of wording, certain information went missing during the translation.

Another challenge was related to the timeline of the research. It was originally planned to have an M&E officer and a police officer on the interviewee list, but one of them refused because of other urgent commitments, and the other one had to go through a complicated process for the interview permission and thus could not participate on time. In addition, the question about the evaluation of survivor engagement (how it could be measured) was not addressed enough in my work since most participants are not familiar with the concept of “measuring the survivor engagement”. One of the interviewees (6th) mentioned that although they had a well-established monitoring and evaluation system of the program impact, the level of survivor engagement is not included as an indicator.

Findings

i. Effective ways of engaging survivor leaders

The most frequently mentioned issue in the interview session was **the importance of explanation and preparation sessions** for the survivors. Those sessions need to be equipped with continuous support from social workers and to be organised in a chronological order for better involvement (see Figure 1).

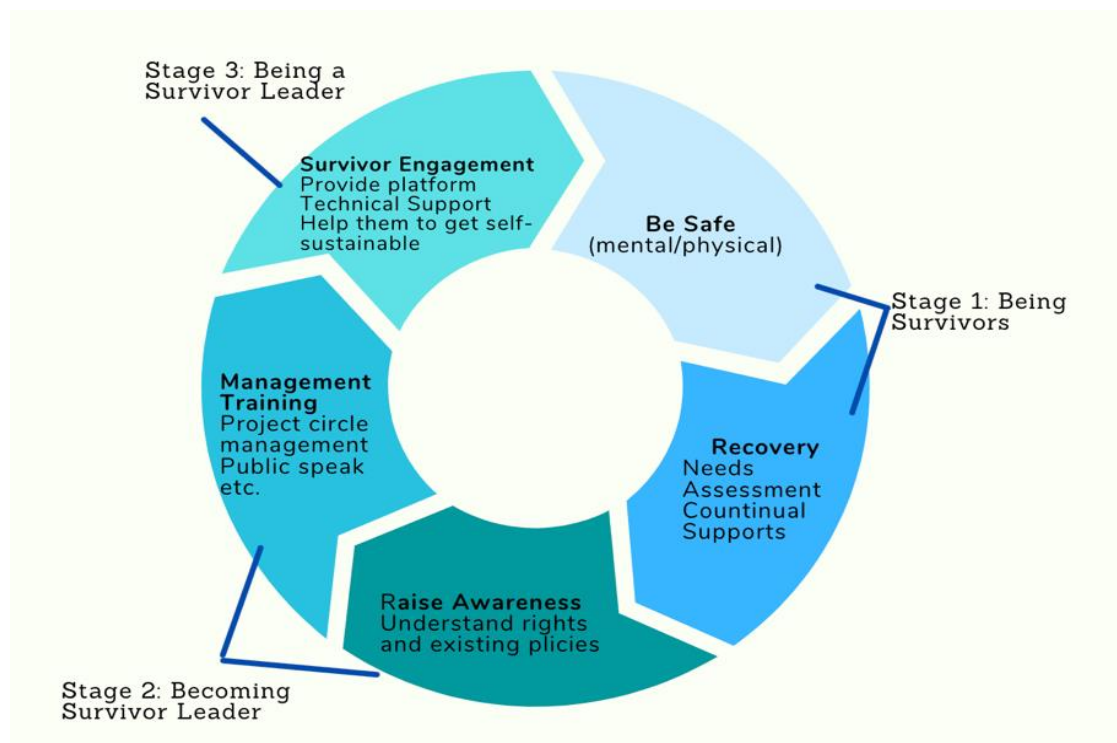


Figure 1: Three-stage NGO support mode for effective survivor engagement. Source: Author

Stage 1: Being a survivor. When a survivor just got rescued, many of them might still suffer from trauma. Therefore, the same social worker or therapist should be there to give full support so that they can **recover first**. As interviewee 1 mentioned, “[an]other factor about good survivor engagement is to ensure that one project officer could follow the survivor case from the beginning to the end [...] once you suddenly change the staff, they will keep distance and will not tell you what they really think [...]the new staff will not know the personality of the survivor, so he/she might say something that hurts the survivors' feelings and it will stop them from participating in the project.”

At the same time, a **needs assessment** should be conducted to understand the whole background of the survivor. For instance, interviewee 5 described a scenario where during the COVID 19 period, survivors reported an urgent demand for hygiene materials more than anything else, so his agency modified their support strategy immediately. Besides, **an awareness session is essential for them**

to understand their rights. Good practice was provided by JICA, where they “*share brochure or booklet to provide some kind of information about like service provision so that ... the LOL [Live Our Lives programme] can distribute to others, new survivors, and they know what kind of policies exists and what they can get from government or NGO's*”. Without this basic understanding, the survivors would not be able to know their rights and how these rights are violated in his/her situation. Just as interviewee 5 pointed out, “*There's a different level of knowledge among the rights holders of holding the very rights. And that transforming their ability or less ability to talk about their problems. You know it goes even to extremes of some accepting the conditions under which they were working are OK [...] before we consult. We need to make them aware of their rights, otherwise, it makes no sense.*”

Another essential preparation in this phase is the inclusion of survivor's family members. An effective survivor engagement shall consider consulting the whole family because “*if the family knows [about what happened to the survivors], it will traumatize the whole family, so we have to do group therapy from very beginning.*” (Interviewee 4). This point was reaffirmed by both interviewee 1 and 3 who worked also closely with survivors' close relatives and treated their opinions equally important for project implementation. FGP 1 felt the same as she mentioned: “*we just can't hear the information from [survivors]. If possible, we can conduct event like in the community and we meet their family members, so the family member can provide some input*”. But such inclusion can only happen when the relationship within the family is strong and supportive, or it might harm the survivors like in one of interviewees 4's examples: “*the dad [of the survivor] has very hot temper they don't really understand their kid, they're gonna try to beat them, to slap them*”.

Stage 2: Becoming a survivor leader. After survivors have recovered, they might show their willingness to help others. However, it is social worker or NGO's work to ensure that the survivors are ready to participate. The aftercare agencies need to **evaluate their situation and empower the survivors** with the needed skills for engagement in the projects. It is worth noting that not all survivors should or could become survivor leaders (Interviewee 2, 4 and 6), and those who self-identified as survivor leaders might **need capacity building courses such as development policies, project cycle management, survivor engagement, so that they could better transfer their experience/expertise into actions**. Interviewee 2 emphasised that: “*Survivors can not only provide advice and guidance, but they can also manage the programmes and so forth. But for that [...] you have to train up those individuals to understand what the development process is [...] but I think sometimes what happens is, you have a technical group of people who do manage mode of NGO's and you bring a survivor, and say, tell us what your recommendations are? [It was the NGO staff telling survivors] you should do this and that. They (survivors) don't know enough about what they're talking to the group about.*” Therefore, the training needs to cover all details of the project circle and the objective, not just rough ideas, to reach the maximum usage of survivors' expertise. With this understanding, survivors would be able to provide the organisations with the most relevant information in project planning and evaluation.

Stage 3: Being a survivor leader. The key point in this stage is “**respect**”. Survivors' decisions need to be respected and reflected well in the reports. Organisation officers, researchers, or media who work with survivors should always be aware of how they ask questions in the interview (Interviewee 2). The importance of continuing support by the NGOs was mentioned again by FGP 2 and 3 because “*if there are organisations that support her, it will influence the community*”. Also, in the case where it is possible, organisations should step back and serve as a platform to let the survivors talk with the decision-makers, so that their voices could be heard directly. A good example comes from Interviewee 6 where

“the role of JICA is to connect MDTs [Multidisciplinary Teams] so that eventually the services provided to the survivors would be the best match to them. One of our approaches is that to

organise a kind of forum where they can share their voices [...] we keep continuing supporting to ensure their relation is strengthened and eventually they can work together directly. [...] For example, [after having the forum, the government] modified how they can compensate the survivor [...] and anti-money laundering law [...] [so] they can utilise this money or property from the defender to compensate the survivor directly and we can see this good development comes from our forum.”

NGOs also need to help survivor leaders become "**self-sustainable**" in this stage through vocational training or consulting because otherwise, the survivors might be "*still having expectations from [ADHOC] a little bit, related to some services or some policies, financial support and also some material support*" (Interviewee 3). In the end, survivors or survivor leaders could slowly achieve self-resilience and live independently.

It is worth noting that there is a pre-condition for the survivor engagement process that has been mentioned above. For achieving a more effective engagement, **survivors are not the only ones who need to be trained**. Interviewee 3 described her concerns about certain media's behaviours, "*It's quite worrying that we know some media that showed [...] the [face of the] children and no punishment happened [...] Although there is the policy in place. But the reality, implementation staff or some staff who work directly with survivors are not really following the rules. That's why we [need to have] refresh training [of safeguarding protocols].*" FGP 2 emphasised that she appreciated a lot when people tried to explain the goal to her before the discussion or workshop started: "*you as the researcher asking questions before starting the question [and] told us that the information that will speak out today will keep confidential [...] to tell us the purpose of the questioning and the interview. Especially encourage us.*"

Besides, people working with survivors might meet the situation that a survivor "*[breaks] down in the middle of a testimony and there was nobody there to help them. So you know you have a bunch of people here on one side of the table and then a person hysterically crying on the other table, and nobody knows what to do.*" Even during this research, FGP 1 suddenly got very emotional when talking about her family situation during the casual chat session before our official discussion. We managed the situation well thanks to the presence of a social worker and I paid extra attention to avoid this topic in the FGD. Therefore, an effective survivor engagement could not be achieved without **training all the people working with the survivors**. From police officers to NGOs project officers or data collectors, they all need to understand the concept of survivor engagement and its related safeguarding protocols.

ii. Complicated usage of terminologies

Although translated to different languages, the term "modern slavery" is not widely used in Southeast and East Asia. All 11 participants preferred to use the crime type that they are working on or experienced -- human trafficking, child labour, etc. – when they discussed with me. Interviewee 5 pointed out that "modern slavery" is a "*western terminology that is used mostly in the UK and Australia*", but the UN would rather use "rights" (child rights, migrant rights) as the gateway to talk to different stakeholders about the same issue. Both interviewee 4 and interviewee 6 mentioned they never used or even barely heard of it in Thailand. For FGP 1-4, they felt modern slavery is something related to "trafficking" and "working abroad".

Survivor engagement is an even more alien term for all the participants. Five out of seven interviewees and all FGPs clearly indicated that they had never heard of this expression before (the translator also showed difficulty understanding the concept). Most of the interviewees also **showed a certain level of reluctance to use the word "survivor"**. The most mentioned reason was the unwillingness to label the victims. Just as Interviewee 3 pointed out, "*We call them the focal point*

because we do not want to label them as victims. We just want to make sure that they are comfortable, and they are representative, so we call them focal point or contact person and some of them call themselves, uh, ambassador”.

In addition, interviewee 1 and interviewee 5 (both work in forced labour/child labour field) felt that “survivor” is a strong word that might push the stakeholders away because *“it comes with an assumption of these people were close to death or some very very strong violations. While the abuses on migrant workers or on those parts of forced labour, might be considered more nuanced by, for example, government officials (Interviewee 5)”*. Also, for the issue of child labour, special attention should be paid to the differences in cultural perceptions of childhood in Southeast and East Asia. For example, *“child labour is culturally acceptable for many parents and factories (Interviewee 2)”*, so the usage of “survivor” or “victim of child labour” might scare the relevant parties and have a negative impact on cooperation. One of the participants in China reported:

“In our work, we even try to avoid use the word “child labour” and use the phrase “underage workers” because otherwise, it will give the factory managers too much pressure. If you use a term that can criminalise their behaviours (of allowing children to work), it might push them away [...] And for the parents is the same, if we use child labour directly, it sounds like we are blaming them being irresponsible. Therefore, we also will not use words like ‘victims, survivors’, we try to help them move on [...] we tend to [...] ensure the education rights for the children. “

Interviewee 5 admitted that UN agencies are not familiar with "survivor engagement" or "survivor leader" because they do not go deep into the field or contact survivors directly. But he insisted that the best way to make the government listen to the survivors' voices is by using "neutral" terminologies to make them open the door of communication.

Such reluctance was not observed among the four FGPs. Although they had never heard of the term "survivor leader" before, after I explained its meaning to them, they all agreed on their status of being a survivor leader. And for them, being survivor leader means to speak out in public such as on the radio or to participate in interviews for raising awareness of human trafficking.

iii. The importance of cooperation at all levels

The power imbalance between survivors and their supporting agencies is reflected very well in the interviews and the FGD. Interviewee 2 condemned the situation where survivors are treated like a "rubber stamp" for NGOs to get more funds because "it's disrespectful to the survivor, for her or him to be in that situation because you're just kind of using them". He also concluded two reasons behind it: the ignorance of the policymaker and the lack of a focal person who "understands both the survivor experience but also the world that they are providing advice and guidance for".

First, he found out that sometimes *"the people who are well educated and trained feel like they are in some ways smarter and more capable"*. This notion is dangerous because it creates a strong bias and stops the policymakers or those implementing projects from understanding - and benefitting from - the competence of survivor leaders. He gave an example that he experienced with a UN officer *"[the UN reporter] kept saying "these stupid migrants" [...] referring to the girls in my stories saying they're just so stupid to be tricked that easily. And finally, I said [...] How do you know that I'm not a trafficker? How do you know if there are no covered vans that are going to come up and grab you? [...]the survivors] may not be as educated [...] but their brain is just as good as anybody else's brain. **They can accept these concepts of working with the government [...], but often they are not given that information.**"*

Similarly, as stated by interviewee 1: *“You should not think that those ended up in the sex industry or forced labour are the ones less intelligent”*. She proved her statement with a story about a Chinese survivor leader: *“XX (the survivor leader’s name) is doing super well in her workshops, they are using the term ‘modern slavery’, they share books with their peers, and debate around the topics such as discrimination and gender equality. They are providing a deeper engagement which has an impact not only on the industry but also on the notions of the participants. Some of them understand their own values and start to think about their life meaning and career path.”* Participants in the FGD also set good examples by using social media to amplify their experience for the new generation and *“to let the community know: don’t believe the broker, don’t easily believe”*.

Power dynamics can also be found among NGOs, IOs, funders and governments. For grassroots NGOs, many face a fundamental problem of largely depending on funders, not only financially but also operationally. Even though their social goals might be similar, donors usually have already set an idea of how things should be done which can be so out of touch with reality as shown in the example of Interviewee 4: *“I feel it is happening everywhere like the one who write the policy, they are in their ivory tower and they don’t really understand the problem [...] Our funder will give us KPIs, like you [...] have to prosecute this number etc. But no, you cannot predict what’s going to happen this year, you cannot predict like how many criminals you can find; you cannot say how many victims you can assess this year”*. But even from the funder’s perspective, their operations still have limitations if the government shows reluctance to cooperate: *“We would like to involve the government to realise how they can promote or reconsider their policies to make [things] better, so we will provide the opportunities to discuss within each government. But after that, it’s up to them.”* (Interviewee 6).

In relation to this, all interviewees called for strengthening the cooperation among all levels. Grassroots NGOs need to work more closely with those NGOs/IOs who can more easily influence the government and donors so their problems can be heard. Donors also need to pay more attention to understanding what survivors need before they decide on any projects and promote the importance of survivor engagement to their partners. For example, JICA will *“ensure that in workshop, that the MDTs or their partnering NGOs know about [their] victim centred approach and [they] try to advocate them to adopt that approach in supporting survivors”*.

Interviewee 5 also emphasised the importance of communication among donors to share information to ensure all vulnerable groups are covered. And more importantly, to be aware of their bias when choosing their implementing partners. A practical method is that, instead of funding through proposals, donors could consider giving more chances to those projects which have already demonstrated their social impacts. For example, the LOL project was not designed by JICA at the beginning, but its success in survivor engagement attracted JICA’s attention, and the latter decided to fund them to encourage more survivors to participate. Interviewee 5 also suggested Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency’s way of cooperating with implementing partners: *“SIDA [...] basically asked us more or less in percentage of our programme, to show to them that the funding that they’ve given us goes in a certain balance percentage working with governments and working with CSO’s in the form of grants. [It] gives a lot of autonomy and independence to CSO’s to do things their own way, given a specific objective.”*

Besides, to ensure the equality and unimpeded dialogues between survivors and supporting agencies at all levels, persons who could bridge both sides are needed *“to help that survivors’ perspective be accepted, as it translates into programme operationalization (Interviewee 2)”*. FGP 1 claimed that even though she could try organising workshops by herself, she still would prefer to have an NGO to assist her because *“when they get the support from the organisation [...] the people will listen to her”*, and in that way the government could better hear her voice.

iv. Barriers to survivor engagement

a. Barriers related to Asian culture

Four out of seven participants pointed to the cultural element as the main barrier that stops survivors from participating in projects or speaking up in their community. The notion of being afraid of “losing face” (equals to public humiliation for loss of reputation and status) and the social pressure of masculinity that ties men to be strong and show no emotion when suffering has a strong impact on Asian survivors’ participation. As interviewee 2 stated:

“Because they don’t want to lose face. They don’t want to be embarrassed, so they lie about their experience, so to help get people who are able to kind of communicate what their experience is and to get over that, is really hard.”

Even in the case where engagement happens, the cultural issue of indirectly showing negative sentiments sometimes may confuse the supporting agencies, particularly those from foreign countries. For instance, Interviewee 5 described a case that *“[In] Asia, people are more reluctant to admit that they don’t understand your question or say no [...] I come from a different culture where people they don’t understand. They’ll tell you I’m sorry. What are you talking about? I don’t get it [...] People here [...] more worried to tell people I don’t understand. They’ll maybe nod or say yes or no, and they didn’t understand the question.”*

To solve this problem, it is essential to *“make sure that they do not feel themselves that they are a victim [...] that they are the hero”* (Interviewee 3). This point has been reflected in the FGD where the most common reason for the FGPs to join the workshops or prevention programmes is the value they could add to *“prevent the young generation from experiencing what [they] have been through”* (FGP 1-4).

b. Barriers related to personal difficulty

Barriers might also come from survivors' current situation or their backgrounds. Language, poverty, mental health condition, or the status of being irregular migrants are the common restraints (interviewees 1, 3, 4 and FGP 2). FGP 4 also mentioned her friend's situation: *“they have violent domestic violence in their family, so they are afraid that her husband hears the story that was happening abroad and they afraid to get violence from him”*. Sometimes, it is difficult for supporting agencies who work closely with the government to find survivors who want to participate *“because somehow it’s naturally that we feel we don’t want to involve the government”* (interviewee 6). Therefore, to reach the goal of engaging more survivors, *“some NGOs need to stay low key to help those survivors who want to hide their experiences [...] because one thing that we could successfully engage the victims is, we promise the victims that if they don’t want this case to be known by anyone, we weren’t going to spread the news or tell anyone about you.”* (interviewee 4)

Also, as already mentioned, survivors' knowledge about modern slavery and their rights is a deciding factor in their engagement capacity. If they are not aware of the national or international standards, they would provide irrelevant information and get discouraged in the process. Thus, survivor engagement should not be simplified to only listening to survivors' voices, but it should also include the actions to ensure the resources and the environment around them are secure and comfortable enough for them to engage.

c. Barriers at the organisational level (government, law enforcement, donors, IO/INGOs)

Funding is a major problem for organisations to invite or support more survivor leaders. Just as interviewee 5 pointed out, *“real survivor engagement [...] costs money [...] Let’s make it practical. because breaking these barriers you need to bring in interpreters, and you need to add an additional event, an additional layer.”*

Besides, in countries where modern slavery is a politically sensitive issue, such engagement could be risky for survivors to carry out their normal life. *“In China, anything organised, but not by the government, will be suppressed. Any CSO, NGO, or movement are under pressure. We [...] align with the policies of the government, follow their commitments of eliminating modern slavery, we still need to keep low key [if we want to continue working on this filed] (Interviewee 1).”* Under this condition, independent NGO/CSOs are needed to create an environment that survivors can trust regardless of their nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation. *“There is no independent organisation in China, or they are not notified by their own government. That’s why the survivor or their family won’t talk. They don’t have the trust person who could fully support them, that’s why. They did not say any experience also because even if they say it, there would be no positive change happen. (interviewee 3)”* **Survivors will engage only if they can see their words have an influence.**

v. The practice of survivor engagement

Deciding on the narrator is just as important, if not more important in some cases, as determining the concepts. Peer-to-peer storytelling could play a vital role in eliminating the influences of the power dynamic between survivors and supporting agencies because *“they were victims before; they understand what are the root causes that made them end up in such situation [...] are in better position to teach their peers to protect themselves. They know their communities and the communities trust them (Interviewee 1)”*. FGP 2 and 4 mentioned the change of government’s behaviour when survivors share information directly with the public: *“[before] when she had a problem in China, she needs to try to find a way to reach out to the Cambodian consulate or embassy, but now [...] They just share out information through Facebook. The embassy or the government immediately intervenes.”*

When talking about peer storytelling methods, a majority of interview participants and all FGPs recommended visual media and interactive media as a new form of survivor engagement. One of JICA (Interviewee 6)'s most successful programs is a drama play that was designed and performed by survivor leaders: *“they do a drama play at high school in the remote area [...] what they do is to share their story through a drama play to show what kind of situation that might happen if they go to work abroad without any information on safe migration. They will also invite government officials [...] provide information like if they face some kind dangerous situations, they could contact 1300 hotline or these kinds of agencies”*. Similarly, interviewee 5 claimed that *“the most effective to connect with survivors is by creating storytelling opportunity and those that probably more impactful, are those done in the form of video documentary [...] Eventually they have a huge impact on the behaviour of companies. Because no company wants to be associated with abuses.”*

Another effective survivor engagement is through social media like "Tik Tok". Three out of four FGPs use live streaming to share their experience and help rescue other victims. However, the exposure of survivors could bring some negative impacts on their everyday life, *“Some people feel like pity them. Some people curse them, and they say that because you want money and that’s why you were traffick[ed] or something like that [...] you decide to find a job in a destination country because you need money, or you want to show off.”* Therefore, supports from social workers and psychologists

from the supporting agencies are essential to protect them from getting re-traumatised by systematically monitoring their engagement.



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