

# Survivor engagement, prevention, and advocacy: a case study from the front- line source area in India

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## Executive summary

This study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with involving survivors in prevention and advocacy programs in a region with high levels of human trafficking, commonly called the source area. The primary collaboration for this study was with Bansra Birangana Seva Samiti (BBSS), a frontline anti-trafficking community-based organisation (CBO) located in Canning, near the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal, India. To obtain valuable insights, this study conducted qualitative interviews with key personnel from the BBSS and engaged in focus group discussions with survivor leaders.

This report offers a comprehensive case study that critically examines BBSS's three-stage survivor rehabilitation and resilience-building processes and practices. The first stage delves into secondary prevention measures, which entail providing immediate assistance to survivors after rescue. It explores how BBSS utilises an innovative Case Intake Tool (CIT) to assess the unique needs of survivors. Subsequently, a tailored rehabilitation program is designed to address fundamental requirements such as food and shelter, address deep-seated issues such as social stigma, and facilitate survivors' access to compensation and justice. The second stage assessed the primary prevention measures implemented by rehabilitated survivors. It focuses on their participation in community-based awareness programs related to human trafficking and associated issues, such as child marriage and domestic violence. The final stage revolves around long-term (tertiary) measures, including creating livelihood opportunities by establishing self-help groups for special survivors. These stages empower survivors to engage in local governance, a critical aspect of local-level policy engagement and advocacy.

A pivotal discovery emerging from this research is the significance of lived experiences during rehabilitation as the cornerstone for effective policy and program engagement, overshadowing the importance of the trafficking journey experience. Key recommendations derived from this study underscore the need to recognise the key role of frontline organisations in combating human trafficking. The work advocates for increased allocation of resources to enhance their capabilities and streamline legal and administrative procedures to ensure survivors' access to justice and welfare schemes, thereby facilitating their rehabilitation journey.

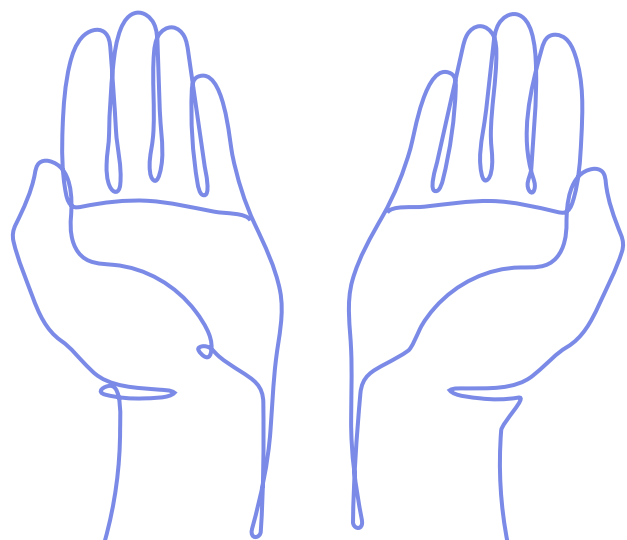
Overall, this study sheds light on the critical nexus between survivor engagement and effective anti-trafficking efforts, with the BBSS serving as a compelling case study. The findings and recommendations presented here serve as a call to action, urging stakeholders to prioritise and support the endeavours of frontline organisations such as BBSS, ultimately working together to combat the problem of human trafficking in source areas and protect the rights and well-being of survivors.

## Acknowledgement

The study is grateful to Amina Khatun Laskar, the secretary and director of the community-based organisation Bansra Birangana Seva Samiti (BBSS), and Santanu Sarkar, the founder member of BBSS and their team, for their immense support during the fieldwork.

Special thanks are also extended to Pallabi Ghosh, founder of the non-governmental organisation Impact and Dialogue Foundation. This foundation works to prevent, rescue, and rehabilitate survivors and at-risk populations of modern slavery and human trafficking across India. Ghosh's knowledge of the Bengali language, understanding of grassroots issues, and familiarity with the CBO and region greatly facilitated the study. Ghosh assisted in identifying the CBO, introducing it, and serving as the main point of contact throughout the fieldwork process.

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## Introduction and context

This study was conducted as a follow-up to the 2022 University of Liverpool research project that gathered evidence of the best practices in survivor engagement within international development policy and programming on modern slavery worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Commissioned by the UK government's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in collaboration with the University of Liverpool researchers, the author then assessed the nature and effectiveness of survivor engagement in international policy and programming from the South Asian perspective.<sup>2</sup> Based on consultations with civil society organisation leaders from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, this study found that factors such as sensational media reports, an unresponsive criminal justice system, and a lack of economic opportunities make it complicated for survivors of human trafficking to engage in policies and programmes. However, there are inspiring examples from parts of South Asia where survivors have overcome these challenges and made their voices heard.<sup>3</sup>

The 2022 South Asian study captured the generic issues of survivor engagement in policy and programmes. This previous study used a top-down approach and was informed by the leaders of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In contrast, the present research on survivor engagement, prevention, and advocacy employed a bottom-up approach by examining how human trafficking is tackled at the grassroots level, collaborating with people with lived experience.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges and opportunities surrounding the involvement and engagement of survivors in source area prevention and advocacy programs. This objective guided the researcher to understand the contextual challenges and possibilities of engaging survivors in anti-trafficking policies and programmes in the frontline source area. The study specifically collaborated with a frontline anti-trafficking Community-Based Organisation (CBO) called Bansra Birangana Seva Samiti (BBSS) in Canning in the 24 Paraganas district of West Bengal, India.<sup>4</sup> The aim was to critically examine how survivor engagement is designed and implemented in local contexts. Within the BBSS, survivors are initially enrolled in a rehabilitation programme and later trained as leaders in the organisation. This report presents a BBSS case study of the processes involved and the methodology they have adopted in engaging survivors in programmes and policies in an area that has recorded high incidences of human trafficking of women and girls, owing to poverty, unemployment, and climate change, known as source areas.

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1. Wendy Asquith, Allen Kiconco, and Alex Balch, *A review of current promising practices in the engagement of people with lived experience to address modern slavery and human trafficking* (London: Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, 2022). Available at: <https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/best-practice-engagement-lived-experience>.

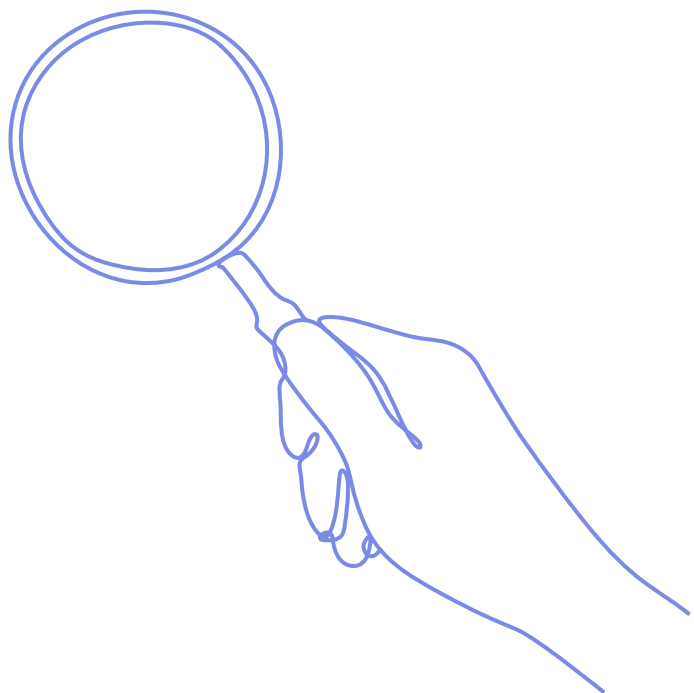
2. Sutirtha Sahariah, *Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programming in human trafficking and modern slavery: reflections from India, Bangladesh and Nepal*. <https://modernslaverypec.org/assets/downloads/Engagement-lived-experience-India-Bangladesh-Nepal.pdf> (London: Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, 2022).

3. Sutirtha Sahariah, *What could prevent survivors from being re-trafficked in India? A decent income*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/what-could-prevent-retrafficking-in-india-a-decent-income/>

4. [Bansra Birangana Seva Samiti - | Home Page 02](#)

The study found that the survivors' lived experience as beneficiaries or service users in rehabilitation builds their capacity and knowledge to later engage in programmes and inform policy. The process and engagement prepare survivors to primarily prevent violence, such as human trafficking, and address intersectional factors, such as child marriage and domestic violence, through awareness and grassroots advocacy campaigns.

The case study shows how survivor engagement in programmes takes shape on the ground. It provides information about the processes, practices, successes, and challenges of survivors meeting in policy and programme settings. The findings explain policy gaps and challenges in engaging survivors in policy and programmes. It makes a series of recommendations to strengthen survivor engagement in programmes and policies in the source areas of human trafficking.



## Research methods

Scope work was conducted in February 2023, when the researcher travelled to the source area and visited the office of Bansra Birangana Seva Samiti (BBSS). During the visit, the researcher informally interacted with members of the BBSS, local community members, and survivor leaders. The exercise enabled the researcher to build a rapport, explain the terminology 'survivor engagement in policy and programme', and explain why it is accorded importance by international policymakers and donors. The exercise laid the groundwork for research collaboration.

The town, Canning, was chosen as it sits on the Bangladesh border, near the mangrove delta Sundarbans, and is vulnerable to climate change impacts (see Fig.1 map below). This area has been a hub of human trafficking for decades. Scores for men and women were missing each year. According to the press, over the past decade, over 2000 minor girls were trafficked from the area and pushed into domestic and sex work to work on construction sites as bonded labourers.<sup>5</sup> The victims were taken to cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore using Kolkata as a transit route and a three-hour drive from Canning by road.



**Figure 1:** The map on the left shows the state of West Bengal on the map of India. The map on the right shows the location of Canning, where this study was conducted.

Qualitative research methods were used to collect data. Interviews were conducted with the CBO's founder, program officer, trainers, group coordinator, and survivor leaders. In addition, a focus group of six survivor leaders was formed.

5. The Times of India, (2022), Kingpin of ring that trafficked 2,000 West Bengal girls held. Accessed on <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/kingpin-of-ring-that-trafficked-2000-west-bengal-girls-held/articleshow/93867068.cms>

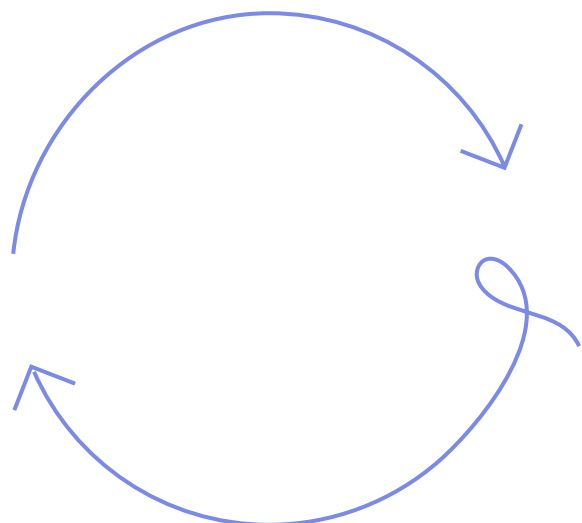


During the research, a well-known human trafficking activist and survivor leadership trainer, Pallabi Ghosh accompanied the researcher during data collection. Ghosh introduced the CBO to the researcher during scoping work, and they worked closely together to communicate and engage with the CBO. The entire data collection process was conducted in Bengali, and Ghosh acted as an interpreter, simplifying the terminologies and research objectives and translating the clauses of the participant consent form. Ghosh's experience at the grassroots level and deep knowledge of the area immensely contributed to the success of data collection.

Most interviews were conducted in the BBSS office, which was a familiar place for the participants. All interviewees enthusiastically participated in the process, which helped the study achieve its research objectives.

The researcher conducted a workshop with BBSS staff members as an exit strategy. In the workshop, the researcher explained how the CBO activities informed policies and programs and how the knowledge generated through this research could be used. Despite their excellent work, the CBO needed more resources to intellectually define its position in a way that could be better understood by policymakers, donors, and academics. The research exercise was a process of self-discovery for the CBO, as the researcher explained how they could project various aspects of their work by breaking it down into smaller programmes. The workshop was about knowledge exchange, and the researcher talked about how to design a theory of change, log frames, and write a funding proposal based on existing projects and operational structures.

The researcher continues to be in touch with the organisation and is helping them network with survivor groups globally.



## Use of terminology

'Rights Holder' refers to survivors in the area the researcher visited and studied. Amina Laskar, the founder of BBSS, explained that they use the word 'rights holder' because the survivors' rights have been violated and the state has failed to protect them. There are five guaranteed rights under the Indian Constitution that the government is duty-bound to provide. The BBSS's rehabilitation and survivor leadership training is based on these fundamental rights:

1. Right to live,
2. Right to housing,
3. Right to food/health,
4. Right to security, and
5. Right to education.

Laskar added that constantly using the term 'survivors' can remind those with lived experiences of their past traumatic experiences and feel like 'labelling someone'. She argued that the CBO's job involves interfacing with various government departments to avail multiple schemes for survivors and help them redeem their rights. Therefore, using 'survivor' in this context can have negative repercussions, especially when interacting with unsensitised government officials. If government officials are inadequately trained and sensitised, their curiosity may lead them to ask insensitive questions. Using the term 'rights holder' instead reinforces the survivor's entitlement to certain rights as a citizen and should have access to all services and welfare schemes intended to help them. However, they used the term 'survivors' in the context of research and while interacting with external researchers. Similarly, throughout this report, the author uses the word 'survivor' to refer to people with lived experiences of human trafficking despite ongoing debates about terminology. This decision was made to create a relatable and inclusive tone for a diverse audience, as 'survivor' is a term that resonates with most stakeholders in the anti-slavery sector.



## Case Study: engages survivors in programs and policies

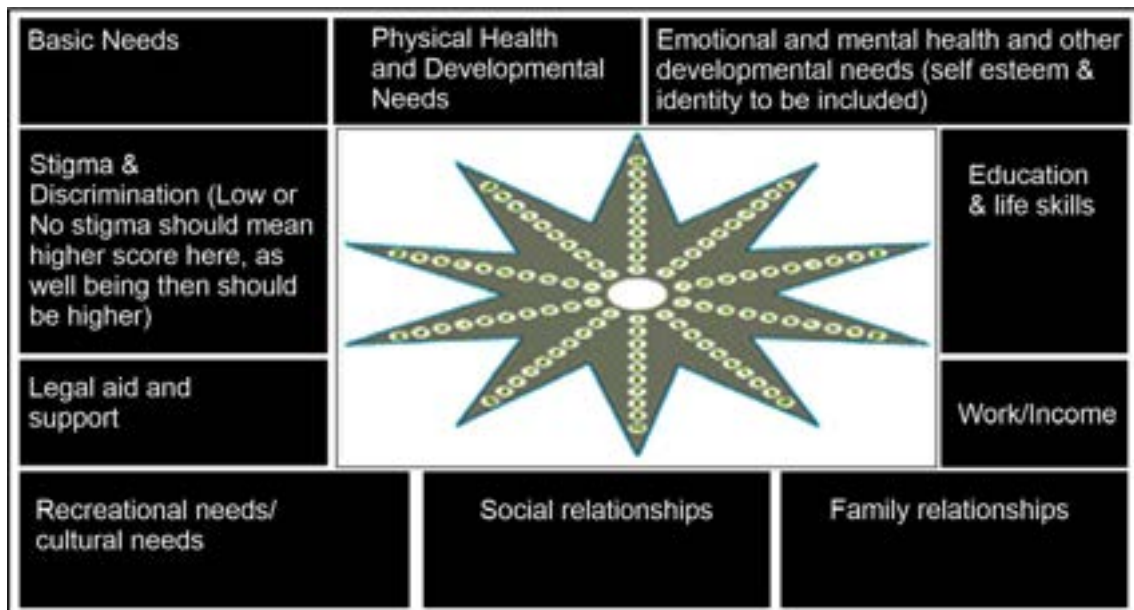
Data analysis was conducted by examining three critical areas of the organisation's work:

- i. The survivor Case Intake Tool (CIT) has ten dimensions against which the survivor rehabilitation programme is designed. Examining each dimension enables the researcher to identify the main themes discussed in this report. It further provided insight into how survivors interacted with state institutions through which state welfare policies were delivered and made accessible, which can be seen as secondary prevention measures. This process is significant because survivors understand the procedure that matters to them when accessing welfare schemes.
- ii. The survivors' group, ICON, formed with the help of BBSS, provided insight into survivors' engagement in programs such as raising awareness in the community through social campaigns on issues of human trafficking, child marriage, and other forms of violence, which can be seen as primary prevention measures.
- iii. The survivors' self-help group, also formed with the help of BBSS, is meant to address survivors' long-term livelihood and economic needs. As it addresses long-term conditions, it can be classified as a tertiary prevention measure.

### Survivor case intake tool – secondary prevention measure

BBSS's analysis of its rehabilitation programmes indicates that a survivor's experience during the rehabilitation process significantly influences their engagement in policies and programmes. The community-based rehabilitation process is complex and involves various issues from basic needs such as food and shelter to tackling endemic problems such as social stigma and legal challenges such as accessing victim compensation and justice.

A survivor's life after rescue is often challenging. When trafficked, they may trust their trafficker until exploitation occurs. However, upon returning home, survivors frequently face stigma and backlash from family and community, leading to isolation and demoralisation that can result in self-blame. Involvement of a CBO-like BBSS is crucial for rehabilitation and recovery. The BBSS uses an innovative Case Intake tool (CIT) to assess the specific rehabilitation needs of each survivor. The CIT helps design custom rehabilitation programmes that address individual core issues, including access to fundamental rights such as housing, food, and shelter.



**Figure 2:** Case Intake Tool shows the ten dimensions against which a survivor’s rehabilitation program is designed.

Addressing these needs involves planning and providing continuous moral support from BBSS social workers and survivor leaders to motivate survivors to cope with trauma and to build resilience. It also involves engaging with the survivor’s family and community, with whom the survivor may face high levels of stigma. This process requires awareness programs through dialogue with family and community members. For the survivor, it entails starting a new life with the support of social workers and other survivors, trusting these service providers as they stand by them, and convince them to fight for their rights.

The diagram shown in Figure 3 portrays a survivor’s experience in India, as they receive support from a CBO during their journey towards healing and recovery. As survivors move forward, they can access local administrative, legal, and justice systems, including the police. The CBO assists the survivor by applying for compensation and starting the legal process for seeking justice, which can be a complex and lengthy process owing to various delays and legal procedures.

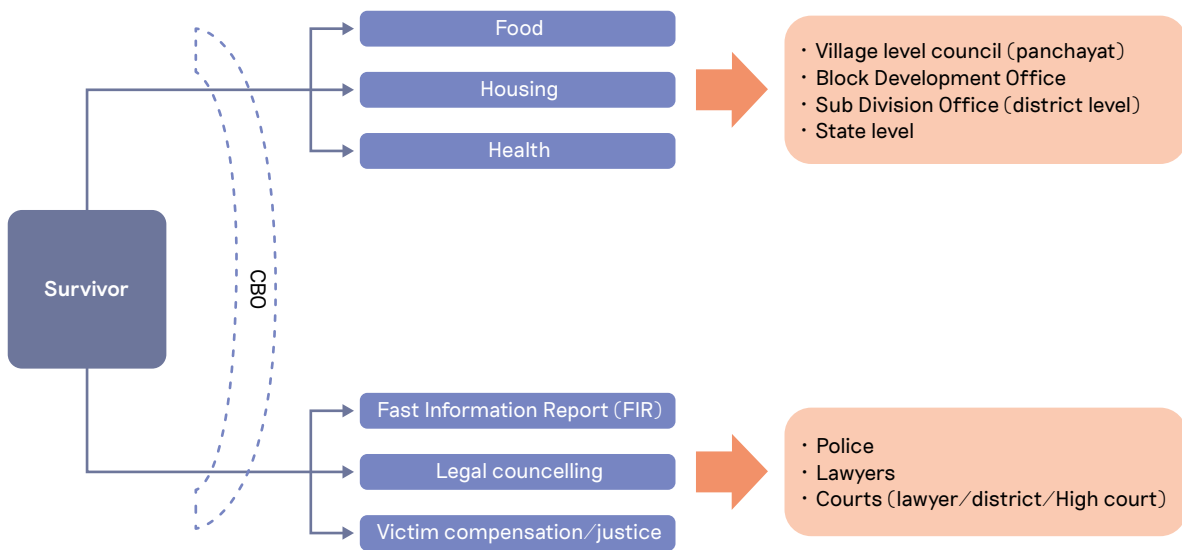


Figure 3: The diagram illustrates the process by which survivors claim their fundamental right to basic needs and seek justice through interactions with state institutions.

As part of the Needs Assessment section, the social workers put down the rating (out of ten) given by the survivor in each dimension in the appropriate box with the date of the rating. The circle in the well-being star corresponds to the score provided by the survivor for each dimension. The larger circle indicates that the survivor is on the path of rehabilitation. Survivors were rehabilitated if they scored high for every size.

This process is described as a star of well-being (Figure 4), and its rating can be revised every three months. For each new rating within the star, a different shape is used to mark each revision, for example, a circle for the first rating and a square box for the second.

১) মৌলিক চাহিদা 2	২) শারীরিক স্বাস্থ্য ও বিষয়বস্তু অধিকার 3	৩) স্বাস্থ্য বিষয়বস্তু, এম. স্বাস্থ্যিক স্বাস্থ্য এবং স্বাস্থ্য বিষয়বস্তুতে অধিকার, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা ও শরীরিক স্বাস্থ্যিক স্বাস্থ্য 1
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The survivors scored their rehabilitation progress in the Needs Assessment Section in the above example. The results are presented in the table below.

Dimension	Score	Dimension	Score
Basic needs	2	Health and Nutrition needs	3
Emotional, mental health and other development needs	4	Education and life skills	2
Work/ Income	3	Family relationships	3
Social relationships	2	Recreational needs/ cultural needs	3
Legal aid and support	2	Stigma and discrimination (low or no stigma should be a higher score)	1

Table 1: Needs Assessment Section.

## Survivors' engagement in programmes through ICON, a survivor leader group (primary preventive measures)

The BBSS survivors' group, ICON, was established in 2021, comprising individuals who have completed the rehabilitation process and have been deemed rehabilitated based on the following criteria: resilience to deal with familial stigma or harassment; ability to live without fear; engagement in community activities; receipt of victim compensation; access to essential security such as food, shelter, and clothing; and sound mental health and a sense of empowerment experienced through camaraderie with other survivors.

The researcher conducted a focus group with members of ICON to understand their future goals. All participants expressed their aspirations for the ICON's growth and prominence. They emphasised their desire for the community to recognise their work on social issues and support outreach to distressed women. They envisioned a future in which their group had attained its own offices and facilities to run programmes and advocacy services. Members aspired to develop their careers in social work, seeing Amina, the founder of the BBSS, as a mentor and role model for garnering community respect. One participant stated, 'I want ICON to grow and expand. I want people to know what we do and earn respect that way. I want that and other children in my community to grow and lead a respectful life.'

Survivors aspired to participate in programs that directly addressed social issues in their communities. They understood that human trafficking is not an isolated issue as it is connected to other factors that make women vulnerable to trafficking in their community. Education for their children is essential, and they expressed determination to break the harmful cultural norms and values that they saw as detrimental to women and girls in their community. Respondent Two said,

*During our training session, we learned about the devastating effects of getting married at a young age or being trafficked. Our parents were uneducated; therefore, no one told us about these issues. In our Muslim community, early marriage is typical, and it has been ongoing for generations. Trafficking became a part of it, and people accepted it. Our training taught us in depth about prevention and rehabilitation.*

With the training provided by the BBSS, the survivor leaders who participated in this study were actively involved in programmes to help raise awareness of prevalent social issues. These right-holders, the survivor leaders, were young, with an average age of just eighteen. However, they demonstrated significant knowledge of the issues addressed during the group discussions. When asked about their campaigning process, they explained in detail their activism against human trafficking and its relationship and connection to other social problems, including child marriage, domestic violence, and education.

The survivor leaders in this study also demonstrated the ability to engage in governance at the local level, which is a vital component of local-level policy engagement and advocacy in India. From the group discussion, the survivors understood the hierarchy in the governance system and the roles and responsibilities of the concerned officer bearers and departments. They knew what government departments and levels of governance they needed to engage with to meet the specific needs of survivors. For example, they knew they had to approach the Block Development Officer (BDO) for general relief or housing needs (see Figure 3). The ability to deal with the government's governance delivery system is seen locally as a crucial indicator of survivors' empowerment. It is also clear that these survivors have become experts by becoming social workers and advocating for others, building relationships with officers at various levels. Many survivor leaders understood the escalation process and had, over time, become confident speaking directly to a senior administrative officer (SDO) or police officer (inspector-in-charge). According to this study, survivors can better understand government policies and programs through this process. This allows them to become advocates and helps design and implement rehabilitation and livelihood programs.

BBSS's persistence to consistently engage and motivate survivors to take control of their lives is a critical factor in preparing survivors to participate in programmes and policies. Respondent 5 said,

*We were afraid to go to the police station, but they [BBSS] would not give up and convinced us to come along. They explained the importance of filing a police complaint, and that by doing so, we will be fighting for justice and other survivors. Therefore, their perseverance helped us so much that we could not express it.*

This example suggests that many survivors find themselves scared to seek justice because of fear, intimidation, and frustration involved. Obtaining a specific right, such as compensation, involves heavy paperwork. It requires several visits to court, dealing with procedural delays and corrections, interacting with apathetic and expensive lawyers, and tackling unscrupulous intermediaries. The process is slow and frustrating, testing the survivor's perseverance and patience. By engaging in this process, survivors learn how to fight for their rights and gain first-hand experience expediting and executing justice.

Furthermore, survivors' ability to regularly take up various matters, such as justice from government offices and police officers, demonstrates their empowerment in the community. They have witnessed their evolution from victimhood to directly challenging authorities. This builds a survivor's leadership quality. Their reputation and acquired knowledge allow survivors to engage more effectively with programmes and policies.

Therefore, when survivors triumph over this process, they are prepared to take on any challenges. Indeed, as stated by this Respondent, 'If I can manage this, I can do anything.' When they emerge triumphant, survivors are equipped with enormous experience, shaping effective survivor engagement.

Therefore, the BBSS case study shows that CBOs, such as BSSS, help survivors by exposing them to state administration systems at the local level. This support allows survivors to build confidence and communication skills, as the ability to interact with the government's system gives them a sense of empowerment and confidence. A deeper understanding of the process enables survivors to build networks at various levels of the governance structure.

### **Self-help groups and economic engagement: tertiary (long-term) prevention measures**

The following description of the Self-Help Group and its contribution to economic engagement is based on inputs from four social workers working as self-help group coordinators, the founder of the BBSS, and two survivor leaders who were briefly interviewed in their residences, where they showcased their livelihood work, such as goat farming and embroidery. These businesses were the outcome of money borrowed through survivor self-help groups. Amina Lasker, the founder of BBSS and a senior social worker, provided context. Questions were asked in both groups, as well as independently. Due to ethical considerations and safety concerns, the survivors were not engaged in lengthy discussions at their residences.



Established between 2019-21, the Survivors' Self-Help Group (SSHG) is unique. All members were survivors of human trafficking, and they were created to respond to the livelihood needs of rehabilitated survivors. The BBSS founder explained that the primary demand from the survivors was to help them with livelihood opportunities, telling her that their situation would never improve without the ability to generate income.

This point was echoed repeatedly in the 2022 study, with activists who participated in the study fearing that failing to address employment issues increases the vulnerability of survivors in their communities. Many survivors are often unskilled when they return to their communities. Without safe options, they are likely to accept risky jobs that can entrap them into other forms of modern slavery.

There are no established programs in India that support individuals who have survived human trafficking. To address this issue, organisations and survivors can work together to advocate creating self-help groups. The BBSS case study highlights the success of Survivors Self-Help Groups in overcoming policy and systemic obstacles through advocacy and engagement by community-based organisations and survivors.

The study found that BBSS formed survivor self-help groups and linked them to the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). NRLM is a poverty alleviation initiative carried out by the Ministry of Rural Development, a division of the Government of India. The main goal of the NRLM is to create institutional platforms to help rural communities sustain their household income through better access to financial services and livelihood opportunities.

At the time of the study, the BBSS Survivors Self-Help Groups had ten women in each group, all linked to NRML, with mothers added as members for minors under 18. The BBSS formed four self-help groups, engaging more than 40 women.

These survivors contributed at least Rs 100 (GBP 1) or Rs 50 (50 cents) monthly. Once they have an Rs 3000 (GBP 30), they can open a bank account as a group. Once formed, the government pays 5000 (GBP 50) and 15000 (GBP 150) after six months.

The first step was to mobilise 40 survivors who were educated through workshops held by the organisation. After the group is formed, three individuals with leadership qualities are selected for the positions of secretary, president, and treasurer (cashier). They received training from government trainers at the NRLM. The self-help group structure includes a facilitator, who is a staff member of the BBSS. The facilitator trains women leaders on how to run the group.

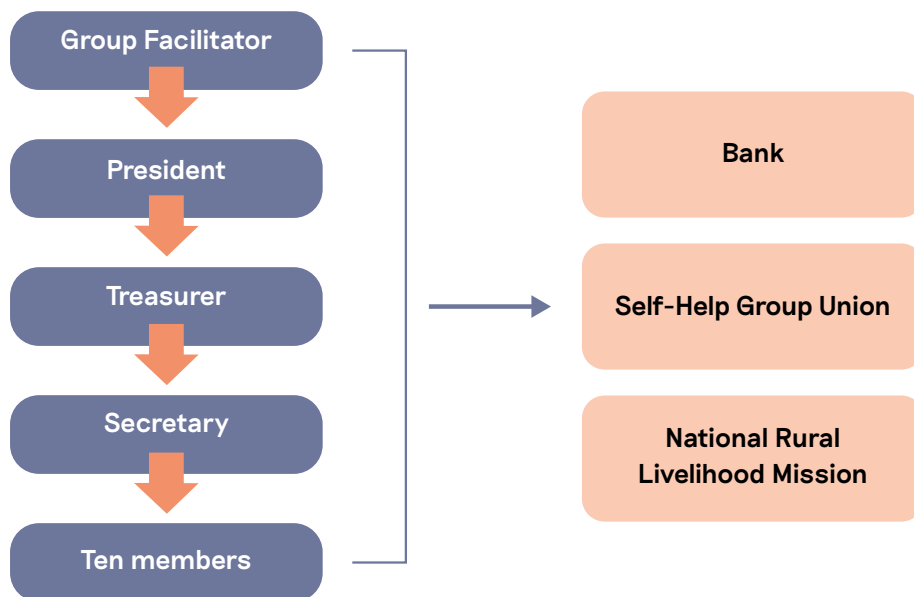


Figure 5: Survivor Self-Help Group engagement with livelihood schemes (policies).

In the words of the group facilitator, Aptab,

*I train them [survivors] on how to do bookkeeping and teach them how to be accountable. How do we decide on a loan amount? How to evaluate the soundness of a business plan and how to apply it. The idea is to train survivors and conduct hand group work. Our main job is to monitor that they stay in the structure of the SHG. The problem is that they need to be more educated, and even now, some concepts of SHG are unclear to them, so it is work in progress.*

The Self-help Group had five clauses:

1. Saving,
2. Meetings,
3. Access to loans (give and take),
4. Writing a resolution,
5. Maintenance of books.

Following these guidelines, the group met fortnightly and passed the resolution. During these meetings, they mainly discussed accounts and assessed new business ideas.

## Summarised BBSS Model for Survivor Engagement in policy and programs

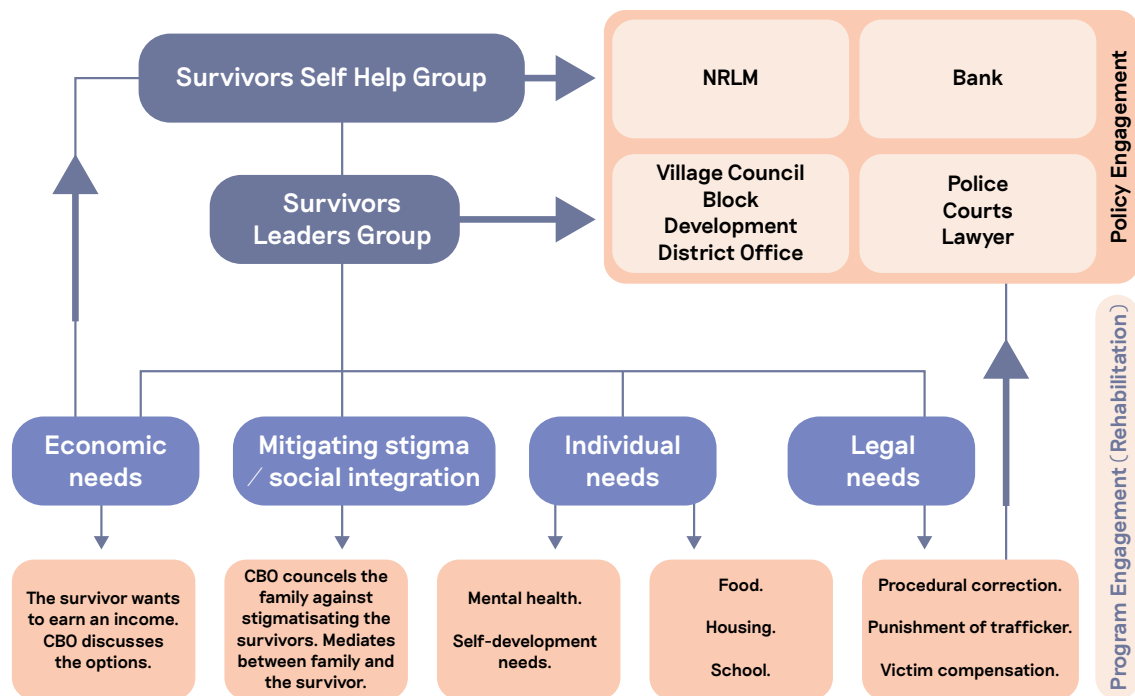


Figure 6: Model describing the process of survivor engagement in policies and programmes based on BBSS.

Figure 6 summarises the processes developed by the researcher based on the BBSS activities. It demonstrates how lived experience is embedded into the rehabilitation programme and provides a foundation for survivors to engage in programmes and policies. Based on the analysis of the survivor Intake Tool described above, BBSS works with survivors across several dimensions, including economic needs, stigma mitigation, mental health, food, housing, school, and legal requirements.

Both the survivor group ICON and the Survivors Self-help Group were formed with the help of BBSS. ICON is a general survivor group engaged in primary prevention programs, while survivor self-help groups focus on survivors' economic engagement and livelihood outcomes (tertiary prevention).

Once survivors are ready to start life in the community, they can join a self-help group if they wish to participate in livelihood activities. Some survivors join the survivor group, ICON, engaging in programmes and policies while helping other survivors. As discussed earlier, survivor self-help groups and survivor leader groups interact with various layers of the government machinery (policy engagement). Through these networks/groups, survivors participate in the rehabilitation process and awareness programs based on their lived experiences during the rehabilitation process.

Leaders are chosen based on attributes such as commitment, communication skills, dedication to social services, knowledge of process policies, and the ability to lead programmes.

The BBSS case study demonstrated the critical role of prevention and rehabilitation in addressing modern slavery and human trafficking. These issues are intertwined with other social factors such as child marriage, domestic violence, and gender-based violence. CBOs are important stakeholders that operate at the intersection of multiple issues in their activism and awareness programmes. However, they often received less recognition and support.

In the 2022 study, Uma Chatterjee, director of the civil society organisation Sanjog and a prominent anti-slavery activist in India, emphasised the importance of survivors' voices and noted that they could not be the only voices due to their lived experiences. Survivors' voices cannot become a competing authority, and the role of CBOs is equally crucial since they mobilise survivors. The 2022 findings also revealed an issue regarding how international development agencies treat CBOs, giving them less respect as stakeholders in anti-slavery work. The founder of the BBSS pointed out that survivors and CBOs are often treated as data-collecting agents and are not informed about how their data are used, revealing stark inequity in the treatment of global development policies to combat modern slavery. She reflected:

*We [CBOs] are driving changes in one of the worst-affected areas in India. We are taking risks, helping survivors rehabilitate themselves in the community, and creating survivor leaders. However, despite our success and hard work, we are looked down on because we do not belong to the elite. We cannot afford to visit large hotels. They say that we need more capacity and skills because we are rural. When it comes to acting, we are the ones who lead. The more prominent and well-known anti-trafficking organisations only use us for data and do not nurture survivors.*



# Challenges of effective survivor engagement

## Community and family stigma

In the 2022 study, professionals and survivors cited tackling stigma as one of the most challenging barriers to engagement and reintegration, particularly for female survivors. The survivor leaders in the present study identified the stigma that survivors faced as the most “critical” issue during the research. This study provides a deeper understanding of how stigma is perpetuated, at what level, and how frontline CBOs address it.

Families are often the first to stigmatise survivors. How the family treats these isolates and adds to their trauma. CBO intervention is critical, as the survivor may take extreme steps, such as committing suicide, and the family may make secret plans to marry her off to safeguard their honour. Amina Laskar, the founder of BBSS, explained this point this way:

Survivors experience trauma after returning home, which is a step away from killing themselves. As the survivor’s family incurred many expenses in rescuing them, they held the survivor responsible for their situation. The family’s priority is to marry them off to a man much older than them, even if they are minor. This is the point at which they are revictimised.

At the family level, stigma takes the form of abuse by the survivor’s father or brothers, who view her as bringing dishonour, shame, and financial burdens to the family. The project manager at BBSS explained that when a girl was trafficked, the cost of rescuing her could be high. Survivors and families do not immediately inform the police but instead spend money on informal channels such as fortune tellers or healers or enlist the help of community members and relatives. They must pay the travel expenses of all those accompanying them.

The challenge is that survivors and their families cannot adapt to new realities. Survivors experience trauma and shame. She feels alone and responsible for the misery she has brought to herself and the family. For the family, this is a question of honour. They start thinking about who will marry their daughter.

Usually, survivors do not know that they are stigmatised. In such cases, the intervention mediates between the family and the survivor through dialogue and counselling sessions. Survivor leaders take the lead and explain their experiences to the family.

At the community level, stigma takes the form of harassment by survivors, and this behaviour stems from cultural taboos that assume that only a woman of bad character falls prey to such mishaps. One of the study participants explained that 'Neighbours could abuse her. They may stop her from drawing water from the well. They might pick a fight with the survivor's parents and say, "If this girl stays with you, she will bring disgrace to the whole neighbourhood."' (Trainer at BBSS, helping survivors in leadership programmes).

In this case, survivor leaders and BBSS representatives appeal to community leaders such as village councils, school teachers, district officials, families, and people living in the survivor's neighbourhood to mitigate the effects. They appeal to them to refrain from harassing the survivor and explain how their actions further traumatise blameless individuals; traffickers warrant punishment, not survivors.

In the focus group discussion, the survivor leaders emphasised that tackling stigma is challenging because it is difficult to detect unless the survivor reports abuse. They also noted the need for greater sensitisation programmes on stigma towards the police, office bearers, and families with better socioeconomic backgrounds. One pointed out, 'The problem is that the middle class and well-off people are so disconnected from these issues that they are not sensitive enough.'

Survivor leaders stated that the trafficking experience is well known, and awareness programmes should discuss preventive measures rather than traumatic tragedy, which attracts stigma.

## Managing frustration with the long wait for justice and compensation

The 2022 study revealed that the lengthy and complex process of accessing victim compensation and seeking justice present significant obstacles to effective survivor engagement. Similarly, the present study discovered that accessing compensation and justice can be difficult, time-consuming, and costly for survivors. However, with persistent efforts, survivors can obtain compensation and justice, which informs them of legal barriers and teaches them how to overcome obstacles while fighting for their rights. Several survivors supported by BBSS received compensation ranging from GBP 4000 to GBP 6000, as explained by this participant.

*The court ordered 13 women to be awarded victim compensation, ranging from four to six lakhs (GBP 4000 - GBP 6000). Five of the thirteen have already got money. We have now developed a new application for 17 more girls. (Interview with one of the BBSS trainers, working with survivors in leadership programmes).*

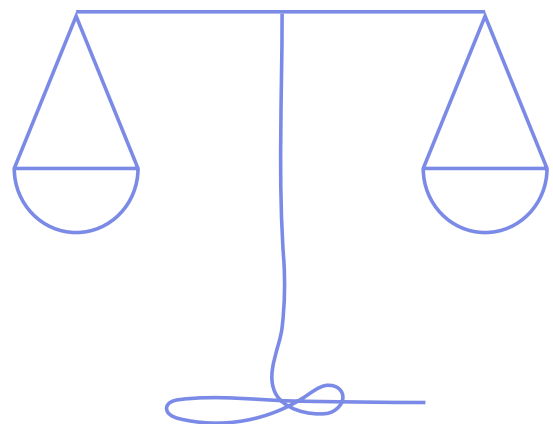


The outcome is highly positive, but the process is cumbersome and expensive and can be a test of patience for survivors. Sometimes, survivors must wait years after the court awards compensation. Another participant explained,

*Frustration starts building up when they do not get the outcome of the legal process for years together because the Indian legal process is prolonged and they become hopeless. Then, develop, mistrust, and start a blame game. They say, 'It has been a year, and the case is dragging on; why should I continue?' (Social worker, BBSS).*

The CBO helps the survivor file the initial First Information Report and appoint a state lawyer. The lawyer directs the survivor about the legal course of action, and based on this, procedural corrections and victim compensation details are discussed with the lawyer.

Supposing the survivors are unhappy with the local police investigation, they can transfer the case to the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU)<sup>6</sup> for more detailed analysis in both the source and destination areas. India's Federal Home Ministry established AHTUs as a law enforcement response to human trafficking. AHTUs are established at police stations throughout the district to register and investigate cases related to human trafficking. This is in addition to other police stations in the district. However, transferring a case to an AHTU requires an expert lawyer, which can be expensive and must be paid by the survivor or BBSS if they receive funding from other sources. The lawyer files a writ petition in the Calcutta High Court to transfer the case, as the police cannot do so themselves. Ultimately, survivors must fight their own battles. Nonetheless, survivors gain valuable experience and knowledge that can be used to provide legal counselling to other survivors. Understanding compensation and justice delivery systems is critical and can significantly increase survivor engagement in complex and expensive legal processes.



6. [https://www.mha.gov.in/en/divisionofmha/Women\\_Safety\\_Division/anti-trafficking-cell](https://www.mha.gov.in/en/divisionofmha/Women_Safety_Division/anti-trafficking-cell)

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

This study aimed to understand how survivor engagement in policy and programmes occurs at the community level. A significant finding of this research is that the lived experience of the rehabilitation process is the foundation for effective engagement in policy and programmes rather than the lived experience of the trafficking journey. While the lived experience of human trafficking is essential for criminal investigations, rehabilitation involves rebuilding a survivor's life from a position of extreme vulnerability. When survivors return home, they face enormous stigma from the community and families who blame them for bringing shame and dishonour.

For a survivor undergoing the rehabilitation process with the support of a CBO, the process involves overcoming personal trauma and unprecedented stigma. This requires building self-motivation and resilience in the face of daunting challenges. From a state of leading everyday life before getting trafficked, they now must engage with state administrative systems at various levels of government to claim welfare schemes. They must also deal with the police, courts, and lawyers to obtain victim compensation and seek justice. These require tremendous patience and perseverance, as the process can be hostile and apathetic to the survivor.

This study also underlines the critical role that CBOs play in mentoring and supporting survivors during rehabilitation and when they become part of survivor groups and lead advocacy programmes. While survivors' engagement in programs and policies is critical, it cannot be the sole objective of global programmes to tackle human trafficking and modern slavery. Similarly, survivors cannot be the only voice. The causes of human trafficking are interlinked with other social factors such as child marriage, domestic violence, and family planning. Therefore, it is imperative to scale up awareness programmes to address these issues. Furthermore, CBOs in this region work with at-risk populations that remain vulnerable to frequent cyclones attributable to climate change. Considering these factors, prevention programmes need more resources and expertise that survivors cannot manage alone. Therefore, global policies, programmes, and donor agencies must strengthen other programs on violence against women, child marriage, and livelihood generation. Survivors must receive extensive training on these issues as well as leadership and management skills.

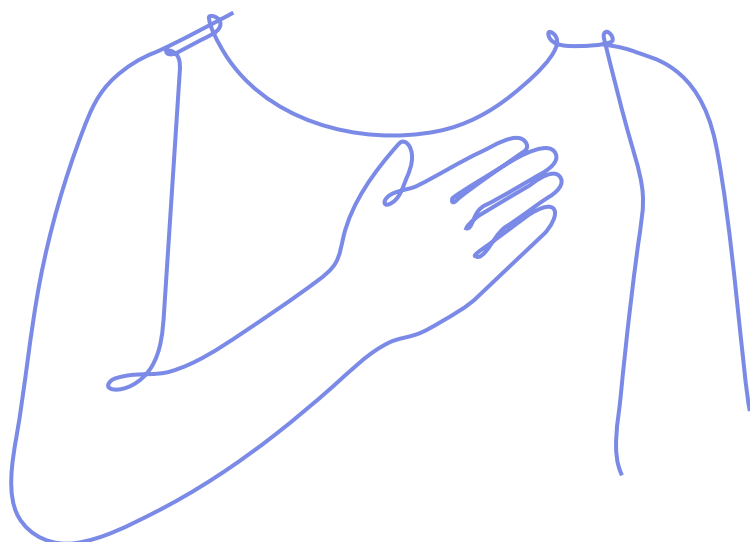
Effective training of survivors is critical for the success of any survivor engagement programme. In this study, there was a correlation between survivor training and positive outcomes. Survivors can be central stakeholders in many issues, particularly victim compensation, reintegration processes, awareness, or combating stigma, but their involvement needs to exceed this foundational level of engagement. Through the BBSS case study, we learned that survivors' knowledge of welfare schemes and how to access them, the legal process of victim compensation and justice, and engaging with awareness and rehabilitation programmes are critical to building their capacity. The training they receive through CBOs provides the foundation for

more considerable advocacy at national and international levels. The frontline CBOs and survivors' groups provide a contextual understanding of the challenges and opportunities that integrate survivor inclusion and uncover the core principles of survivor engagement in policy and programmes. Contextual knowledge is essential as there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling modern slavery. Thus, it is necessary to recognise the work of CBOs and make them equal partners in development rather than just resources for data collection.

Based on the above findings and conclusions, the following policy recommendations are suggested.

- Frontline and grassroots organisations are crucial in preventing and rehabilitating human trafficking. Their understanding of local and contextual factors driving modern slavery, their ability to network and mobilise survivors, and their ability to run awareness programs in remote areas help form a vital strategy in global efforts to end modern slavery. Despite their strength and commendable work, they are not consulted, and new international policies and programmes are not conveyed. Donors and policymakers should identify and recognise their work and establish meaningful partnerships.
- The rehabilitation and recovery processes of survivors should inform policies and programmes. The focus should be on understanding the barriers and challenges of survivors lived experiences in the rehabilitation process.
- Human trafficking does not occur during isolation. Other social factors, such as widespread child marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, sexual abuse, and lack of family planning and education, contribute to the conditions under which a person is trafficked. These factors are significant barriers to achieving better human development and UN sustainable goals. The proposed Global Commission on Modern Slavery might consider collaborating with other agencies to focus on the above factors.
- Policymakers in India, including the judiciary, should review the gaps in welfare and victim compensation processes. Welfare schemes should be accessible and straightforward with one-stop centres with trained officers. The one-stop centre at the village level should coordinate with other departments in government systems across the block, district, and state levels. The one-stop centre should work closely with CBOs.
- Streamlining legal procedures for obtaining victim compensation should be made more straightforward, with the state bearing all legal expenses, even in instances of survivors appealing for greater compensation or pursuing federal anti-human trafficking investigation of their cases. The cumbersome legal process and cost of hiring expensive lawyers discourage survivors from filing complaints with the police. Therefore, anti-trafficking cases should be attempted by fast-track courts.

- Language is a significant barrier to frontline workers. AI platforms like Chat GPT and language translator apps can make a pathbreaking difference. Technology and IT companies can help upgrade the existing online IT systems.
- Survivor engagement and policy programs must provide provisions to cover survivors' time and travel costs. Survivor engagement does not work unless the survivors are compensated for their time. Their expectations were around GBP 80 per month.
- Governments must devise mechanisms to educate and work with religious leaders. Religious leaders have considerable influence over the poor population in the source areas. Their involvement and activism can make a difference to curtail harmful cultural practices.
- The generation of livelihood opportunities is the primary demand for all survivors. There is scope for business opportunities based on local resources such as fisheries. Modern slavery issues must be highlighted more prominently in both private and corporate enterprises. Seed money through corporate social responsibility funds or ESG initiatives can help establish small-scale businesses with the help of CBOs, which could generate livelihood opportunities for survivors and arrest risky migration that entraps people into human trafficking.



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