

BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY: FEATURE

Forgotten survivor initiatives: the zombie projects of anti-trafficking

Survivors' groups are supposed to empower people. This is what happens when they don't

'Survivor leadership' is a hot topic inside anti-trafficking circles. Not just making space for survivors at the table, but enabling them to sit at the head of the table, is considered by many to be the next frontier for the movement. Those same people often take a dim view of what's been tried so far. They argue that survivors are 'tokenised' more than they are empowered, and that their stories are more often used to legitimate pre-existing agendas than to challenge what anti-trafficking organisations are doing or where they are heading.

This is a debate about the distribution of power in anti-trafficking. It is about access to privileged spaces, resources, and the tools to shape narratives. It is, for the most part, about who gets to be at the top.

But there is another type of survivor leadership that is, if not at the bottom, at least much further down. It neither forms organically nor is it created to primarily benefit an organisation's optics or mission. When it works well, it sees survivors leading in their own communities, making decisions, and supporting their peers. But sometimes it doesn't work well. This form of survivor leadership – the kind I encountered in Nepal – gets its start through a short-term project of a well-intended NGO. It is then left to languish as priorities move on, but never actually ceases to exist. It limps along – zombie like – causing damage far outside the public eye.

Survivors of trafficking in Nepal

In Nepal, 'survivor of trafficking' is an official status. It's generally given to returnee sex workers and people who have been 'trafficked' for sex work. Only rarely is it applied to people who have experienced labour exploitation in other sectors.

Survivor status is the key to accessing services. Those with it are able to access in-depth counselling, rights-based training, health and legal aid, skills and vocational training, community-based advocacy, and sometimes surveillance and policing training. The objective of all these services is to empower and reintegrate survivors of trafficking into society. Some make use of what's on offer and then go off to live a life. Others choose to get involved in the anti-

trafficking movement. They join the teams of rehabilitation centres, transit homes, and the many NGOs active in this area.

Survivor status is also a beacon that attracts attention.

In one Nepalese village, I encountered the remnants of a community survivors' group that had been set up by a national, survivor-led anti-trafficking organisation. The aim had been to empower local survivors to:

- identify and recruit new survivors in the group
- report social discrimination, derogatory remarks, or attacks towards the survivors
- monitor the activities of informal agents
- conduct voluntary surveillance to pre-empt trafficking

The survivors' group effectively became defunct in 2016 when the national NGO ceased its support. When asked why that happened, the NGO's representatives said their donors had pressed them to expand their geographical reach, and they didn't have enough workers and volunteers to cover 'old' intervention areas.

The group has tried to keep itself going, and I met some of its members during my fieldwork in the years that followed. One of its leaders, Heidi, said that the group had initially worked well. The NGO had given them financial and logistical support, with support workers visiting regularly to organise the monthly meetings. But while it continues to send researchers and journalists their way, the NGO had now left them to fend for themselves.

As late as last year it still had active members, although by Heidi's own admission there were no real benefits to being part of it anymore. That doesn't make it benign though. It became clear through interviews with other members and people in the community that it was causing damage by simply existing at such an ineffective level.

Surviving survivorship in a village

Despite not coming with real benefits, the survivors' group managed to unhelpfully split the community in several ways. It consists of people who had experience of commercial sex: Nepalese citizens repatriated from Indian brothels, individuals 'rescued' by clients, and returnee sex workers. But not all wanted to be part of it, and not who wanted to join were allowed.

Several community members said that some sex work returnees did not want to participate because it would 'out' them to the world. The attempt to empower them by labelling them as survivors would, they thought, simply stigmatise them. Meanwhile, the community members who had experienced extreme exploitation while performing seasonal work in India, domestic work in the Middle East, or construction work in Malaysia were not allowed access to the group. Like the country's national laws, the local group did not regard them as survivors of anything

Not that being inside the group solved many problems. Indeed, its inability to prevent the future exploitation of even its own members led to considerable discontent and disillusionment in its ranks.

They had traded stigma for an empty promise, and this disillusionment intensified the community's hostility towards anti-trafficking NGOs.

Sanchamaya, for example, was rescued from an Indian brothel by a community member. She returned to the village and married a local man, who later abandoned her with three children, elderly parents, cattle, and a small plot of land to care for. She joined the survivors' group to get help.

She said she received a small course in 'entrepreneurship' and was given some crops to grow, but the yield was low and she didn't receive help to navigate the market to sell what little she had produced. After failing as a farmer, Sanchamaya was forced to beg money from the community members to take care of her children's needs. She eventually migrated to the Middle East to be a domestic worker. She had to make the trip irregularly, as the Nepalese government has banned travel for domestic work to protect women from being trafficked.

Nancy, another member, has been through rehabilitation three times since being swept up during a brothel raid in India. The first time was in an Indian

shelter, where she felt humiliated. The second was in a Nepalese shelter, where she received training in stitching and embroidery. The third time was in the community, where she got married. Neither this extensive rehabilitation nor her active membership in the group, however, was enough to help Nancy find sustainable employment in the community. Like Sanchamaya, she felt forced to migrate to Kuwait for domestic work via irregular channels. Nancy said the exploitation she experienced there was more severe than her experience in sex work in India, from where she had been 'rescued'.

The survivor group's promise of empowerment – which evaporated whenever it really counted – led Sanchamaya, Nancy and other members to feel abandoned. They had traded exposure and stigma for an empty promise, and this disillusionment intensified the community's already existing hostility towards anti-trafficking NGOs. Distrust of anti-trafficking had become endemic in an area often stigmatised as a 'hot spot' for trafficking.

Who is responsible for sustainability?

NGOs are beholden to funders for their operations, and it is a fact of modern funding that long-term project money is extremely difficult to come by. NGOs have adapted to this by pitching short-term initiatives, and they sweeten the sell by trying to build self-sustainability into the design. It's the planting seeds metaphor that many funders see as a better return on investment.

This local survivors' group in Nepal is a cautionary tale for what happens when the plant, left unattended, becomes a weed. It *did* become self-sustaining, but it is neither productive nor positive for the community. NGOs need to be much more careful about what they put into the world, and funders need to become much more realistic about the timelines needed to build up organisational capacity before 'self-sustaining' initiatives are left on their own. Otherwise, as this group shows, their 'success' can be worse for the communities – and for anti-trafficking work as a whole – than their failure.