



STRONGER TOGETHER

The central role of civil society and survivor expertise in anti-trafficking efforts

SUMMARY REPORT FROM OSCE HELSINKI+50 SIDE EVENT
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Image: The authors of this report at the Helsinki+50 side event on 31st July 2025.



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HUMAN TRAFFICKING AS A PRIORITY ISSUE FOR THE OSCE

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), including its Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (OSR/CTHB) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), together with the Freedom Fund, convened a side event to the [Helsinki+50 Conference](#) to highlight the urgent need for solidarity and coordinated action in the fight against human trafficking and modern slavery¹. The OSCE's anti-trafficking framework underscores that prevention, protection and prosecution are interdependent pillars of an effective response, and that a multi-stakeholder, survivor-centred approach is foundational, not optional.

Human trafficking is not only a criminal justice matter; it is a human rights violation, a security concern and an economic challenge. Victims are stripped of their liberty, dignity and access to justice, and are further denied the exercise of virtually all other fundamental rights. Dr Kari Johnstone, the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Human Trafficking, emphasised that OSCE takes a human rights-based, victim-centred and trauma-informed approach across all its work.

Building on this perspective, the three co-hosts of the panel – the Freedom Fund, the OSR/CTHB and ODIHR – convened the discussion to examine how survivor expertise can inform more effective, rights-based, victim-centred and trauma-informed anti-trafficking responses and how such approaches can be institutionalised within anti-trafficking strategies. Our shared goal was to ensure that those who have lived through exploitation are placed at the heart of designing, implementing and evaluating the responses to address human trafficking.

We have to move from talking about survivors to working with survivors, because that is where real change begins.

Itohan Okundaye
ODIHR International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council

¹ Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation where individuals are controlled through violence, force, fraud or coercion for others' commercial or personal gain.

THE FOUNDATIONAL ROLE OF SURVIVORS IN EFFECTIVE ANTI-TRAFFICKING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Why survivor involvement is important

Survivors are not merely witnesses to exploitation, they are experts in understanding the root causes, mechanisms and potential solutions to human trafficking. Their insights are grounded in lived experience and offer empirical evidence about what works – and what does not – in real-world contexts. Involving survivors strengthens the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of anti-trafficking policies and programs.

As emphasised by panellist Itohan Okundaye, a survivor leader from the ODIHR International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC) and human rights advocate, survivor leadership is not a token gesture but a transformational force. Shifting from speaking about survivors to working alongside them in genuine partnership is essential for driving systemic change.

Inspiring examples of involving survivors

The following are two powerful examples from the Freedom Fund that illustrate the value of survivor-centred policy and program design:

Ending bonded labour in Nepal

Since 2014, the Freedom Fund has been working with the Harawa-Charawa community, agricultural bonded labourers in southern Nepal who, for generations, have been trapped in exploitative work arrangements with local landowners. Community-led advocacy led to the Prime Minister of Nepal declaring such exploitative arrangements illegal in 2022. Survivors, however, insisted that legal reform alone was insufficient. They successfully pushed for federal budget allocations to fund employment programs and vocational training, creating genuine and lasting pathways to economic independence ([Freedom Fund and Progress Inc, 2024](#)).



Lived experience is the compass guiding the anti-trafficking movement. Without survivors' voices, we are navigating in the dark.

Kehinde Ojo
The Freedom Fund

Transforming conditions for child domestic workers in Ethiopia

While international child labour conventions often focus on harm reduction (such as reducing exposure to violence or hazardous tasks), the Freedom Fund took a different approach. Through a child-led process, child domestic workers co-designed interventions that prioritised dignity and inclusion within the households where they worked. This approach led to a 72% increase in school attendance and a 67% reduction in violence experienced by participating children ([Kram-Brooks and Mersha, 2025](#)), outcomes achieved by fostering respect for children's rights rather than narrowly focusing on compliance and harm reduction.

These examples demonstrate that when survivors are empowered to lead, they can identify structural barriers and design sustainable interventions that go beyond short-term fixes.



BARRIERS TO SURVIVOR INVOLVEMENT AND HOW TO MITIGATE THEM

Designing with, not for, survivors

A recurring theme in the discussion was the need to involve survivors from the outset of policy and program design, rather than inviting them into conversations only after decisions have already been made. The role of survivors must go beyond sharing personal testimony or storytelling. Survivors should be contributing strategic insights, co-creating interventions and influencing priorities from the agenda-setting stage.

Long-term support beyond immediate needs

Many anti-trafficking responses focus narrowly on immediate interventions, such as emergency shelter, short-term financial aid, medical care and mental health support, without providing the sustained, wraparound assistance needed for survivors to rebuild their lives.

Panellists stressed the importance of:

- Access to long-term support, including psychosocial services, medical care, education and vocational training (such as digital literacy and language classes), tailored to survivors' individual needs;
- Access to employment and full participation in the labour market;
- Regularisation of legal status through clear, safe and timely processes;
- Criminal record relief for offences committed as a direct consequence of being trafficked to remove barriers to employment and housing; and
- Right to work for all survivors, as economic security is a cornerstone of preventing re-exploitation.

Without these measures, survivors may be forced back into unsafe situations or become vulnerable to further exploitation.

Including lived-experience experts from the very beginning is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

Dr Kari Johnstone

OSCE Office of the Special Representative
and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in
Human Beings

Image: Helsinki+50 main event.
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Moving beyond tokenism to shared leadership

Tokenistic engagement, where survivors are present but lack real decision-making power, risks perpetuating marginalisation. True partnership means recognising survivors as leaders and co-owners of the anti-trafficking agenda, as respected experts working alongside policymakers, service providers, NGOs and international organisations.

Leadership opportunities should be open to a broad range of survivors, not limited to a select few. Many survivors want to contribute directly to the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

Fair compensation for survivor expertise

Survivor participation in policy processes and service design should be recognised as professional, skilled work. Preparation, travel and participation in meetings often require significant time and effort, sometimes at the expense of other income opportunities or personal responsibilities. Compensation for survivor involvement should be:

FAIR



Aligned with rates paid to other consultants or subject-matter experts;

TRANSPARENT



Communicated clearly from the outset; and

AUTOMATIC



Survivors should not have to request or justify payment.

Failure to provide fair compensation risks reinforcing the very exploitation that anti-trafficking initiatives aim to eliminate.

Building institutional confidence and capacity to engage survivors

Many government institutions support the idea of survivor involvement, but some lack the practical knowledge, tools or confidence to begin. This uncertainty, often linked to concerns about not being adequately trauma-informed, can result in inaction.

To address this, decision makers can refer to available guidance and survivor-authored resources that set out safe and ethical engagement practices. Case studies of successful survivor involvement, for example, national survivor councils or embedding survivor leaders in frontline agencies, can help institutions translate intention into action. Tools such as OSCE ODIHR's *Guidance on Establishing and Maintaining National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils* and the National Survivors Network's *Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience* offer step-by-step advice. Please refer to the Annex of this report for a list of relevant resources.

We are beyond simply talking about the importance of involving survivors, it's time to act.

Yuki Lo
The Freedom Fund



KEY TAKEAWAYS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS

The panel discussion reinforced a central message: survivor-centred, multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential to ending human trafficking. Survivors bring unique expertise that can transform the design and delivery of anti-trafficking policies and programs, ensuring they address root causes and produce lasting change.

However, for survivor involvement to be effective, it must be embedded from the outset, adequately resourced and sustained over the long term. This means:

- Designing policies and programs with survivors, not 'for' them;
- Providing comprehensive, long-term support, including housing, education, employment, legal status, medical and psychosocial support, criminal record relief and the right to work;
- Moving beyond tokenism to shared leadership and genuine partnership; and
- Ensuring fair compensation for survivor expertise.

Decision-makers have proven approaches, practical guidelines and concrete evidence showing how survivor involvement strengthens policies and programs. The challenge is no longer understanding why it matters, it is turning that knowledge into action.

The path forward requires political will, institutional commitment and the courage to redistribute decision-making power to those who have lived through exploitation. Ending human trafficking will not be achieved by any one government, organisation or sector. It will take collaboration, shared responsibility and survivor leadership at every stage of the journey.

ANNEX

Resources on survivor involvement

Several practical tools and resources were highlighted during the event that can help governments, NGOs and international organisations strengthen survivor involvement:

Survivor involvement in policies and programs

- **Guidance on establishing and maintaining National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils ([OSCE ODIHR, 2024](#))**
Provides practical information for OSCE participating States on how to establish and structure National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils.
- **Ensuring ethical survivor inclusion ([Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons, 2025](#))**
Presents key ethical considerations for involving survivors in anti-trafficking efforts, emphasising partnership, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches, informed consent, fair compensation, non-punishment, and protection.
- **Code of practice for ensuring the rights of victims and survivors of human trafficking ([OSCE ODIHR, 2023](#))**
Provides guidance on ways to ensure not only the inclusion of victims' and survivors' voices but also their full engagement on all anti-trafficking responses.
- **Meaningful engagement of people with lived experience ([National Survivors Network, 2023](#))**
Outlines the Lived Experience Engagement Spectrum, explains how to move an organisation up the Lived Experience Inclusion Ladder and gives practical tips on how to address common barriers to meaningful lived experience engagement.

Survivor leadership

- **Capacity building for survivor leaders of trafficking in human beings ([OSCE ODIHR, 2023](#))**
An e-learning program designed to build leadership capacity among survivor leaders of trafficking in human beings.
- **Rising to lead: Transforming leadership to build stronger and inclusive voices in the fight against modern slavery ([Freedom Fund, 2025](#))**
Offers critical insights into the role of survivor leadership in the fight against modern slavery, demonstrating how investing in the leadership of those most affected by exploitation can drive personal transformation, organisational change, as well as stronger, more influential movements.
- **Centring survivors' voices in the fight against modern slavery: Learning from the past and shaping the future of the Survivor Leadership Fund ([Freedom Fund, 2025](#))**
Since 2021, the Survivor Leadership Fund has supported 118 survivor-led organisations across 15 countries. This evaluation highlights achievements, challenges and recommendations to strengthen the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of survivor-led organisations.
- **Tips for anti-trafficking professionals when working with survivor leaders ([Survivor Alliance, 2018](#))**
A Survivor Leader Advisory Board provides their recommendations for best practice when engaging with Survivor Leaders in anti-trafficking work.

Trauma-informed responses

- **Survivor-informed indicators for the identification of victims and survivors of trafficking in human beings** ([OSCE ODIHR, 2025](#))

Survivor-informed indicators for identifying victims of human trafficking, to help address the gap in identification tools by reflecting the knowledge, professional expertise and lived experience of survivor leaders.

- **Beyond awareness-raising: Reshaping human trafficking prevention** ([OSCE, 2024](#))

Builds on the outcomes of the OSCE's 24th Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference, offering strategies to move beyond traditional awareness-raising towards data-driven, targeted and collaborative approaches for preventing human trafficking.

- **Trauma-informed code of conduct for professionals working with survivors of human trafficking and slavery** ([Helen Bamber Foundation, 2018](#))

This toolkit provides professionals with an understanding of how trauma affects survivor leaders, alongside tips to ensure sensitive, trauma-informed engagement.

Human trafficking risks in public supply chains

- **The role of public procurement in preventing trafficking for labour exploitation in supply chains and advancing human rights** ([OSCE, 2023](#))

Outlines the OSCE's approach to integrating human rights due diligence into public procurement practices to prevent trafficking in human beings and labour exploitation in supply chains.

Image: Helsinki+50 main event. ©Eija Palosuo/Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Finland)



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