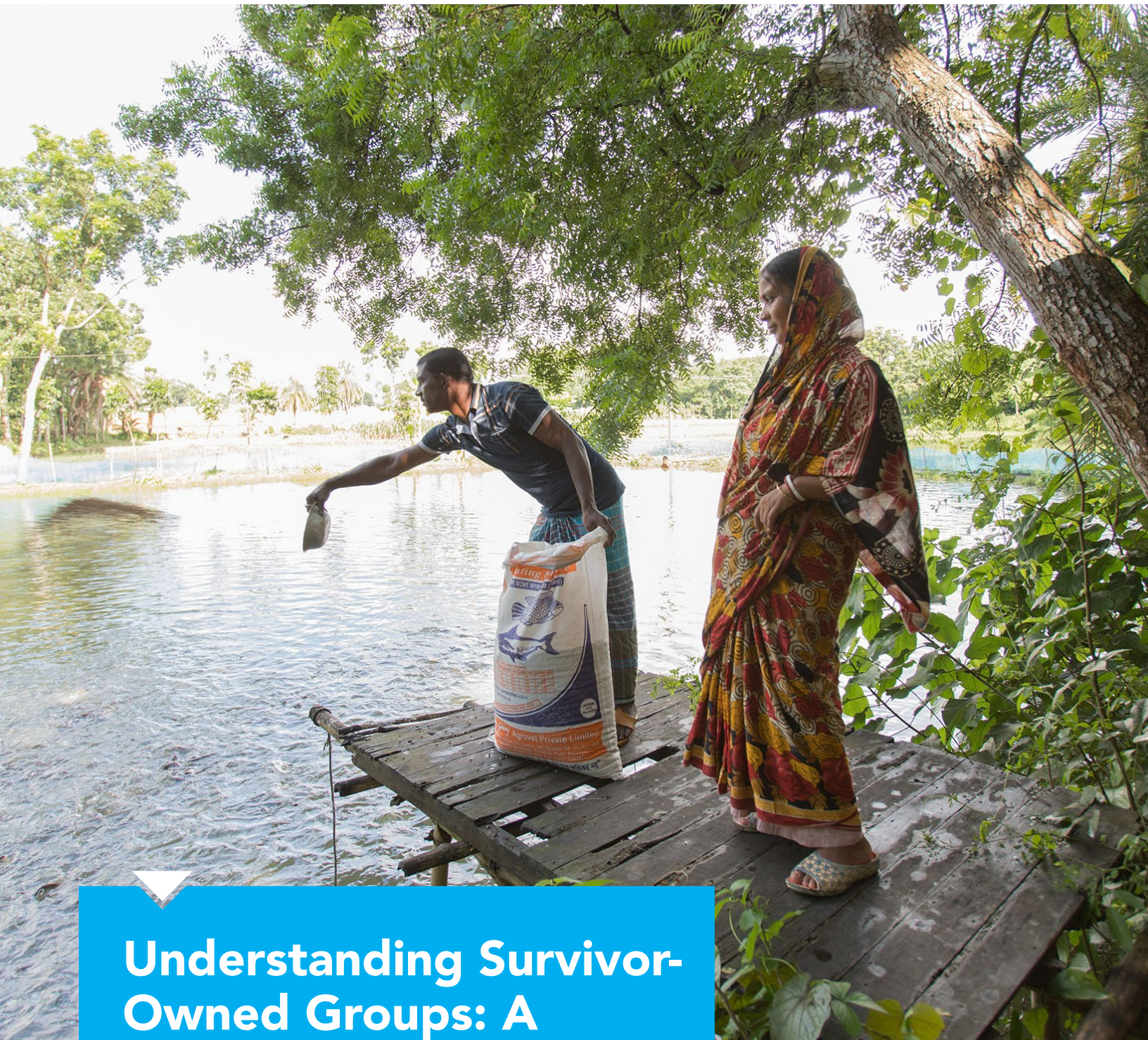




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Understanding Survivor-Owned Groups: A Systematic Literature Review and Narrative Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

There is a burgeoning interest in survivor-centered programming in the field of counter human trafficking. However, according to our understanding, survivor-centered programming requires meaningful survivor engagement, and survivor engagement can only truly be meaningful if survivors are sufficiently empowered. However, limited guidance is available around the building of survivor empowerment. Evidence shows that, in general, collective action among rights holders is one way in which to effectuate empowerment from the bottom up, possibly the only way. To better understand how collective action can and does take place among trafficking survivors, we undertook a systematic literature review, asking *What factors are necessary for collective action, as actualized through survivor-owned organizations, to form, function, and be sustainable?* After screening 3,043 titles and abstracts, found through both a deductive and inductive search protocol using Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, and the University of Sussex database, and assessing 30 retrieved documents for quality and relevance, we uncovered only two studies which fit the inclusion criteria. While an aggregate of two resources is insufficient for a systematic review, we chose to share our findings to highlight similar themes uncovered in the documents, and, at the same time, identify the glaring gaps in the adjacent and overarching literature through a narrative synthesis. The two included studies provided evidence that survivor groups form from necessity and that those who did engage reported increased levels of wellbeing. However, both studies over-emphasize the challenges and provide a shallow analysis of the potential positive outcomes of the groups. The overall narrative review process demonstrates bias in the wider evidence base regarding survivors. Mainly, we saw patterns of 1) exclusion of victims as perceived members of the community; 2) insufficient analysis of positive psychosocial outcomes; 3) conflation or confusion between human trafficking and sex work, as well as human trafficking and labor migration; and 4) finally, a push/pull effect for those who exit trafficking to identify as a sex worker/migrant laborer and relinquish the survivor identity. The paper ends with a long list of unanswered questions resulting from the lackluster findings of the review around collective action, survivor-owned groups, and survivor empowerment. This systematic literature review will serve as a starting point for future research in this thematic area, including a forthcoming participatory action research conducted by Asia CTIP with a survivor voice organization in Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of *survivor-centered approaches*, *survivor engagement*, and *survivor empowerment* have recently become central in the field of human trafficking. The concepts and terms are a major feature of the “Revised USAID Policy on Counter Trafficking in Persons” (USAID, 2022). For example, the term *survivor empowerment* features in the introductory paragraph: “USAID deems the protection and empowerment of trafficking survivors a high priority” (pg. iv). In addition, the first of the seven **Guiding Principles** of the revised policy is to “promote survivor-centered approaches in C-TIP programs” and the second of the five **Programmatic Objectives** is improved opportunities for survivor engagement. Inclusion of these principles and objectives shows a clear intention to ensure survivors have a role in guiding and shaping CTIP programming.

However, while their presence in the revised policy is promising, the definitions of these terms and how an inclusive shift in programming will take place remain unclear. On the one hand, the term *survivor-centered approach* is clearly defined:

An approach that involves placing survivors’ priorities, needs, and interests at the center of programming to support their autonomy; assisting them in making informed choices; prioritizing efforts to restore their feelings of safety and security; and safeguarding against policies and practices that might inadvertently re-traumatize them. A survivor-centered approach should also be trauma-informed and culturally competent. Programs should aim to be contextually appropriate and reinforce survivors’ dignity and well-being (pg. 4).

However, the terms *survivor engagement* and *survivor empowerment* lack clear definitions and directives. The policy document seems to conflate these two terms with the concepts of a *survivor-informed approach*, which is defined as

A program, policy, intervention, or product designed, implemented, and evaluated with intentional leadership, expertise, and input from a diverse community of survivors to ensure that the program, policy, or intervention accurately represents their needs, interests, and perceptions and supports their autonomy (Ibid).

Overall, the document provides no instruction about how to ensure these approaches are carried out appropriately or well. To substantiate the above and fill this gap, this systematic review and narrative synthesis sets out to investigate the existing research around survivor-leadership and survivor-owned groups, which our prior research indicates are the most effective expressions of survivor empowerment and engagement in CTIP (Kasper and Chiang, 2020; Kasper and Chiang, 2022; Tauson et al., 2023). Being able to trace how engagement and empowerment have led to survivor-centered and -informed approaches is an important step in this process.

DEFINING “EMPOWERMENT” AND “ENGAGEMENT”

In order to review the evidence around empowerment and meaningful engagement we need to define these two terms as they relate to survivors. *Empowerment* is not an easy term to define, even though it is part of the development rhetoric (Henink et al., 2012). According to Narayan (2002), empowerment is both a means to an end and an objective in itself; relevant at both the collective and individual level; and is defined subjectively by local values, beliefs, and norms. Overall, for those to be empowered, they must be able to “participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (pg. 14).

From our understanding, *empowerment* means a shifting of power from one person or group to another person or group. Power is a dynamic resource, and one cannot, in earnest, simultaneously give-up and maintain the same power.¹ For example, if a parent attempts to empower their small child to dress themselves but interferes or vetoes every decision the child makes, then the parent is retaining power. Giving power thus means trusting and accepting the risk that things will not go in the way we expect, or think is best. The same is true for so-called beneficiaries; if groups are only allowed to make decisions based on that which the donor or service provider approves, this is merely tokenistic and not empowerment (see Chua and Tauson, 2022 for a deeper understanding on donor/service provider relations).

Engagement has a very clear relationship with empowerment and can be defined in multiple ways, across multiple disciplines from organizational behavior, public policy, marketing, and health, among others. The concept can exist on a spectrum that

starts with the sharing of partial information, in order to manipulate groups, and can extend all the way to full citizen control (Broerse & Buning de Cock, 2012). Based on this understanding, *meaningful engagement* is impossible if it is not accompanied by empowerment. Deer and Baumgartner (2019, p. 168), for example, point out that tokenistic engagement differs from empowered leadership – the former involves feedback that may or may not be taken up, whilst the latter means survivors have the “power to set the agenda, make major decisions and control resources.” Broerse and Buning de Cock (2012) further explain how sharing information and consulting with marginalized groups are improvements compared to partial information and manipulation. However, these forms of engagement are still often tokenistic measures, as the aim of these actions can be to gain support without guaranteeing any actual influence on decisions and actions. If we follow this type of pseudo, or in-name-only, “survivor-informed approach,” receiving feedback and inputs without making meaningful and substantial changes, the subsequent programs, policies, and interventions, cannot and will not be effectual.

Finally, empowerment occurs as a result of a top-down and/or bottom-up approach. Often those who are marginalized or disempowered demand power through their ability to act collectively, i.e., collective action. This is because collective action increases access to resources, improves groups’ ability to solve problems, and amplifies voices through collective bargaining power. As such, building the capacity and assets of survivors as individuals and as a group will more often lead to sustained and positive outcomes (Narayan, 2002).

To meaningfully operationalize these concepts, we need to dig into the evidence around how survivors tend to experience empowerment and engagement. Evidence suggests that survivors tend to experience social exclusion and hold lower levels of power in society. Evidence also suggests that relatively marginalized groups tend to maximize their agency through acting collectively. Therefore, to think about empowerment and engagement usefully, we must understand survivor agency, survivor leadership, and survivor practices through which they attain skills and capacities for engagement.

¹ It can, however, be said that shifting power from group A to group B can create opportunities for group A to access greater power. For example, in the case of a married couple, a spouse that controls and keeps their partner at home has power over them. Relinquishing power and allowing the partner to explore careers (again, as an example) may bring more power to the couple as a whole, therefore, to the individual (See Chambers, R., IDS Bulletin Volume 37, Number 6, November 2006).

UNDERSTANDING “COLLECTIVE ACTION”

At the beginning stages of the research design, the team conducted an initial scoping of literature on collective action to better understand the concept and how it could and should apply to survivor-led groups. As defined by van Zomeren (2013), collective action is essentially the summation of activities and pursuits by those who see themselves as a part of a group, for the betterment of the group, whether they act alone or as a unit. In this sense, collective action can range from the act of signing a petition or voting to an armed revolution. Among others, collective action can include civic engagement and socio-political acts such as demonstrations, protesting, boycotts, strikes, forming unions, advocacy, and campaigning.

For many decades researchers have been trying to understand what catalyzes collective action. While there are a multitude of explanations that come from various disciplines, the seminal work of van Zomeren et al. (2008) provides an integrated model of collective action. This model brings together theories and evidence from psychology, sociology, political science, and economics (Ibid) to explain the motivations for taking part in collective action. From this and subsequent research, collective action can be seen to come from both group and individual factors (Duncan, 2012).

Group factors, according to Duncan (2012), subjective injustice or disadvantage, include perceived group efficacy, and social identity. Subjective injustice or disadvantage is a necessary, but insufficient factor in determining mobilization; all groups engaged in collective action perceive injustice or disadvantage – for themselves or others – but not all who perceive injustice or disadvantage take part in collective action. According to van Zomeren et al. (2008) for collective action to take place, a group must share emotions such as group-based anger, dissatisfaction, resentment, or relative deprivation. While little research provides evidence on group longevity or sustainability, Thomas et al., (2021), find that a combination of hope, outrage, and social identification can predict sequential change or stability over time. Group efficacy, or a group’s belief in their capacity to achieve their goals plays an important role in mobilization (Hornsey et al., 2006; van Zomeren, 2013). Participation in collective action is, at minimum, costly in time and effort and, at maximum, risky in terms of livelihood and physical safety and security. Given this, those who take part in collective action must weigh the costs and benefits of participation (van Zomeren, 2013). Without hope or believing that participation will bring a favorable outcome, it is unlikely that one will participate.

Social identity can be defined as psychological membership of a group; it does not have to be a legal, cultural, linguistic, or ethnic distinction (Thomas et al., 2016). As such, group identification can be fluid and based on shifts in awareness, social norms, circumstances, personal or societal values, moral convictions, political or economic events, and others (Edström & Dolan, 2018; Smith et al., 2015; van Zomeren et al., 2013). According to van Zomeren (2013), group identification is a powerful predictor of collective action.

Personality and life experiences also play a role and influence the individual’s likelihood of engaging in collective action (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Duncan, 2012; Smith et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2018). Family background, such as coming from a warm and permissive household or a household that has more liberal views; a family or community history of collective action; experience of relative poverty or deprivation; self-efficacy; and cognitive flexibility and openness all seem to play a role as to whether an individual will join a group or contribute through some action or another (Duncan, 2012).

Regarding outcomes, research shows that while collective action can challenge or change power dynamics in a system, it can also positively influence the outcomes of individuals. Studies on activism, including left-wing, environmental, and feminist movements, found that individuals engaging in collective action experienced fewer negative associations with their lived experiences, stronger feelings of empowerment, and a positive outlook in facilitating change (Jasko et al., 2019). For sexual assault survivors, a study found that there was a positive correlation between engagement in collective action with post-traumatic growth (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2021). Shodiya-Zeumault et al. (2022) conducted a systematic literature review on Black women’s resistance and found that among racially marginalized people, engagement can facilitate healing from oppression and discrimination, support critical agency, and encourage formation of community networks. In survivors of domestic violence in India, it was found that collective action enhanced community-level agency to respond to domestic violence, and, in turn, provided knowledge and skills to create leaders in the community (Menon & Allen, 2020).

Findings from our scoping exercise above show that collective action is mobilized out of a number of personal and group factors that must interact to catalyze action. They also show that collective action can create many positive outcomes for victims of trauma and violence. The above general understanding will help us to analyze the leadership and collective action of

human trafficking survivors, particularly through survivor-owned groups. In the next section, we explain our choice to explore what is known about collective action by looking at survivor-owned groups and better understand if survivor circumstances are unique or in line with the knowledge around collective action.

Rationale

Our previous research on reintegration (Kasper & Chiang, 2020), victim identification (Kasper & Chiang, 2022), and referral mechanisms (Tauson et al., 2023), shows that survivor-owned groups can obtain and retain power in a meaningful way. The results from the research showed that survivors are not helpless victims. Instead, they have an in-depth understanding of the complex problems and needs that result from trafficking, and they can and should play pivotal roles in ensuring positive reintegration outcomes, not only for themselves, but for others. Survivor groups are not only useful because they understand the gaps and issues that exist in services and service delivery, whether it be protection, prevention, or prosecution. They are useful because, when empowered to facilitate or design their own services, they are well positioned to effectively address the gaps and issues at the community level. This is particularly urgent given another finding from our research: that survivors who are engaged in grassroots, bottom-up collective action (alternatively leadership, organizing) tend to experience more positive outcomes and are personally empowered to help others. Based on the above, we sought to understand what knowledge exists around the correct and best ways in which to engage and empower survivors through collective action.

Further, we understand that survivor-centered approaches are necessary for efficacious interventions and programming but cannot be accomplished without meaningful survivor engagement. Survivor engagement, however, can too easily be tokenistic if the survivors are not prepared or able to voice their perspectives and suggestions to a set of receptive *partners* during that “engagement.” Survivor empowerment is most efficiently and sustainably achieved through simultaneous top-down and bottom-up efforts. What is more, those who are engaged in grassroots, bottom-up collective action experience more positive outcomes and are personally empowered to help others, using their knowledge and expertise to make sustained and meaningful contributions to the counter trafficking effort.

As stated above, our previous research findings and everyday experiences in the field allow us to confidently theorize that collective action, in the form of *survivor-owned or -led* groups,² can lead to efficacious survivor-centered approaches through sustained empowerment. While this hypothesis can be strongly argued, we still lack a general understanding of survivor-owned groups in the field of counter human trafficking. This includes information around how survivor groups initially form or come together, what makes them cohesive and sustainable, what makes them effective, and how their success can be replicated in other contexts. To build this understanding, with the purpose of contributing to evidence-based approaches in the CTIP field, we have chosen to engage in a number of research efforts,³ starting with this systematic review and narrative synthesis, asking the research question: *What factors are necessary for collective action, as actualized through survivor-owned organizations to form, function, and be sustainable?*



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- 2 By survivor-owned or survivor-led, we mean autonomously run by survivors, whereby they are in full control of the form the group takes, the overarching aims, and the actions and interventions of the group, even if they consult with or seek assistance from outside groups or receive outside funding.
- 3 In 2023, we started a participatory research project with a survivors' network in Bangladesh to evaluate their impact, better understand their motivations, and what a sustainable outcome looks like from their perspective.

METHODS

The purpose of this research is to build an understanding around what makes for efficacious, survivor-owned groups of human trafficking survivors. The aim of this review is to compile and summarize research findings and evaluation results that could tell us what factors, including general circumstances, interventions, programs, activities, or policies, contribute to the formation, function, and sustainability of survivor-owned groups. To do so, we sought to identify and analyze findings from articles, reports, and evaluations that utilized primary data sources, either qualitative or quantitative, that provide insights on the above research question.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The below table (Table 1) provides a complete breakdown of the eligibility criteria for this research.

TABLE 1: ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND RATIONALE

Factor	Inclusion Criteria	Rationale
Years	Published since January 1, 2010	The scoping exercise identified the earliest research using integrative models of social and personality psychology from 2008. The earliest empirical research utilizing the integrative model to understand what makes survivor groups effective was first identified in 2012. Based on this, it was decided to begin the search with publications published since 2010 to ensure nothing was missed.
Methods and Methodology	Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Method	We sought empirical evidence to identify patterns and understand context-specific factors for collective action. Therefore, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods would be included, and any theory-based or editorialized publications would be excluded.
Data Sources	Primary	Related to the above, research should use primary data sources, or empirical data from survivors or key stakeholders. Again, editorialized, or theoretical papers would not be included. Only literature reviews that used systematic searches would be included.
Language	English	Searches were conducted in English based on the language abilities of the team.
Publication Type	Peer Reviewed, Postgraduate Research (Dissertations/ Theses), and grey literature	To ensure the review is based on high-quality, credible, and relevant research, peer-reviewed research was included. Due to a lack of peer-reviewed articles, the search was expanded to include both post-graduate research (master and doctoral level) and grey literature. As a result, the quality of sources was heavily scrutinized before inclusion was considered.
Group classification characteristics	Survivor-owned or survivor-led collective action in trafficking and slavery	In line with the objectives of this research, only literature which investigated “survivor-owned” or “survivor-led” groups was included. Included: groups that are started by survivors; groups that are started by NGO, INGOs, UN agencies, religious groups, or others, as long as they are overwhelmingly autonomous, i.e., led by survivors; ⁴ and mixed groups of survivors and others as long as the role and voice of survivors in the group is distinct (and not conflated with other groups). Excluded: “survivor-owned/led” or “collective action” in name only; public advocacy groups, while this can be seen as civil society engagement, they are not survivor run; and mixed groups that do not provide a platform for, or actively discourage, survivor voice.
Participants	Trafficking survivors	While other similar groups such as sex worker and migrant rights groups, can and do provide insights on the topic, they are outside the scope of this research.

⁴ We define *autonomy* as a group that can set their own agenda and has survivors in the leadership and organization of the group. If the group receives support from a donor, they can still be considered autonomous if they can meaningfully make decisions, e.g., how funds are spent or what or how activities are carried out. If the group does not receive funds from, but is run and managed by, another organization (NGO, religious organization, etc.) and survivors only receive services and do have not voice in the shape of the organization, it cannot be considered “self-owned” or as a group engaging in collective action, e.g., an NGO run support group.



Identification

INFORMATION SOURCES

Searches were conducted across four databases: Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, and the University of Sussex Library Database. Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Scopus were chosen as they are among the most frequently used databases for systematic literature reviews (Gusenbauer, 2018). It is well documented that Google Scholar's constantly changing content, database structure, and algorithms often produce duplicate or irrelevant results, which reduces its suitability for systematic literature reviews on its own (Giustini & Boulos, 2013). However, the broad coverage offered by Google Scholar across disciplines, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, cannot be ignored (Martín-Martín et al., 2018), thus its inclusion in this research. The University of Sussex Library Database was chosen due to access to author access and the wide range of journals and articles available in the database. However, while Sussex's library provides a wide range of articles and access to multiple databases at once, such sources provide less precise and overly sensitive results. As a result, many search strings produced duplicate results and were excluded.

SEARCH STRATEGY

The deductive search focused on two key concepts: "collective action" and "trafficking survivor" and their relevant synonymous phrases (see Table 2). While the search strategy for each database started the same, searches were adjusted based on the number of hits and relevance of pre-screened results. When these inductive strategies were used, team members recorded each adjustment on the Excel screening form. Inductive strategies were particularly

relevant when searching Google Scholar; after pre-screening 10 pages without any relevant results, the searches were terminated.⁵ For example, the terms "collective action" AND "modern slavery" produced results around public advocacy campaigns, such as demanding consumer change or protests against companies with problematic supply chains. The term "modern slavery" seems to bias results towards public facing campaigns, where emotive responses are valued, as opposed to terms such as "forced labor" or "human trafficking." In addition, when searching "collective action" AND "trafficking victim" Google results tended to produce toolkits and manuals. Additionally, two other searches were excluded from all databases during the pre-screening phase: ("support groups" AND "human trafficking") and ("support groups" AND "modern slavery"). These search strings produced a wide number of irrelevant hits; no survivor-led or survivor-owned groups could be found among these, and all were extremely top down in nature.

TABLE 2: LIST OF SEARCH TERMS

Primary search term	Synonymous phrases
Collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organiz* • Social movement • Survivor network* • Support group* • Participatory approach* • Participatory action • Grassroots • Peer support
Trafficking survivor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trafficking survivor • Trafficking victim • Modern slavery • Human trafficking

5 Based on Haddaway et al. (2015). *The Role of Google Scholar in Evidence Reviews and Its Applicability to Grey Literature Searching*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138237>

TABLE 3: SEARCH STRATEGY AND HITS

Database	Paste text of search strategy below	Hits
Scopus	"collective action" OR "social movements" OR grassroots" OR organizing" AND "trafficking survivor" OR "trafficking victim" OR "human trafficking"	1982
Sussex	"collective action" OR "social movements" OR grassroots" OR organizing" AND "trafficking survivor" OR "trafficking victim" OR "human trafficking"	171
Google Scholar	"collective action" AND "trafficking survivor" OR "trafficking victim" OR "modern slavery" OR "human trafficking"	15465
	"support group" AND "trafficking survivor" OR "trafficking victim"	188
	"survivor networks" AND "trafficking survivor" OR "trafficking victim" OR "modern slavery" OR "human trafficking"	72
ProQuest	"collective action" AND "modern slavery" OR "human trafficking"	479
	"participatory approaches" OR "grassroots" OR "peer support" OR support networks" AND "human trafficking"	62
	"survivor networks" OR support groups" AND "modern slavery"	12

The searches were conducted between January 16 – 23, 2023, with a total of 18,431 hits recorded across the four databases. Of the hits, 648 duplicates and 14,740 irrelevant hits were removed before screening. The large number of records were removed due to the above-mentioned issues and strategies with Google Scholar. The research team consisting of two members, conducted the searches separately with one member conducting the preliminary search using Google Scholar and ProQuest and the other using Sussex's library and Scopus.

Due to the limited nature of the evidence base, complex Boolean searches were not necessary, and in some cases rather limiting. Simple searches were sufficiently effective, using each combination of the of one term or one phrase from each grouping (see Table 3).

Screening

SELECTION PROCESS

In the first stage of the screening process, 3,691 abstracts and titles were screened by the research team. First, the team downloaded the results for each search into an Excel workbook, using four worksheets corresponding to each database. This was determined the most appropriate method, as each database produces downloadable .xlsx files of

records with information such as year, title, author and abstract, in a distinct order. Second, records were screened for duplicates within databases and then across databases, resulting in the removal of 648 records.

At this stage all 3,043 records were reviewed based on title and abstract. Since abstracts are not readily available when downloading the records for each search in Google Scholar, this meant that for each hit, the team had to click on an individual record to view the abstract (or introduction/summary if no abstract was available). This inevitably made the process tedious and time-consuming.

During the review, the team classified the records according to a 0-4 ranking system, based on the inclusion criteria (see Table 4). Rankings in Excel were done for each set of results according to database by the same team member who had previously identified the records in the corresponding databases. The ranking system was developed due to the lack of literature, to ensure that no study was excluded that could potentially fit the inclusion criteria and provide needed insight into the research question.

Based on the titles and abstracts, records were ranked as follows.

TABLE 4: RANKING AND CRITERIA OF RECORDS:

Ranking	Criteria
1	a) Included trafficking survivors as a focus of the research (as opposed to other groups, e.g., sex workers, migrant laborers, domestic workers), AND b) Were survivor-led or owned (as previously defined by the team, see above), AND c) The organization or group worked toward a desired outcome
2	a) Included trafficking survivors as a focus of the research, BUT b) Was unclear if survivor-led/survivor-owned or about the extent survivors were involved, OR c) Was unclear if the research focused on any form of collective action
3	a) Not trafficking survivors, BUT b) Collective action by a vulnerable group or a group related to trafficking or forced labor (sex workers or labor rights groups), AND c) The organization or group worked toward some desired outcome
4	a) Relevant to the concept of organizing trafficking survivors (for background information), BUT b) Did not appear to be empirical or based on primary data collection
0	a) Was not about collective action or survivor-led or owned outcomes

After the first round of screening, 111 documents were ranked 1-4 and identified as potentially relevant to the research question. The 111 remaining records were combined into one worksheet from the four databases; all those ranked “0” were excluded. Following the eligibility criteria above, the abstracts were read again, and often the full document was downloaded and skimmed for further details around the varying uncertainties. All records were then re-scored by each team member. A discussion was held on any items where there was any disagreement in scores. If an agreement could not be reached, the document was put into the higher category to ensure no relevant literature was left out. The majority (51) were reclassified as “0”, 32 were ranked “1-2” and moved to the next round of screening, and the remaining 28 were saved due to their insights and for background reading on the topic, but not included.

TABLE 5: NUMBER OF RECORDS IN EACH RANK

Ranking	Number
0	51
1 -2	32
3	21
4	7

Attempting to err on the side of caution, when reviewing, the research team included documents containing terms such as “labor exploitation”, “bonded labor”, “forced labor” for consideration, recognizing that the definitions of these terms are not always clear and consistent and those without legal expertise often confuse and conflate the definitions of these terms (Burke, 2013; Nawyn et al., 2013).

In the second round of screening, the research team retrieved the electronic versions of any document that was ranked 1 to 2. Full documents were read and assessed for quality and relevance to the research question and were ranked ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Documents were assigned to team members who read the document in full. The research team was unable to retrieve two papers: one from Google Scholar and another from Scopus. For the 30 that were reviewed, their eligibility was determined by the quality of research and relevance to the research question.

In the third and final round of screening, five documents were potentially determined to be of quality and relevance and were reviewed a final time against the eligibility criteria by a different team member. Team members discussed and debated, and as a final result, three papers were excluded due to definition issues, with either trafficking or collective action. Definition issues and other reasons of exclusion/inclusion are discussed below in the Results section.

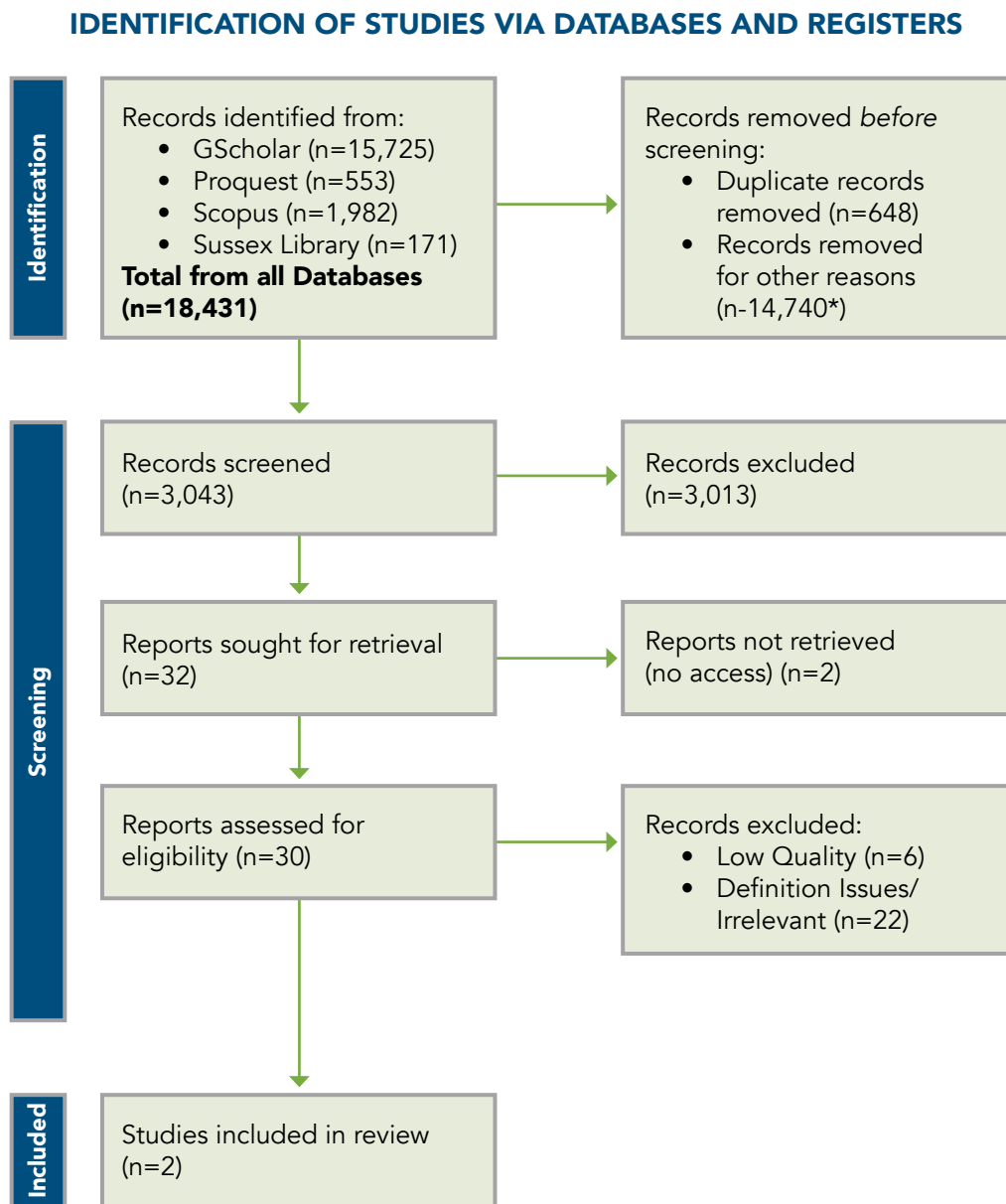


RESULTS

STUDY SELECTION

Overall, 3,043 records were screened, with 3,013 excluded based on a review of titles and abstracts. Thirty-two documents were sought for retrieval. The 30, which were available, were reviewed for both quality and relevance based on the inclusion criteria, and, as a final result, two documents were included.

FIGURE 1: PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM



* As mentioned above, during pre-screening, once reaching 10 straight pages with 0 relevant or only duplicate results, pre-screening was halted, thus eliminating the remaining records in the identification stage.

During this final stage of the review process, the main reasons for exclusion of the 28 retrieved documents were as follows.

1. Mismatching definitions: collective action and related terms poorly defined

In the abstracts and titles, articles would use the term collective action or similarly related terms such as grassroots, collectives, community organizing, and civil society groups. However, some of the researchers seem to poorly understand these notions and attributed wrong definitions. One such example of this (Sawyer & Clair, 2022) defined collectives and collective agency in a women's shelter as enforced support groups and the occasional group birthday celebration. Collective action and its synonyms: collectives, collective agency, etc., cannot be top-down or enforced. While outside actors, such as NGOs or community leaders may help to form groups, survivor leadership or evidence of survivors driving the agenda of the group should be apparent. If participation is mandatory or if access to services is dependent upon participation, this cannot be defined as collective action (Sawyer & Clair, 2022; Victor, 2020) and thus, were excluded.

2. Peer support is relevant, but not technically defined as collective action or survivor-owned

One study (Deer & Baumgartner, 2019) was of high quality and provided solid examples as to why peer support can lead to positive outcomes for survivors, both those providing and those seeking support. However, this is not collective action as the research mostly described individual survivors, mostly those working at the NGOs or working as service providers years after exiting trafficking. While this provided extremely powerful insights, it does not address the research question. Other studies discussed participation in support groups, but this was also not collective action as the groups were run and owned by NGOs, religious organizations, or researchers (Evans, 2019). Gonzalez et al. (2020) and Torri (2020) also provided examples of survivors reaching out to help others, but the description and analysis were limited.

3. A high number of sex worker and migrant labor organizations strategically exclude survivors

The review process uncovered a significant body of high quality, relevant research conducted around sex worker organizations and migrants' rights groups. Even though one of their clearly stated aims included

the prevention of trafficking (hence their inclusion in the retrieval stage), this was explicitly through increased rights and protections for sex workers or migrants' groups. Sex workers in these groups unambiguously did not identify as survivors of trafficking, even when they had experienced trafficking. This is seen as strategic because the aim of the group is, through collective action, to help other women who continue in sex work, access their rights. These groups feared that the conflation of the two groups would lead to raids on their places of employment to "rescue" them, or that they would not be seen as active agents with autonomy, therefore impeding their work toward increasing rights and protections. This was a clear distinction in the literature (Dasgupta, 2014; Koné, 2016), which we came across many times in the review process as well.

4. Some studies list reasons why survivor groups can actually be negative, can be impossible to form, or why they should form; however, they fail to research active groups

Rather than investigating what makes groups work, some research investigated why groups have yet to be formed (Torri, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2022), even investigating potential dangers (Weaver, 2019). One other looked at the interest in forming groups among sex workers and trafficking survivors in the Philippines (Urada et al., 2022), showing there would be much interest, but not really explaining why it has yet to happen.

5. Misleading titles and abstracts

Perhaps only misleading to us, in search of relevant literature, some titles and abstracts seemed to emphasize engagement with and empowerment of survivors/vulnerable people. However, after reviewing the studies, no interviews, surveys, focus groups, or participatory research were done with survivors or vulnerable groups (Anasti, 2019; Gerassi et al., 2017; Guse, 2019; Lux and Mosely, 2013; Stoll et al., 2012). In the best case, Standing et al. (2016) interviewed NGO staff about survivors who were a part of or had organized groups (but failed to include methods or verifiable information, which lead to its exclusion).

6. Quality was lacking

Quality was a major issue among the research reviewed, as is generally the case in the field of CTIP. Much of the reviewed literature completely bypassed methodology sections and made unverifiable claims. These, of course, were excluded.

STUDY CHARACTERISTICS

As the above section explains, only two studies were included in the review after the screening of 3,043 titles and abstracts. These two studies were the only studies which fell within the inclusion criteria and were of sufficient quality:

***How Formerly Abducted Women in Post-Conflict Situations are Reasserting Their Humanity in a Hostile Environment: Photovoice Evidence from Northern Uganda* (Acan, G., Amony, E., Harris, J., & del Guadalupe Davidson, M. (2019). *Gender & Development*, 27(2), 273–294)**

***Community-Based Responses to Negative Health Impacts of Sexual Humanitarian Anti-Trafficking Policies and the Criminalization of Sex Work and Migration in The US* (Hoefinger, H., Musto, J., Maciotti, P. G., Fehrenbacher, A. E., Mai, N., Bennachie, C., & Giametta, C. (2019). *Social Sciences*, 9(1), 1.).**

These were the only studies, of minimum quality, that 1) used primary or empirical data 2) to understand how trafficking survivors 3) engaged in collective action 4) that can also be defined as self-owned/incorporating survivor leadership. Tables 6 and 7 below provide some data and information on the inclusion criteria and basic characteristics of the two studies.

TABLE 6: STUDY DESCRIPTION

Study	Database	Type of publication	Research methods	Sample Size	Type of Trafficking	Country/ies
Acan et al., 2019	Scopus	Peer reviewed article	Participatory methods (photo-voice)	13 trafficking survivors/ group members	Trafficking in conflict zones	Uganda
Hoefinger et al., 2019	Scopus	Peer reviewed article	Participant observation, KIs, survivor interviews	70 (N=50 sex workers, migrants, trafficked persons)	Sex Trafficking	USA

TABLE 7: STUDY DESCRIPTION CONTINUED

Study	Who started the group	Purpose of the group(s)	Does the article fully address the research question?		
			Formation	Effectiveness	Sustainability
Acan et al., 2019	Survivors/ Women in the community	Community reintegration and access to services (to fill NGO gaps)	Limited	Limited	No
Hoefinger et al., 2019	Various/ Survivors and sex workers	Health access, bail bond, mental wellbeing, various groups	Limited	Limited	No

Both studies are peer-reviewed studies, which use varying qualitative methods to collect empirical data from survivors or key informants. The Acan et al., (2019) study uses participatory methods, namely photovoice, a technique that involves photography and storytelling, to better understand how post-conflict trafficking survivors employ their own efforts to improve their conditions, investigating one community-based group in Uganda. Hoefinger et al., (2019) use a number of qualitative methods to understand how multiple grassroots, community-based groups, comprising sex workers, migrants, and trafficking survivors, work together to offer protection and services in two cities in the USA. Both studies show that groups are formed for protection purposes, mainly to access resources which are denied to them based on their status: former abductees, in Acan et al. (2019) or sex workers and sex trafficking survivors in Hoefinger et al. (2019).

Regarding the research question, while both studies met the inclusion criteria, neither study fully addressed or investigated how groups formed, details on their effectiveness, or how groups have been able to sustain over the

many years of their existence. The Acan et al., study used participatory methods to better understand the long-term implications of having been abducted and returned to their villages of origin and how organizing has helped women to meet needs and achieve dignity. While the researchers asked participants to capture both positive and negative aspects of their lives, the authors placed a strong emphasis on the negative reintegration outcomes (9 pages) and limited information on how co-organizing helps survivors to overcome challenges (1.5 pages).

The second study had a similar objective: to build an understanding around the consequences of counter trafficking policies and the criminalization of sex work in regard to access to health care and the community led responses that can protect against systemic violence and negative health outcomes. While this study provided a slightly more balanced analysis between the problems (10 pages) and the mitigation of these problems through community-based organizations (5 pages), the analysis leaves out important aspects. These include specific details around the services offered, how groups are able to transcend barriers, what brings groups together in the first place, and how they can be sustained.

RISK OF BIAS IN STUDIES

There is a distinct risk of bias in this review based on the fact that only two resources could be included. Due to this, we will not be drawing any major conclusions around the research question. Each study presents its own biases and limitations that would further preclude us from making any such claims. The first study, by Acan et al., (2019) has only 13 participants; while in-depth understandings of the experience of these women if very insightful, based on the limited literature available on this topic, it does not allow us to make any general conclusions. The second study, by Hoefinger et al. (2019), does not distinguish sex workers, as in those who choose⁶ their profession and are actively seeking rights from those who qualify and identify as trafficking victims/survivors. Although the groups are not mutually exclusive, there may be differences in needs and priorities for those who strictly identify in one group over another, as mentioned above.

In addition, both articles focus overwhelmingly on the problems that survivors face and mention that the groups were self-formed in an effort to solve these problems, also expressing that the groups are highly effective. At the same time, there is much less emphasis on how their organizations have led to more positive outcomes and how survivors have been able to solve their own problems, although. While this overarching focus in trafficking research toward the struggles and dramatic stories of survivors⁷ is compelling, it creates bias in the evidence base. As we fail to analyze the possible solutions available to survivors, we lack the necessary evidence to ensure effective practices and perpetuate the narrative of victimhood, as the limited number of applicable studies available on this topic help to demonstrate.

RESULTS OF INDIVIDUAL STUDIES

With limited available data, it is impossible to extrapolate to wider populations. However, it is of interest to find that the two studies, carried out on two separate continents, reflect findings in the scoping exercise around collective action, showing a similar impetus for groups to self-organize, a parallel list of service gaps filled, and achievement of similar outcomes. The first column in Table 8 shows the three main areas listed above: impetus, services, and outcomes, listed by themes. The second and third columns provide the language used in the documents to describe each theme to demonstrate overlap. Since Hoefinger et al. (2019) worked with several groups (at least 5), more areas were covered and listed.

6 We use the word choose with full awareness that the limited options available to some people make this less of a choice, but the general distinction is between those who are seeking protections as they continue to work in this area, as opposed to someone who does not feel like they had a choice, and their main aim is or was to exit their situation and seek assistance.

7 For examples see: Bouhours et al. (2013) *Human Trafficking and Moral Panic in Cambodia*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2190704>; Nawyn et al. (2013) *Estimating the Extent of Sex Trafficking: Problems in Definition and Methodology*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43301211>; Brennan (2017) *Fighting Human Trafficking Today*. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/wflr52&div=20&id>; Okech et al. (2017) *Seventeen Years of Human Trafficking Research in Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761407.2017.1415177>



TABLE 8: COMPARISON OF INCLUDED STUDIES

Theme	Acan et al., 2019	Hoefinger et al., 2019
Impetus: Why formed?		
Resistance to humanitarianism	Corruption and theft from NGOs	Abuse, unintentional destitution and harm as a consequence, and neglect from service providers
Unmet needs	Frustration and disappointment	Shortcomings and lack of care
Solidarity	Mutual support and human support structures (social capital)	Community building to contradict victimhood narrative
Services: What was undertaken or provided?		
Financial assistance and livelihoods	Economic security through livelihoods projects (not specified)	Direct financial assistance through crowdfunding
Education	Social and educational services (not specified)	Educational scholarships
Health services	Health (not specified)	Advocating for universal access to health services, including primary health care, HIV treatment, and sexual and reproductive health services; referrals to services; health education
Peer support	Peer support (not specified)	Peer support (not specified)
Family Tracing	Searching for children or abductor fathers	
Solidarity for social and political advocacy	Reducing stigma and social exclusion; Reparations from the government	Fight discrimination in the justice system (not specified), providing advocacy for maternity needs of incarcerated people
Outcomes: What were the results?		
Love and emotional connection	Familial love and human connectivity	Sense of community and belonging
Psychosocial wellbeing	Sense of hope	Increase ability to speak out and defend agency and life experience
Advocacy	Petition heard on the floor of Ugandan Parliament calling for reparations and budgetary commitments	Building critical alliances (not specified)

Overall, the groups formed for three main purposes. First, whether consciously or subconsciously, groups formed in reaction to NGOs or humanitarian service providers who did more harm than good, according to study participants. Acan et al., explained that NGO workers actively manipulated and stole from abductees. Hoefinger et al., spoke of sex workers and survivors being abused and neglected by those who purported to provide support and of the systemic violence created through the criminalization of sex work. These service providers include law enforcement and health care providers. As a result, survivors groups formed to confront the systems in place that fail to provide entitled and much needed services.

Second, and related to the above, according to both studies, participants found that services were lacking, leaving them in need and with shared frustration. Groups formed to help survivors access needed services, through direct service provision and referrals. Finally, participants in both studies felt they needed to work together to achieve their goals (group efficacy). For the abductees in the Acan et al., study, their exclusion from society meant that they had to work together to avoid complete marginalization in society. In the Hoefinger et al., study, participants felt sidelined by the victimhood narrative, and had to work together to be heard and recognized. While both studies explained the “why” behind group formation, the “how” has been left out.

Regarding outputs or services, the groups were able to assist other survivors with livelihoods and direct financial assistance, education, access to health services, and others. One shortcoming of the research is that service provision provided and accessed is not well explained or detailed. Mostly the services were listed off in the publications without information on individual survivor or group outcomes. Both studies also mentioned advocacy and provided details of the aims, but the specifics were not provided in this area either.

Finally, the outcomes listed in both studies related to a sense of empowerment and controlling the narrative, a feeling of belonging or even love, and a sense of hope. Both studies mentioned that the groups were able to push forward political agendas through solidarity and networking. However, apart from a mention of a petition read to the Ugandan parliament by the women’s group, the details and analysis around this theme are generally missing.

NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS - THEORIZING THE LACK OF LITERATURE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the many limitations described above, we are not able to draw definitive conclusions around our original research question. We are unable to build an understanding of how efficacious survivor-owned groups form and sustain, how they might be replicated in other contexts, and how we, as practitioners, can better support the formation and sustainability of such groups.

However, the review process, meaning the entirety of the search, screening, retrieval, and assessment processes, has provided 1) some indication as to where the literature falls short and 2) observations that open up a wide range of questions related the original research question.

Identified trends, issues, and evidence gaps

The review process has provided insights into the wider literature, allowing us to recognize some general themes and patterns, including biases and confusion around terms and concepts. These insights shed light as to why there may be limitations in the evidence base.

One of the most important insights into the literature is that survivors are often excluded from groups that fall into the wider category of collective action. As noted in the results section above, there are clear definition issues around the term “collective action” in the counter trafficking space; however, even when definitions are correctly applied, survivors are left out. Overwhelmingly, when studies analyzed the impact of groups working against trafficking, applying terms such as collective action, grassroots organizing, civil society coordination, civic networks, and community-based responses, there was absolutely no mention of survivors or anyone with lived experience as groups within themselves or as members of the groups (Anasti, 2019; Burke, 2013; Evans, 2019; Gerassi et al., 2017; Guse, 2019; Stoll et al., 2012). While not a necessity for collective action to take place, it shows that survivors remain invisible and are not viewed as a group with agency or autonomy. Within these documents, there was no accounting for survivors’ absence in the community or civil society or any reflections by the authors around their exclusion. It is not possible to speak on behalf of these researchers; their complete



disregard of survivors as community members leads us to conclude that this is an academic blind spot.

As found with the two studies included in this review, the concepts of wellbeing and resilience, in relation to exposure to peer survivors, were mentioned in titles, abstracts, and even conclusions, but analysis on this topic was generally missing. For example, in Evans (2019: v) a significant conclusion from the research is that relationships are “considered the greatest instrument of healing”, but the author spends only one paragraph analyzing data from support groups and one other paragraph analyzing data on other interpersonal relationships. Torri (2020) provides a much more detailed description of how relationships with other survivors lead to more positive reintegration outcomes, but much like the two studies in this review, the specifics as to what these relationships look like, how they form, and any concrete results are left out. To be fair to these authors, their core intention was not

to understand these relationships, and their importance likely emerged as a reoccurring theme during analysis. However, taking the four studies that explore psychosocial aspects of reintegration and recovery, there is a clear avoidance of both the psychological and sociological, creating major gaps in our understanding of the needs and possible interventions in this area. A cross-disciplinary approach to research, incorporating psychology, applied neuroscience, and/or social psychology may begin to fill these gaps.

Another insight from the body of literature screened for this review is that researchers often conflate, arbitrarily assign, or generally confuse sex work, migrant labor, and trafficking. Without doubt, the line among and between these classifications can at times be blurry or non-existent; however, sometimes this intersection is neglected by authors. Some of the research on migrant laborers and sex workers (Bhuyan et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Scrogie, 2013; Urada et

al., 2021; and Wijaya et al., 2018;) highlight cases that can be defined as human trafficking but lump them into cases of abuse within migration or sex work. While this is a tactic sometimes used by researchers for the purposes of building an understanding around other experiences, if not addressed and treated properly, it can bias the evidence base. For example, Bhuyan et al., (2018) provide descriptions of “labor exploitation and psychological hardship” as incidences of migrant carers being locked in windowless basements, being forced to work without pay or being allowed days off, and having their wages withheld. It is not clear if researchers who specialize in topics such as labor organizing, migration, and/or sex work do not have a clear understanding of trafficking due to divisions among academic departments or if they are actively disregarding a level of complexity. While impossible to say, this review of literature does show that inconsistent definitions can lead to a clear gap in the evidence base as well as bypassing the trafficking experience in the literature all together.

As opposed to the above, in some of the research that covers organizing of sex workers and/or migrant laborers, authors also provide very clear distinctions and subsequent justifications for these categorizations. These authors are very well aware of the nuance, and it is often that the individuals they are researching who choose to not be identified as trafficking victims or survivors. This tends to be a strategic choice on the side of both survivors and organizers. As Brennan (2010) points out, being identified as a trafficking victim has many challenges and, often, very few benefits. After exiting trafficking, the unidentified survivor is probably better off accessing migrant communities who offer support and assistance in job placement. Given the option, joining aligned, rights-based labor activist groups may have perceived longer-term benefits as opposed to joining a survivor group, especially for someone facing economic hardship.

Koné (2016) also highlights this in her research with grassroots sex worker organizations based in Latin America. According to her findings, when sex workers’ rights organizations identify a trafficking victim, they often help to find that person assistance, but if that person chooses to identify as a victim/survivor, they should not be part of the group. This is because the unified aims of these groups are to gain more rights and protections for sex workers. If their advocacy message is unclear or equated with victimhood, it can hold them back. For example, if sex workers who are trying to earn a living are seen as victims, they may be “rescued” by law enforcement and forced to remain in shelters against their will. Dasgupta (2014) describes a similar situation in Kolkata. In this case, even women who are trafficked attempt to hide it, as sex work is le-

gal, but trafficking is not tolerated. If a woman is found by other sex workers to be trafficked, she will be forced out of the community, where the consequences may be much more severe. Sex workers have to keep themselves safe from those NGOs and religious organizations that fail to distinguish between the two groups or do harm to trafficking survivors. Therefore, some women feel that they must hide their situation and outwardly identify as an autonomous sex worker for the sake of safety. This body of literature shows us that there is a clear distinction between the aims and identities of labor and sex work organizations, as opposed to survivor-owned groups. This finding may indicate that helping to form survivor groups may not always be the best course of action, particularly in destination countries. Survivor groups should be formed when there is a perceived benefit to the survivors and should not be formed for tokenistic purposes.

Key Observations and Remaining Questions

The two studies included in this review help to substantiate our previous research findings (Kasper and Chiang, 2020; Kasper and Chiang, 2022; Tauson et al., 2023), provide evidence that collective action mobilization among trafficking survivors does deviate dramatically from other groups, and our theory that survivor empowerment, through collective action can lead to sustainable changes. However, even within the inclusion criteria, these studies do not fully answer the research question. In fact, the review of the wider body of literature has brought to light both the size and abundance of evidence gaps and put forward new questions and perspectives.

Both included studies describe groups which formed out of a necessity to confront systemic aggression and social exclusion. Both studies provide examples of groups being pushed to the margins of society where human rights and access to basic needs and services are limited, based on the participants’ categorization. Evidence from the studies suggests that group formation may be marked by necessity to make change for themselves, their families, and all others that are a part of this group, as reflected in the collective action literature. However, as stated above, necessity alone is not sufficient for groups to form. If this were the case, self-organized collective action among survivors would be much more prevalent. Much more research is needed to understand the varying aspects that lead to the formation of such groups if the aim is to assist in their formation.

Both studies also provide evidence that groups formed to fill extreme service gaps, exacerbated by

rejection, ridicule, and abuse. While groups are not able to fill all gaps, their value add is their ability to provide targeted and impactful survivor-centered programming. Overall, the studies provide some evidence that if survivors' expertise is matched with resources, in one way or another, it could lead to improved and sustained outcomes for survivors. More research would help us to understand the intricacies of service provision to inform practitioners, donors, and survivors how this can most effectively be bolstered, expanded, and sustained.

Finally, this research provides evidence that participants who encounter or are part of these groups are better off than they would be otherwise. Being part of a survivor-owned group seems to foster a sense of belonging and help survivors navigate and make sense of their situation. However, there is still much we do not understand about these outcomes.

We conclude with a list of questions presented below. These are not fully formed research questions, nor are they exhaustive compared to the gaps identified throughout the paper. However, the questions serve as a starting point to highlight gaps that may need answering if we, as practitioners, aim to legitimately empower and engage survivors in a meaningful way.

First, when should counter trafficking projects work to form survivor groups to empower survivors? Also, how do we know what is in the best interest of survivors?

Second, if survivor groups are an endeavor worth undertaking, what are the barriers and how can we best circumvent or mitigate these? For example, must individuals already be successfully reintegrated before they can help others, or can helping others be part of a healthy reintegration process, why or why not? Third, when appropriate, what are the conditions that matter for catalyzing, amplifying, and sustaining survivor empowerment survivor owned groups?

CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

There is a burgeoning focus in survivor-centered programming in the field of counter trafficking. More donors, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations are pushing this agenda, and for good reason. There is no logic in excluding survivors from influencing, or even directing, project design, implementation, or evaluation. However, this is not just about survivors weighing in on what interventions they would prefer, as if participating in marketing surveys for a consumer good. Human trafficking is a

complex phenomenon, in which survivors have unique expertise, knowledge, and perspective. Designing programming without survivors is akin to relying on hospital administrators to design medical interventions while willfully disregarding the combined expertise of doctors and the experience of patients.

According to our understanding, survivor-centered programming requires survivor engagement, which can only meaningfully take place if survivors are sufficiently empowered. However, limited guidance is available around survivor empowerment. Research shows that collective action is one way in which to accomplish empowerment from the bottom up, possibly the only way. To better understand how collective action can and does take place, we undertook this systematic literature review to ask: *What factors are necessary for collective action, as actualized through survivor-owned organizations to form, function, and be sustainable?*

After screening 3,043 titles and abstracts and assessing 30 retrieved documents for quality and relevance, we uncovered two studies that fit the inclusion criteria. While two resources in total are not sufficient for a systematic review, we did not refocus our research question, as it felt important to highlight the glaring gaps in the literature. Findings from the documents reviewed and retrieved showed that survivor groups form from necessity, and that those who are engaged report increased levels of wellbeing. However, both studies over-emphasize the challenges and provide a shallow analysis of the potential positive outcomes of the groups.

Overall, the review process shed light on areas that may influence the existing bias in the evidence base, such as an exclusion of victims as perceived members of the community, insufficient analysis of psychosocial outcomes, conflation or confusion between human trafficking and sex work or human trafficking and labor migration, and finally, a number of competing push factors for those who exit trafficking to identify as either a survivor or a sex worker/migrant laborer. The paper ends with a long list of important but unanswered questions resulting from the lackluster findings of the review around collective action, survivor-owned groups, and survivor empowerment.

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