2024

# Practitioners' Guide to Supporting Survivor Groups:

*Based On Learnings From Bangladesh*

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# Special thanks

# Navigation

# 1. Purpose

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the discourse within the counter trafficking-in-persons (CTIP) sector on the role of survivors of trafficking in CTIP projects and interventions. Influential stakeholders within the CTIP sector, including international donors such as USAID, increasingly communicate the need for more survivor engagement in global CTIP efforts (USAID, 2023). However, there remains considerable ambiguity and a lack of consensus around what survivor engagement entails. This is in part due to the relative novelty of the concept, which for now remains ambiguously defined. Further, documentation of best practices and challenges of working with survivors is currently lacking, resulting in poor understanding and awareness of its nuances and complexities (Tauson et al., 2024). We argue that the push from international donors for CTIP practitioners and projects to work on survivor engagement, combined with the dearth of guidance on what aspects need to be considered when attempting to work with survivors, has the potential to lead to unintended consequences and unfavorable outcomes for survivors. By drawing on findings from a participatory action research (PAR) project with ANIRBAN, a survivor-led group in Bangladesh, this guide aims to detail the unique role of survivor groups and help practitioners keen to support these groups understand the complexities and challenges involved. This guide provides insights on how NGOs can effectively support survivor groups, leveraging their strengths while providing the necessary assistance.

# 2. Background

Research conducted by USAID Asia CTIP with a survivor-led group in Bangladesh in February 2023 aimed to fill the research gap around survivor empowerment and collective action. The study underscores the impactful role of ANIRBAN in identifying survivors, connecting them to essential services and facilitating positive reintegration and prevention outcomes. ANIRBAN, meaning "the flame that will not fade" consists of trafficking survivors who act as frontline workers, receiving tip-offs about returning survivors and proactively meeting their needs. These groups play a crucial yet underrecognized role in the protection system, assisting survivors who might otherwise be overlooked.

ANIRBAN was founded in 2011 during a USAID-funded convention where survivors decided to create an organization advocating for their rights and preventing trafficking. In its present form, ANIRBAN is a network of survivor groups around Bangladesh, which has worked to raise awareness around human trafficking and advocates for survivors and their rights. The groups give voice to survivor issues and concerns in local communities to engender a positive attitude toward survivors. However, it is important to emphasize that ANIRBAN functions not just as a "survivor voice" or advocacy group. They facilitate sessions in schools and madrassas on safe migration; conduct interactive meetings with journalists, local government and civil society organizations; provide leadership and facilitating training to members and other survivors; and promote human rights, women's rights and safe migration days in their communities.

## Victim vs. Survivor

"Victim" is commonly used in legal contexts to identify individuals who have suffered harm and are entitled to certain rights and protections under the law. Some advocacy groups and CTIP organizations prefer using the term "Survivor", on the basis that it conveys a sense of agency and ongoing recovery, as opposed to "victim" which implies that the person subjected to trafficking is weak and struggling to overcome the trauma of trafficking. [i] Some argue that there is little evidence to support this presumption, and that this dichotomy is somewhat redundant. [ii]

## People with Lived Experiences

People with lived experience are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives them insights that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs. Lived experience means knowledge based on someone's perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience. [iii]

i Adapted from definitions provided by the Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center. Retrieved from https://surviveandthriveadvocacy.org/human-trafficking-terms-what-you-need-to-know/

ii Adapted from "Using the term 'Survivor': Facilitating conceptual clarity in the anti-trafficking domain". Retrieved from https://www.fighttrafficking.org/atc_blog/using-the-term-survivor/

iii Adapted from "Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience", Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

## So which term should you use?

Navigating the terminology around human trafficking requires sensitivity, respect for individual preferences, and awareness of both legal and social contexts. The debate over terminology reflects broader societal shifts in how we understand and address trauma. While language used in the CTIP sector is dynamic and constantly evolves, the key is to remain empathetic and responsive to the preferences of those directly affected.

Much of this work is underpinned by ANIRBAN's ability to mobilize and organize survivors in the local community. Indeed, the unique yet often overlooked organizing work which ANIRBAN undertakes is a central tenet to the way the group operates in its multifunctional capacity.

**Figure 1: GFEMS framework and assessment for measuring and increasing lived experience leadership across the spectrum of engagement**

| Inform | Ask | Involve | Collaborate | Empower |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Keep people with lived experience informed about decisions that impact them. | Seek out & review feedback from people with lived experience, and incorporate when possible. | Work with impacted people throughout planning & implementation to consider their concerns. | Work closely with people who have lived experience on each aspect of program development & implementation, from exploring options to making final decisions. | Your program will leave final decision-making power to people with lived experience and will implement the strategies & decisions they develop. |

This guide is informed by the invaluable learnings from our research and aims to address the growing call for survivor-led approaches in counter-trafficking programming. Effective engagement with survivors requires avoiding tokenism and ensuring meaningful participation, as highlighted by frameworks from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS).

Without strong empirical evidence, competing priorities and deeply entrenched ways of working will inevitably hinder the prospect of actualizing this paradigm shift to meaningful survivor engagement in CTIP programming (Chua and Tauson, 2022). Without intending to, well-meaning CTIP interventions can miss opportunities for more meaningful engagement with survivors and ultimately fail to genuinely share power. ANIRBAN's success demonstrates the unique and invaluable contributions of survivor groups to anti-trafficking efforts, including protection, identification, referral, and reintegration. This guide aims at providing practical strategies for practitioners to support survivor-led groups effectively.

## Tokenism

Tokenism refers to the practice of making a superficial or symbolic effort to be inclusive or representative of marginalized or minority groups without genuinely addressing their needs or making substantive changes to promote equality and inclusivity. In anti-trafficking work, this for example may involve including one or a few survivors to provide inputs in the design phase of an anti-trafficking, giving the appearance of survivor-centered program design, but without the intention or commitment to fully integrate their perspectives.

## Recommended readings:

C. Ash and S. Otiende. Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience: A framework and assessment for increasing lived experience leadership across the spectrum of engagement. Global Fund to End Modern Slavery and National Survivor Network- Cast, Washington, DC (2023).

S. Lockyer. Beyond Inclusion: Survivor-Leader Voice in Anti-Human Trafficking Organizations, Journal of Human Trafficking (2020)

Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (Eds.). Participation: The new tyranny?. Zed books (2001)

# 3. Survivors Groups in Action: What do they do?

## 3.1 Why survivor-led prevention and awareness campaigns matter

Based on key findings from previous research, prevention and awareness messages can be quite problematic as incomplete and ambiguous information may give potential migrants a false sense of security, knowledge but no actionable alternatives to risky migration pathways, or generally miss the fact that migrants are often aware of risks but choose to migrate anyway out of desperate need (Pocock et al., 2021; Davy, 2021). Survivors like those in ANIRBAN have a unique and profound understanding of the contexts and motivations that drive individuals to make risky decisions leading to trafficking. Official information from NGOs often misses the mark because migration frequently occurs through unofficial and informal channels, which are more accessible than official ones. Additionally, isolation and shame can heighten vulnerability, and at-risk communities are more likely to seek advice and place their trust in people "like us"—survivors who have shared experiences of marginalization from mainstream social, political, and economic systems.

While survivor groups like ANIRBAN cannot always provide safer migration pathways, their real-life stories and experiences highlight potential risks and red flags far more effectively than generic NGO prevention messages. Ultimately, individuals and communities aiming to escape poverty through migration are more likely to heed advice from those with lived experiences of trafficking. Through insights gained from ANIRBAN's work, there are several reasons why survivor-led prevention and awareness raising has the potentially to be more impactful than non-survivor led initiatives.

### "Prevention" in the 4Ps

The 4Ps framework, developed by the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, is a comprehensive strategy to address human trafficking globally. It includes four key pillars: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships. Under this framework, prevention refers to strategies and actions aimed at stopping human trafficking before it occurs. This involves addressing the root causes and vulnerabilities that lead to trafficking, as well as raising awareness and educating potential victims and the public.

- **Survivor-led messaging and community outreach:** Survivors of trafficking have firsthand experience and credibility within communities. They can create awareness campaigns that are nuanced, realistic, and targeted. Additionally, their embeddedness in the community allows them to leverage everyday interactions and spaces to spread prevention messages organically.

- **Early intervention and confidential information:** Survivor groups can identify individuals who are at risk of trafficking, such as those seeking migration without proper documentation. By providing counseling and support, they can intervene early and prevent trafficking attempts. Furthermore, their deep understanding of the community makes them well-positioned to act as confidential informants, alerting vulnerable groups to potential traffickers and brokers.

> *"When we find that someone doesn't have the proper documents for having a job abroad and is still trying to get through an illegal channel, which might eventually make them a victim of trafficking and being cheated, we step in and provide them with consultation. We encourage them to have all the right papers for migration and to use the right channel. Sometimes it gets out of our hands. At that time, we seek support from our senior members in ANIRBAN."*
>
> (Female ANIRBAN Member 3, Jashore)

- **Focus on reaching the most vulnerable:** Traffickers often target marginalized individuals, including women, girls, and those in remote areas. Survivor groups prioritize reaching these high-risk populations through persistent outreach efforts. They overcome challenges like social stigma and lack of access to information to ensure these groups are informed and empowered

> *"Since we live near border area, people are easily convinced to cross the border for work. Recently a brother (ANIRBAN member) came and had courtyard meetings with the community people to make them aware of illegal trafficking. Since it is a border area, we try our best to make the community aware of it. Still if any incident takes place, we cannot do anything.."*
>
> Female ANIRBAN Member 2, Jashore

- **Deep understanding of motivations and targeted outreach:** Survivors share a common understanding of the hardships and lack of opportunities that drive people to migrate, even if it means taking risks. This empathy allows them to tailor their messaging to resonate with vulnerable individuals. They can address the root causes that make people susceptible to trafficking and offer alternative solutions.

- **Confidential informants:** Survivor leaders can play a key role in monitoring the action of brokers in the community. In some ways, they act as the first line of defense in ensuring that potentially vulnerable subpopulations of the community are aware of known traffickers.

> *"….so youth meeting is like we do youth meeting in a place, like some different youth will go. So, we call all the group, and we discuss about human trafficking, cause of human trafficking and we also make some awareness between young people, and we help them to identify survivors. And we also inform them about traffickers and who is in [sic] risk of trafficking and also child marriage. So, we are like spies [within] their networks"*
>
> Male ANIRBAN member 1, Cox's Bazar

- **Tackling stigma:** Sharing experiences breaks down stigma around trafficking and encourages those affected to seek help. In more conservative countries and regions, trafficking is a taboo topic and not widely discussed. Therefore, broaching this topic with community members can often be hugely challenging. While this may undeniably frustrate and deter more conventional NGOs from reaching the most vulnerable groups (i.e. women and girls), survivor groups are persistent in their efforts, often repeating door-to-door visits to build trust. However, even with this perseverance, the reality is that overcoming deep-seated stigma around trafficking remains a massive hurdle.

> *"When I go to the community to offer counseling to young girls who have decided to go abroad for work through illegal channel, some of the girls, and sometimes their families don't respond well. Sometimes they won't let me in and talk to the concerned person."*
>
> Female ANIRBAN Member 2, Jashore

## 3.2 How Survivor-Led Initiatives Enhance Community Engagement

Individuals that form and contribute to survivor groups are typically well known within the community where they operate. Often, the members of the group come from the local area and have long-standing social and familial ties. It is important to emphasize here that the organizing work that survivor groups like ANIRBAN undertake leads them to be well connected, and it is this intentional action and network building which results in their embeddedness in the community.

# How survivors' groups can engage community members effectively:

- **Trusted voices:** Survivors are often from the local area with long-standing social ties, making them trusted sources of information.

- **Leveraging daily life:** Survivor groups use everyday activities (market meetings, tea stall discussions, community gatherings) to spread awareness and share experiences. They are able to identify and utilize entry points in quotidian social activities, in order to discuss sensitive issues including trafficking and exploitation,

> *"And same things in tea stall mating [sic]. Tea stall is like a mini-Parliament of Bangladesh, so everyone can say anything, everyone discusses anything. In this stall, it's very addictive."*
>
> (Male ANIRBAN Member 2, Cox's Bazar)

- **Understanding social dynamics:** It is undeniable that survivor groups possess profound knowledge and an intrinsic understanding of the social, economic, and political realities which shape the lives of individuals in their community. With this knowledge, survivor groups conduct targeted awareness raising campaigns on subgroups in the community which have been identified as potentially vulnerable to trafficking

> *"OK, so we identify the poor families first, because in some families don't have father or don't have mother of child……..they have so much risk about trafficking, like their mother can't afford their educational costs when they are studying in 9th and 10th standard. At that time, they have so many risks because they want to migrate abroad, and they want to do some job inside the country or some other places. [At] that time, the traffickers took advantage of that situation, and they trafficked those young guys. So, we identified them, and [provided] counselling [to] them."*
>
> (Male ANIRBAN member 2, Cox's Bazar)

# 3.3 How survivors help with TIP Identification and Referral

In an earlier paper we authored on navigating national referral systems (Tauson et al., 2023), we found that survivors in Bangladesh often undergo repatriation on their own, as they are sent back by traffickers or employers or are rescued and/or deported without being able to contact with their family or formal service providers.  As such, they may not be aware of their rights and entitlements, and which organizations to reach out to for support.

This means that these survivors have no way of receiving reintegration support and services. Further, how survivors will be received by the family and community can be uncertain, as this differs from place to place, underpinned by a myriad of sociocultural factors (Kasper and Chiang, 2020). In more socially conservative countries and regions, female survivors in particular face high risk of rejection by their family and the community. Even when they do manage to return, they are often forced to stay indoors to avoid bringing "shame" to the family. Although it is almost impossible to provide a figure on the number of trafficking survivors that go unidentified due to difficulties in establishing the prevalence of human trafficking globally (DiRienzo, 2020; Cho, 2015;Crane, 2013; Aronowtiz, 2009), victim identification is arguably the biggest challenge facing CTIP projects and practitioners globally. This is despite immense efforts and resources that have been expended by both governmental and non-governmental actors in developing screening systems and victim identification guidelines.

This is how survivors' groups and their organizing role in the community can be a more effective strategy to increase identification and assistance:

- **Navigating repatriation after trafficking:** Survivors are often repatriated without their knowledge or means to contact family or support services. This leaves them unaware of their rights or how to access essential reintegration help. In conservative areas, returning survivors (particularly women) may face rejection and shame from their families and communities, limiting support and forcing them into isolation. Due to their embeddedness in the community, survivor groups can also help reconnect individuals to their families upon their exit from trafficking. For instance, ANIRBAN specifically works closely with families to facilitate acceptance of survivors. Importantly, the relationships and rapport which survivor groups have established with key service providers allows them to refer survivors to relevant services within and in proximity to the local area. This enables to refer survivors on to support for legal remedy, psychosocial counselling, shelter , skills training and gainful employment.

> *"OK, we do meeting with the hotel owners and we tell them, when you need some worker in your hotel and motel. Please let us know [because] we have survivors, they need some jobs, so if you can give them give them some job opportunity to do their job it will be helpful for them and they do that thing in that meeting."*

Male ANIRBAN Member 2, Cox's Bazar

- **Community outreach:** Survivor groups offer localized support in a way that larger organizations cannot. Through community meetings and awareness campaigns, they create a safe space for survivors to break through stigma and self-identify. This is crucial since victims may not openly disclose their experience at community meetings straight away, but prefer to seek help privately, as illustrated in the quote below. Further, some individuals who have returned may not yet have understood their ordeal as "trafficking" and may not have been aware that they are entitled to support. Indeed, survivor-led groups act as role models in directly addressing the social and familial barriers that hinder returning survivors' access to essential resources.

> *"……..the first time we share their experiences at the meeting, if there's anyone who was victimized in a foreign land and is now a survivor, please let us know. We will help them for legal action and the integration for their job support. During the meeting, no one says anything about themselves, but after I finish that community meeting session, sometimes people approach the female ANIRBAN outside and share their stories."*

Male ANIRBAN Member 1, Cox's Bazar

- **Trust:** Survivors' reluctance to seek assistance, often driven by the urge to simply return home as soon as possible upon their exit from trafficking, poses a significant challenge to identification efforts. They remain invisible to screening systems, leaving them vulnerable to trafficking even after initial exploitation, exacerbated by the trauma and indebtedness survivors face post-trafficking. Survivor groups, intimately familiar with their peers' struggles, play a vital role in connecting victims with support and services. Their strong community bonds, built through their organizing work, create a safe environment for survivors to seek help without fear of stigma. By harnessing these trusted networks, survivor groups can effectively identify and refer victims, ensuring they receive the necessary assistance.

## 3.4 How Survivors help with Reintegration and Follow-up

Reintegration is a complex process with many ups and downs, requiring a deep understanding of context, relationships, and individual needs. It demands ongoing monitoring and support over time, which NGOs often struggle to provide consistently due to the constraints of CTIP project life cycles (Chua and Tauson, 2022). Survivor groups play a crucial role in ensuring successful reintegration by offering the sustained support and understanding what essentials are required to navigate this intricate journey. Survivors of human trafficking are individuals who have experienced trauma, who were already vulnerable to start with, and post-trafficking are even more vulnerable. Expecting seamless "reintegration" is unrealistic. Thus, providing assistance and support becomes even more complex, requiring a nuanced approach that addresses their trauma and vulnerabilities while ensuring their safety and well-being. In this context, survivor groups play a vital role in offering the specialized care and sustained support necessary to mitigate risks and facilitate genuine reintegration.

- **Lived experience:** Survivors possess a unique understanding of the challenges faced by those they seek to assist. This deep empathy, combined with their embeddedness in communities, allows them to offer tailored support that traditional NGOs often struggle to provide.

- **Counseling and needs assessment:** Shelters offer various services but often isolate survivors, hindering their social inclusion and preparation for reentering society (Limanowska, 2007; Surtees, 2013; Dutta, 2016). Although there is a shift towards community-based services, these remain underfunded and a low priority in CTIP programming (Tsai et al., 2020). Indeed, NGOs find it costly and time-consuming to visit villages and provide services to survivors. Survivor groups, with their extensive networks built through years of organizing, present a viable solution. They are well positioned to regularly visit survivors, assess their needs, and refer them to local NGOs, effectively bridging the gap between shelters and community-based services

**To keep in mind:**

Survivor groups are trusted by their peers, speak the same language, understand the local reality, and can empathize deeply due to their own experiences with human trafficking. However, they are not trained counselors, lack professional expertise in administering psychosocial assistance, and may not be familiar with conventional monitoring and evaluation terms or the technocratic jargon that increasingly characterizes CTIP programming . They may also have their own prejudices and limitations. It is important to visualize the strengths of survivor groups alongside the areas where they require technical support from NGOs.

By understanding and leveraging these complementary strengths, NGOs and survivor groups can collaborate more effectively, ensuring fair expectations and better outcomes.

# 3.4 Survivors as Experts and Advocates

Survivors can play a key role in sharing their knowledge on how and why TIP happens, what does not work in current efforts and what could be done more effectively. Their voices carry significant weight because they come from firsthand experience. Simply having survivors present in policy discussions can profoundly impact and compel policymakers to consider their perspectives more seriously, leading to the design of policies with a higher likelihood of making a real difference

- **Experts in project design:** Survivor groups can significantly contribute to the design, monitoring, and evaluation of CTIP interventions. Engaging them in these activities not only enhances the effectiveness of NGO efforts but also equips survivors with valuable skills in M&E, research, and reporting, aiding the growth and strengthening of their own groups. Their deep understanding of the local context, emerging trends, and community dynamics, especially in complex environments like rural Bangladesh, is crucial for the effective design, monitoring, and assessment of programs.

- **Advocating for justice:** Survivors support each other in pursuing legal action against traffickers, with survivor groups playing a crucial role in these prosecution efforts. This is especially important given the roadblocks in the legal process, particularly when traffickers are linked to powerful community members. Groups like ANIRBAN fight for the rights and dignity of survivors, often taking high risks that NGOs cannot or are unwilling to take. This dynamic must be carefully considered: if survivor groups can go where NGOs cannot, this can put them in dangerous positions. It is vital for NGOs to support and protect survivor groups, making them aware of potential risks and offering help if needed. However, NGOs should also respect the survivor groups' decisions to take risks, ensuring that "protection" is never used as a pretext to override their autonomy.

- **Advocates for policy changes:** Survivor groups are often unified by a strong commitment to effect change in society and combat injustice. Their engagement in policy activities not only allows them to voice their desired changes but also strengthens the group by reinforcing the trust that their voices are being heard and that they have the power to make a difference. This active participation empowers them and validates their efforts, fostering a sense of agency and collective strength.

# 4. Establishing a Survivors' Group: Realities of Organizing

So far, we have presented the unique roles which survivor groups play in the CTIP sector. Further, we assert that many of these functions are irreplicable, due to the expertise and knowledge which only survivors possess. However, unlike countries such as the U.S.A and the Netherlands where support and services are readily available to survivors via both government and NGO channels, survivors in Bangladesh constitute a group in Bangladesh which is  are extremely marginalized, with little to no access to reintegration support. As such, it is uncommon for survivor groups to emerge spontaneously. Indeed, similar conditions prevail in most South and Southeast Asian countries, where the majority of existing CTIP programming in Asia is implemented.

Research conducted by Kasper and Chiang (2024) found that hierarchy, informality, and patron-client relations are the fundamental characteristics of the Bangladeshi state and society. As such, to get anything done, individuals and groups on the margins of society rely on patronage from those in positions of power and status. Our experience in Bangladesh has helped us understand that some form of top-down support is crucial to the formation of survivor groups. The aim of the top-down intervention should be the creation of a partnership of equals, rather than the historically unequal and fraught relationship between international donors in the Global North, and aid- receiving countries in the Global South (Chua and Tauson, 2022; Watson and McGrath, 2018). Ultimately, top-down support has the potential to act as a catalyst to unlock survivor leadership and the semi-spontaneous formation of groups for survivor organizing. Importantly, survivor groups require a clear overarching purpose, defined and agreed upon among members of the group,  as a member of an ANIRBAN chapter shared.

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> *".... It is about helping someone to their feet, not pulling them to their feet. We need NGOs to walk beside us."*

In short, NGOs and donors need to understand that it is not their job to form survivor groups, but to **support survivors that already have a desire to come together** and collectivize. Based on our time spent with ANIRBAN in Bangladesh, this section explains three major aspects which are crucial for organizations to consider in supporting and working with survivor groups: 1) Purpose, 2) Top down vs. self-organizing, and 3) Sustainability.

# 4.1 Purpose: It Starts with Them

When forming a group, it's crucial to clearly define its purpose and objectives from the outset. This helps ensure that everyone involved understands the group's mission and can align their efforts accordingly. The purpose of a group can significantly influence its structure, dynamics, and the type of members it attracts. Here are some considerations:

- **Ensure a Purpose-Driven Formation:** Don't form a survivor group just for the sake of it. A strong sense of purpose is essential for maintaining motivation and cohesion. If the group is entirely top-down, it won't be effective, while self-organizing efforts might require some support and guidance. The key is to find the right balance between structured support and autonomous operation.

> **"It is about helping someone to their feet, not pulling them to their feet. We need NGOs to walk beside us."**

- **Facilitate Participatory Planning:** Hold workshops where survivors brainstorm the biggest challenges in their community. Practitioners should support groups as they prioritize the most pressing issues and set specific, achievable goals on how their group could address those challenges.

- **Strengthening:** Observe and ask questions about what skills or training the group might need to reach their goals. Offer to connect them to existing training or develop tailored capacity strengthening training in collaboration.

## Types of Groups

**Self-help and support groups:** These groups primarily exist to provide emotional support, resources, and shared experiences to help individuals cope with personal challenges. They are often centered around mutual aid and personal growth. Members join seeking help and support, and as they heal, they may move on. This creates a dynamic where the group continually welcomes new members in need, resulting in a rotating membership.

**Power building groups:** These groups aim to create broader social or systemic change. They focus on advocacy, organizing, and influencing policies or societal structures. Such groups may not prioritize bringing in new members who need significant support, as their focus is on strategic actions and building collective power. They might refer individuals needing support to appropriate services instead.

**Hybrid groups:** These groups, like ANIRBAN, blend elements of both support and systemic change. They provide mutual aid and support to members while also engaging in broader advocacy and activism. Balancing support and activism can be challenging but allows the group to address immediate needs while working towards long-term goals. Members might stay involved both for the support they receive and their commitment to the group's larger mission.

# 4.2  Barriers to Independent Formation:

**Moving on from traumatic experience:** Upon returning home, many survivors simply want to move on with their lives and be accepted back to their family and community. Gainful employment is often an immediate goal, in order to contribute to the livelihood of their family. As such, many individuals understandably do not see becoming part of a survivor group as an immediate priority, given that it is a time, resource and emotionally intensive commitment. It is vital that CTIP practitioners understand this reality and walk alongside survivors, by prioritizing the immediate reintegration need of survivors and providing them ample time to recover.

**Bureaucratic hurdles:** A lack of access to education beyond the primary level can hinder the acquisition of skills necessary for organizing and running survivor groups, in particular for typical "office" activities such writing up grant proposals and formal reports to larger donor organizations. It is important to understand that survivor groups do not function in the same way as conventional NGOs or implementing partners of CTIP projects. Survivor groups are characterized by their organizing and mobilizing skills, which is not something typically well understood and valued across the CTIP sector. **[1]** For practitioners and projects seeking to partner up with survivor groups effectively, it is imperative that more flexible arrangements are established, particularly in terms of formal bureaucratic requirements especially to do with funding and reporting. For this type of partnership to work, CTIP projects and practitioners have to fundamentally meet survivors and survivor groups where they are, rather than the other way around.

> **Positionality** in social work refers to the recognition of how one's social identity and background, such as race, gender, class, and other socio-cultural factors, influence their perspective and interactions in a professional context. This concept has been explored by various pioneers and influential scholars in the field, including Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Donna Haraway and Paulo Freire, each bringing nuanced understandings

**Social Inequality:** Power imbalances within communities can lead to dominance by those with higher education or social status, potentially silencing the most marginalized voices within the group. From our experience, the power differentials that exist can sometimes be impervious to CTIP practitioners and organizations, particularly those who are well intentioned about partnering up and supporting survivor groups. In reality, the relationships that we build and the way they are nurtured are often underpinned by power structures and dynamics that may seem invisible. As such, it is vital that CTIP practitioners critically reflect on their background and positionality, and to be aware of the power differentials that exists between them and the people they aim to serve, including survivors and survivor groups. Ultimately, supporting survivor groups requires means practitioners' to be aware of their position and power, and to be willing to give up and share that power.

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[1] For more details on how survivor groups do this, please refer to nature of survivor organizing by Kasper (Forthcoming)

**Internalized Marginalization:** Throughout our research, survivor leaders frequently expressed doubts about their qualifications to lead an organization, citing a lack of education and ability. We believe this stems from a deeper issue: a sense of alienation and marginalization ingrained by society. Survivors often experience repeated messages of inadequacy and worthlessness throughout their lives.

**Discrimination and Self-Doubt:** This marginalization can be rooted in societal biases against survivors based on factors like social class, education level, ethnicity, and gender. These prejudices create a challenging environment for building survivor-led groups with agency and autonomy. Simply put, survivors are not accustomed to having their voices heard or being taken seriously in everyday life, which translates into doubting their capacity for leadership.

**Systemic barriers to survivor organizing:** The previous points intersect and compound each other; they exist as part of the self-perpetuating systems that marginalize people, put them in conditions of greater vulnerability to trafficking, and inhibit their abilities to heal and thrive afterwards. Survivor leadership – and even more so organized groups of survivor leaders – tends to be resisted and squashed by the same system that generates vulnerability in the first place. Survivors hoping not only to thrive in the aftermath of trafficking but to find ways to effectively stop trafficking from happening to others face an uphill battle, especially when it comes to taking collective action. By appreciating and recognizing that spark of leadership when it emerges, CTIP practitioners can step in to collaborate, share power, and help create conditions in which survivor leadership can grow and the skills and capacities for collective action can be nurtured.

> **To keep in mind:**
>
> All individuals, regardless of social, cultural and economic background can potentially fall prey to human trafficking. Most recently, white collar professionals from across the globe, including individuals with graduate degrees and proficiency in multiple languages have become the target of trafficking for online forced scamming operations in Southeast Asia. It is important to be cognizant of the fact that survivors have a very diverse set of needs and wants and should not be regarded as a monolithic entity.

## 4.2  How NGOs Should Support Formation of Survivor Groups

In countries like Bangladesh, as opposed to countries like the US which have many self-formed survivor groups**[2]**, many services are still missing that would enable groups to form independently. For example, ensuring children continue education past the primary level can be very difficult for some families in Bangladesh.

As a result, the same people who are the most at risk of trafficking may lack some of the needed (and perceived) skills to form and run a group independently. Given this context, some initial external support is often needed.

[2] National Survivor Network https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/about/consultant-speakers-bureau/ and Survivor Alliance https://www.survivoralliance.org/vision-mission are two great examples.

**Strengthening capacity, respectfully:** The most effective NGO support walks a fine line. It is essential to offer capacity-building resources while respecting the group's autonomy and right to determine their own path. CTIP practitioners should aim to inspire and empower survivor groups rather than force their formation. Providing relevant training and demonstrating the potential benefits of collaboration is far more effective than applying direct pressure. The key takeaway is that survivor groups thrive when they proactively identify their own training needs, demonstrating a strong sense of purpose and internal motivation. NGOs should offer trainings that survivors specifically request based on their aspirations and goals.

**NGO power sharing:** Start with a partnership mindset, and this means not imposing your/your organization's agenda. NGOs must be prepared to relinquish control as the group gains skills. This might include creating opportunities for survivors to handle tasks usually managed by the NGO, taking on challenging roles such as engaging with government officials or addressing sensitive issues, and supporting program activities that may not directly benefit the NGO. For instance, NGOs could allocate project funds to innovative survivor initiatives or invest additional time into coaching to ensure that shared resources and responsibilities enhance group cohesion.

Survivor groups should not be treated as mere recipients of information or given superficial involvement in decision-making. They deserve full agency and the authority to make decisions based on their unique experiences, skills, and goals. Survivor groups have the right to exercise this decision-making across every aspect of their operation, including crucial areas like funding and strategies for sustainability.

"**Community organizing" mindset:** Community organizing refers to a process focused on mobilizing people and building collective power to achieve common goals.**[3]** This approach contrasts with traditional project implementation, which often involves predefined objectives, rigid performance indicators and top-down management. To be more effective, efforts to support the formation of survivor groups should be treated as community organizing endeavors, rather than simply implementing projects. CTIP practitioners typically receive training to offer services, but they usually are not equipped as community organizers or to grasp the relational dynamics of empowerment. Activities which involve collective action and community organizing are relatively novel in the CTIP sector, particularly in the Asia region (Tauson et al., 2023). As such, it makes sense that supporting survivor groups, which requires a significant transfer of power, is not something which most professionals working in CTIP can become comfortable with immediately. This is a significant shift in mindset that requires a healthy dose of reflexivity, gradual prioritization by donors, and ultimately a willingness to change the way things have always been done. **[4]**

[3] For a primer to community organizing, see Marc Porter Magee (2023), "The Action is the Reaction: Community Organizing for Local Change".

[4] For deeper analysis on factors inhibiting NGOs and practitioners from embracing more innovative approaches to CTIP, see Chua and Tauson (2022), "Learning from our Actions: How can we be Comfortable with Failure".

# 5. Sustainability: Thinking Beyond the Short-term

## Legitimacy

Our research highlights the significance of legitimacy for survivor groups. Legitimacy increases credibility and leads to greater recognition from others. For organizations, legitimacy acts as a key that unlocks recognition and support. Organizations that lack legitimacy may face dismissal and limited access to resources. In societies where relationships are structured around authority and validation, legitimacy can have a ripple effect. It can open doors to broader networks, potential partnerships, and funding opportunities

Indeed, we saw this through our research with ANIRBAN. Before the group obtained registration from the Ministry of Social Services, they struggled to receive assistance or recognition when approaching offices or seeking help. They were often overlooked and not taken seriously. However, after obtaining registration, their status as a formal organization garnered respect and attention. When they approached offices for support or attended meetings, such as those related to counter trafficking or social services, they were now invited and acknowledged. This corroborates with prominent institutional theorist W. Richard Scott (1995), who argues that legitimacy for new institutions often starts with 'regulative' legitimacy coming from formal status such as registration with government bodies.

> 66
>
> *We noticed a huge difference before and after we got our registration. Once we became registered, when we approached offices or sought help, we could say, "We are a registered organization," and they would take us seriously. They started to give us importance. But before we got our registration, when we tried to get the same support, no one would help us. Now, many government officials and NGOs invite ANIRBAN to attend meetings—whether it's about counter-trafficking or social services—because we are a registered organization.*
>
> Male ANIRBAN member 1, Jashore

# 5.1 Addressing the Funding Challenge for Survivor Groups

Funding survivor groups is a complex challenge. It's essential to provide financial support to enable them to achieve their goals, especially as survivors often face significant economic hardship. However, creating and funding a survivor group at the outset, without developing a clear plan for longer term funding, can create reliance and hinder the group's ability to become financially self-sufficient in the future.

Members of ANIRBAN Cox's Bazar chapter have developed a profound attachment to their cause over the last decade. The survivor group is hugely reliant on monthly subscription fees which are contributed by individual members. This effectively funds various planned activities and office expenses. Despite their commitment to the cause and deep attachment to the group, the burden of self-funding creates a significant challenge. The group's predicament underscores the complex dynamics of commitment and financial sustainability within grassroots organizations,

> *…… we love our organization so much and that's a problem for us. There is a financial problem for us. We can't afford this organization. We have pay for everything on our side…*
>
> Male ANIRBAN member 3, Cox's Bazar

The intricate balance between passion and practicality faced by ANIRBAN, exemplifies the potential funding constraints faced by survivor groups more generally. While their dedication remains unwavering after years of involvement, the strain of financial responsibility weighs heavy on survivor leaders and threatens their ability to continue their work effectively.

# 5.2 Potential Funding Models: No "One Size Fits All"

The appropriate funding model is highly dependent on various factors such as: the group's specific goals, the network of supporting organizations, the capacity of survivors involved, and the availability of funding resources. There is no plug and play model, solutions must be developed collaboratively with the survivor group.

Here are some funding models typically employed by grassroot organizations and smaller NGOs more broadly, which could potentially be adapted for survivor groups in the CTIP sector:

## Social Enterprise

**Survivor-led groups run a business that generates revenue to support their anti-trafficking activities.**

| Pros: | Cons: |
|---|---|
| <ul><li>Sustainable income stream</li><li>Provides survivors with job skills and economic empowerment</li><li>Can raise awareness about trafficking within the community</li></ul> | <ul><li>Requires business expertise and start-up capital from larger organizations or through crowdfunding</li><li>Can be challenging to balance social mission with the need for profitability, questions about how profits are used may arise</li><li>Fractures may emerge if control of the business is dominated by one or two members</li></ul> |

## International Donors

**Foundations, corporations, or foreign governments dedicated to humanitarian causes, including anti-trafficking initiatives.**

**Pros:**

- Potential for large-scale funding
- Access to resources and networks of an international organization

**Cons:**

- Application processes can be highly bureaucratic, complex and time-consuming.
- May have stringent requirements or restrictions on how funds are used
- Funding can be subject to political or economic shifts

## NGO Donors

**Larger, established non-governmental organizations provide grants or subcontracts to smaller survivor-led groups.**

**Pros:**

- Can provide mentorship and guidance
- Access to established funding channels and donor networks

**Cons:**

- Requires building relationships with larger NGOs
- Survivor-led groups may need to adapt their work to align with the focus areas of the NGO
- May have stringent requirements or restrictions on how funds are used

## Government Grants

**State or local government programs provide funding for specific purposes, like victim services or housing support.**

**Pros:**

- Can be reliable and substantial source of funding
- Potential for long-term partnerships

**Cons:**

- Bureaucratic applications and reporting requirements
- May have stringent requirements or restrictions on how funds are used
- Subject to changes in political priorities

## Individual Donations

**Fundraising from individuals through crowdfunding platforms, events, or direct appeals.**

**Pros:**

- Grassroots support can build a strong community base
- Flexibility in how funds are used

**Cons:**

- Unpredictable and can be time-consuming
- Requires marketing and outreach efforts

## Hybrid Models

**Many successful grassroot-led groups utilize a mix of these models to diversify their funding and increase sustainability.**

**Model 1**

A social enterprise to generate operating income, supplemented by government grants for specific survivor support programs.

**Model 2**

Individual donations to build initial capital, followed by seeking NGO donor relationships for large-scale projects.

# 6. The do's and don'ts of forming survivors' groups

## 6.1  Key aspects to consider

- **Respect Survivor Decisions:** NGOs often feel responsible for survivors' decisions, and could lead to risky outcomes, but they must resist controlling the process. Donors' expectations for success and low tolerance for failure pressure NGOs to avoid risky strategies[5]. NGO workers may also have biases, doubting survivors' decision-making abilities. It's crucial to foster dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding, recognizing that empowerment means allowing decisions that differ from what NGOs might choose. NGOs should offer advice, outline risks, and present alternatives to help the group make informed decisions, but ultimately, they must respect and support the group's final choices.

- **Discrimination & Self-Doubt:** The marginalization of survivors exists in many countries and can be rooted in societal biases based on factors like social class, education level, ethnicity, and gender. These prejudices create a challenging environment for building survivor-led groups with agency and autonomy. Simply put, survivors may not be accustomed to having their voices heard or being taken seriously in everyday life, which translates into doubting their capacity for leadership.

> **To keep in mind:**
>
> 1. Every survivor group is unique. Adapt your support to fit their situation.
> 2. Building authentic trust is essential. Don't expect quick wins and be prepared for setbacks.
> 3. Prioritize survivor voices AND build their capacity to act on their own decisions. This is the core of a true partnership.

- **Organizing:** Survivor leadership is a critical aspect of forming and sustaining effective groups, especially in contexts where empowerment and healing are central. It is important to recognize that survivor leadership is not an inherent resource ready to be utilized; rather, it is developed through the organizing process. Organizing nurtures the capacity for survivor leadership and overcomes roadblocks such as discrimination and self-doubt, through both the bonds formed and the actions taken.

[5] See Chua and Tauson (2022) for more insight into the "fear of failure" culture entrenched in the international development sector

- **Gender Dynamics:** In more conservative and patriarchal societies, consider how to support both women and men survivors in leadership roles, in a way which aligns with local norms and the group's aims.

- **Challenges to Agency:** While this agency is their right, survivor groups may encounter numerous obstacles when trying to fully exercise their decision-making power, including from larger partner organizations and funders.

# 6.2  Gatekeeping

**NGOs are gatekeepers:** Conventional NGOs often operate according to program objectives set by donor organizations, which for instance may focus on the provision of specific services or training. These project objectives are well intentioned but may simply not align with the realities on the ground, and the day-to-day needs of the community. NGOs nevertheless face pressure to work within the confines of donor expectations to justify funding, and to remain competitive for future rounds of funding (Chua and Tauson, 2023). Moreover, rigid agreements may not allow for adaptations and a trial-and-error approach.

To meet these expectations, NGOs can sometimes overstep their supportive role and become gatekeepers, potentially undermining survivors' agency and exploiting their experiences to fulfill their own organizational objectives.

## Actions to take to prevent gatekeeping:

- **Establish respectful partnerships:** From the outset, focus on building a mutually respectful relationship with survivor groups where roles and expectations are clear.

- **Encourage reflexivity:** NGOs need to have internal processes that encourage staff to examine their own biases and assumptions about survivors. Provide training and resources to support this reflection.

- **Listen and walk beside:** Emphasize that NGOs are facilitators rather than leaders, always prioritizing the needs and goals of the survivor group they support.

## 6.3 Understanding the importance of Survivors' groups identity

Forming a group for the sake of it will lead to issues within the group, as well as sustainability issues. Evidence suggests that group formation and sustainability depend on the group having a shared purpose (Tauson et al., 2023). For example, if the group is formed by attaching membership as a condition to receive services, e.g., if they attend meetings they will get services, this will only create problems (Bhagat, 2023).

- **Understand the complexities of 'survivor' identity:** Discuss how the label can be both empowering and limiting, and how it evolves over time. Acknowledge that individuals may reject it or choose when and how to identify with it.

- **Provide space for self-definition:** Work with survivor groups to explore what their group identity means to them and how they want to represent themselves. As mentioned previously, the key is to remain empathetic and responsive to the preferences of those directly affected.

- **Support evolving purpose:** Help survivor groups define their goals and adapt over time, shifting focus from immediate reintegration to broader systemic change, if desired. Groups have to want to form and have a shared purpose to sustain or adapt over time, independent of the benefits provided by NGOs. For survivor groups to form, stay together and thrive, setting a clear purpose which all members of the group can get behind is vital.

### Mentorship model: learning from survivors

**Map Networks and Systems:** Work with survivors to map out the networks and systems of power involved in trafficking. Survivors' firsthand experiences can provide detailed insights into how these networks operate at the ground level, which is crucial for developing effective interventions.

**Understanding Local Contexts:** Every region has unique social, economic, and cultural factors that affect trafficking. Survivors can provide context-specific information that helps NGOs tailor their strategies to be more effective and relevant.

**Learning from Intervention Outcomes:** Discuss past interventions with survivors to understand what worked and what didn't. This can help NGOs predict the consequences of various actions and avoid repeating mistakes that could lead to harm or wasted resources.

**Develop Survivor-Led Training Programs:** Implement training programs where survivors educate NGO staff and other stakeholders about the realities of trafficking. This not only empowers survivors but also ensures that practitioners receive firsthand knowledge.

## 6.4 Assessing and building skills

Capacity building that is not tailored to survivor groups' needs and does not recognize their existing expertise is ineffective and a waste of scare resources. There are several approaches to capacity building that we put forward, based on our experiences working with both ANIRBAN:

- **Needs-Based Approach:** Focuses on identifying what is lacking or required within a community or group to address a problem. This approach seeks to fulfill these needs by bringing in external resources or support.

- **Asset-Based Approach:** Emphasizes identifying and utilizing the existing strengths, skills, and resources within a community or group. This approach aims to build on what is already working well.

- **Recognize lived experience as expertise:** Recognize that survivors possess invaluable knowledge about the realities of trafficking and practical solutions. Their lived experience gives them a deep understanding of what it means to survive at the margins of society, navigating systems of patronage and informality to make ends meet. Programs should be designed to harness this expertise. Capacity-building initiatives must be framed as a collaborative process, where NGOs learn from survivors as much as they teach

## 6.5 Key recommendations for funders and NGOs

- **Time:** Invest significant time in building relationships with survivor groups. One-off focus groups are not enough to uncover their true needs and aspirations.

- **Trust:** NGOs and funders must trust survivors as experts, recognizing their knowledge and ability to lead systemic change.

- **Patience:** Changing mindsets and building capacity takes time. Support survivor groups on their journey towards independence with patience and ongoing mentorship.

- **Humility:** CTIP professionals should acknowledge they are not the ultimate experts in stopping trafficking or supporting grassroots survivor leadership. They need to learn from the experiences and insights of survivors.

- **Investment:** CTIP practitioners and survivors share a common goal of stopping trafficking, which requires a long-term effort to change systems that create vulnerability. Investing in survivor leadership and collective power is crucial for achieving this goal, and this includes financially supporting the valuable work survivors do.

- **Flexibility:** Establish flexible and adaptable systems to collaborate with survivor groups, respecting their informality and independence in decision-making and risk-taking. Provide support and funds in a responsive and efficient manner.

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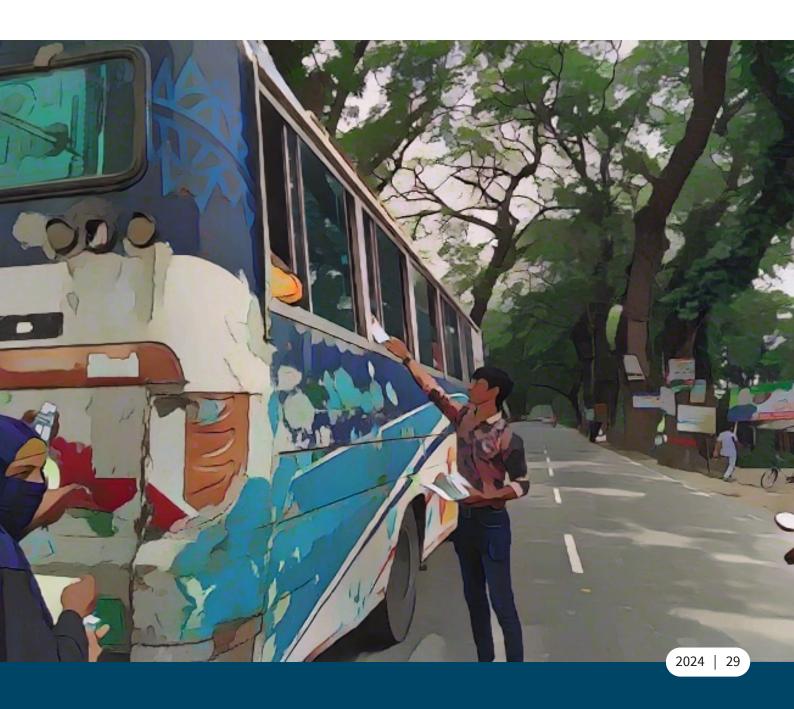
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