

# Voices and Participation of Trafficked Persons

## Discussion Paper

### Introduction

This paper is one of three discussion papers prepared by the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS) in conjunction with eleven of its member and partner organisations from India, Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> During 2014-16 eleven women's rights organisations among GAATW's members and partners and the GAATW International Secretariat, received grants from the Global Fund for Women (GFW) to continue with their anti-trafficking work. In addition to providing the much needed financial support GFW also initiated a learning cohort among the grantees. The grantees met in 2014 and 2016 to critically examine their work and learn from each other's experiences and insights. Srilatha Batliwala as an external consultant facilitated the convenings in 2014 and 2016. During 2015-16 GAATW-IS worked with the grantees to develop three thematic papers on issues chosen by the groups – on Reintegration, Access to Justice and Voice and Participation of Trafficked Persons. GAATW-IS followed very similar methods to develop the papers. After the themes were proposed and agreed upon by the colleagues, the IS sent a set of questions to all of them and sought input. During visits to the groups there were one-on-one discussions. GAATW-IS also did some desk research on the topics and included insights from its previous work, where applicable. Finally, the topics were discussed again at the final convening. Thus, while GAATW-IS put the papers together, they are indeed the result of the group's work.

### Structure of this Paper

This paper focuses on the topic of voice and participation of trafficked persons in anti-trafficking work. Its aim is to initiate a discussion about 'voices and participation of trafficked persons' among the grantee organisations of the Global Fund for Women who are part of the learning initiative on human trafficking during 2014-2016. We hope it will encourage the participating partners to reflect on the way they include trafficked persons in their work and what the implications of this are for the trafficked persons who use their services and for the overall representation of human trafficking in society and the media.

This paper has six sections. Starting with a brief introduction it moves on to discuss the rationale and practice of participation of trafficked persons in anti-trafficking work. The third section discusses the challenges to including trafficked persons' voices in anti-trafficking work, while the fourth and fifth sections briefly touch upon the role of media and the problematic practice of 'Celebrity humanitarianism'. The concluding section outlines a few questions that need to be seriously considered by anti-trafficking stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> The following are the grantee organisations of GFW who have provided input to this paper: Foundation for Women and Association for Human Rights and Women's Right in Development (AWARD), Thailand, Kaagapay and Batis Center for Women, the Philippines, National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM) and Institute for Social Development (ISD), India, Institut Perempuan and Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia, Alliance Against Traffic in Women and Children in Nepal (AATWIN), Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) and Shakti Samuha, Nepal.

## Why listen to trafficked persons and why should they participate in anti-trafficking work?

A central part of a feminist, human rights-based approach to trafficking is the inclusion and empowerment of trafficked persons. In this approach, their opinions and active participation are essential to the design and implementation of assistance services. Their experiences, needs and voices also inform the other activities of support organisations, such as advocacy, awareness raising or training of state and other professionals working with trafficked persons. In this way, trafficked persons and their interests are placed at the core of anti-trafficking work, which contributes to their empowerment and reintegration and ensures that anti-trafficking work is evidence-informed and victim-centred. Their active participation helps them regain the feeling of control over their lives and feel a sense of accomplishment, contribution and improved self-esteem.

*'It is important to listen to the life stories and voices of trafficked persons. It is very helpful to understand how and in which situation they suffered while trafficked and what kind of protection measures are needed and helpful for their reintegration. It is helpful for making effective programmes/interventions for the support and protection of the survivors as well as advocate for survivor friendly policies and mechanisms.'* AATWIN

*'No one else would know better what a trafficked person needs than the trafficked persons themselves.'* Batis Center

But how do NGOs actually include the voices of trafficked persons in their work? It is often acknowledged that each trafficked person's experience is individual and unique, but for successful advocacy and awareness raising some generalisations need to be made and some voices are prioritised over others. And in doing so, we risk privileging some individual voices and appropriating them for our own agenda, while silencing others. Are all voices represented in our work equally or do we, perhaps unwittingly, participate in the creation and promotion of a certain image of the trafficked person and a certain degree of suffering, where only the most severe abuse deserves attention? How do we avoid 'using' trafficked person's voices for our own purposes?

## The participation of trafficked persons in anti-trafficking work

The participation of trafficked persons is integral to recognising them as active agents of change and not simply voiceless victims in need to rescue. The feeling of active participation and contribution to the decision making process helps their recovery, as it stimulates them to be more autonomous and regain the feeling of control over their lives after the trafficking situation, in which they had very little or no control. It also gives them a sense of justice that their suffering has been recognised and acknowledged and may serve to prevent others from similar experiences.

*'I'd love to help others because the person who lives the experience knows more than the one who studies it... You can talk and talk, but living the reality is something else.'* Ecuadorian interviewee in Ecuador

*'Their engagement is empowering in itself. Their engagement elicits peer support, that they are not alone, as there are others who have gone through similar difficult experiences, thereby understand that trafficking is not just a personal issue but a political one and that we need collective effort in addressing it.'* Batis centre

The 'bottom-up' approach in anti-trafficking work means that all activities of an organisation are informed by trafficked persons and their experiences. For example, lobby and advocacy work towards the government to develop and implement anti-trafficking and related laws and measures, is based on the needs that trafficked persons share with the organisation, such as safe accommodation, counselling, reintegration programmes, regulation of recruitment fees for working abroad or regulation of certain labour sectors. They may also share specific difficulties they've had in the interaction with different agencies, which can lead to the development of better referral systems, capacity building and cooperation protocols. These concerns are then brought to the political level to lobby for their inclusion in legislation, national action plans, etc. For awareness-raising work, we learn from trafficked persons how, where and by whom they were recruited and exploited and what could have helped them to better protect themselves. Then we design our campaigns and messages accordingly and determine where and how to distribute them in order to have the broadest or most targeted possible reach. In our assistance and reintegration work, we ask trafficked persons what services and support they need, for what duration and what would be the most beneficial way to receive them. When necessary, we adjust our programmes to suit these needs and have the most positive impact on their lives.

*'In 2014, we held a series of focus group discussions to explore the employment situation in destination countries. In an interview, one of the trafficking survivors told us that she regretted working abroad as a domestic worker. She regretted that accurate information about the employment situation in the destination country (esp. Saudi Arabia) was not provided to her and other prospective migrant domestic workers. She emphasised that if she had received this kind of information, she would have considered more carefully her decision to work abroad. Based on their experiences as well as the results of other focus group discussions, Institut Perempuan planned to follow up on the results of the FGDs. One of our plans is to perform monitoring/review of the implementation of the West Java Local Regulation on Trafficking, especially preventive measures (access to information, etc).'* Institut Perempuan

*'Trafficking survivors helped us to identify what resources (psycho-social counselling, income generating activities, life skill training) are needed to support them and avoid their future marginalisation in society.'* WOREC

*'Sometimes the government and NGOs develop programmes for the survivors without consulting them about what they actually want and what their needs are. Sometime there are involuntary repatriation and forced reintegration programmes, unwilling prosecution, or limited choice of vocational training, all of which reflects on the result of the work. So it is necessary to take the opinion of the trafficked person from the policy level to community level interventions.'* AATWIN

Finally, the inclusion of trafficked persons' voices and participation in our work has benefits for us as an organisation/service provider too. It helps us to improve our own understanding of human trafficking and take into account the different complex and intertwining issues that lead to it. It also helps us to increase our accountability to the people we serve and, ultimately, strengthen our organisation and staff. This was reaffirmed by the research that 17 GAATW member organisations had undertaken among trafficked persons, in order to learn their opinion about the services they provide and learn how we can 'do better'.

*'...their comments made us understand the different meaning of justice among women survivors of trafficking. We often want prosecution of the traffickers and then justice is served. However, most of the trafficking survivors prefer not to file charges against their traffickers for fear of reprisal. Justice for them is moving on with their lives including freedom from their marriage of convenience. This we need to consider in our work.'* Batis Centre

*'... working with trafficking survivors helped us to realise that trafficking has to be looked at through a holistic approach rather than from an unsafe migration perspective. So WOREC's programmes are driven towards ensuring right to work and free mobility of women.'* WOREC

Trafficked persons' voices can be included in our work in different ways. For example, a particular personal story or a quote from it can be used in prevention and awareness-raising campaigns or for a media report about human trafficking. A combination of stories can be used for advocacy purposes to lobby for particular policies and legislation. Other ways can include seeking feedback from trafficked persons on the facilities or rules in the shelter, involving them in research and the development of prevention materials, either as respondents or in focus groups, organising self-help groups for former trafficked persons, or hiring former clients as staff. For example, AATWIN had a survivor of trafficking as a Chairperson and at the moment two of the organisation's Executive Committee members are survivors.

*'At present under the human trafficking act of Nepal there is provision of two trafficking survivors in the National Committee to Control Human Trafficking as a member and both are from AATWIN's members. There is presence of survivors as member in Government's District level committee too.'* AATWIN

*'Batis Center for Women formed Batis-AWARE in 1996 as an organisation of returned migrant women survivors of trafficking, illegal recruitment and domestic violence among other violence against women migrants. Today, the two organisations maintain good partnership in the fight against trafficking and advocating for migrant women's rights. AWARE also helps for peer support to Batis' new clients.'* Batis Centre

*'Shakti Samuha has received the opportunity to be a member of various government committees such as NCCHT, DCCHT & LCCHT to ensure the rights of survivors of human trafficking. Ms. Sunita Danuwar has been selected for the second time as a central member of NGO federation of Nepal.'* Shakti Samuha

## **Challenges to including trafficked persons' voices in anti-trafficking work**

The participation of trafficked persons in anti-trafficking work and the inclusion of their voices is not without its challenges. To start with, there are some ethical considerations related to research and media appearances. Retelling their story and recalling the details of the exploitation, can be traumatic for many survivors and can hinder their recovery and should only be done after careful consideration and, if applicable, with guidance from a social worker. Other survivors can be eager to tell their story to the media, perhaps with the good intention to prevent others from being trafficked or to bring the perpetrators to justice, but may disclose details in the process, which can endanger their safety or that of the supporting organisation. NGOs need to have clear rules, protocols of codes of conduct for working with the media or researchers.

Before trafficked persons engage in anti-trafficking work publicly, for example, as an NGO staff or for advocacy and campaigning, they need to have recovered from their experiences. Some trafficking situations involve severe abuse, limited or no freedom of movement and choice and violations of bodily integrity, which may result in post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, etc., accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt and fear. All these strong emotions and psychological consequences need to be overcome, in order for the trafficked person to be able to make meaningful

contributions to the work of an NGO. If these feelings have not been processed and integrated, this will reflect both on the trafficked person's emotional wellbeing and on the work of the NGO.

*'For trafficking survivors, we think that they could contribute or engage in anti-trafficking work. But for a victim who is still in the trauma phase, she/he needs to concentrate on the recovery/counselling process rather than involving themselves in anti-trafficking work.'* Institut Perempuan

Another challenge is for NGOs to 'keep' trafficked persons with the organisation for a sufficient time as to include their voices in their work. Many trafficked persons prefer to forget their experiences and return home or go on with their lives as soon as possible and do not wish to receive services or engage with anti-trafficking work further. This leaves NGOs with a certain 'selection bias' of the voices of those who stay in the shelter or receive counselling or other services for a long time.

*'One of the challenges is how to build communication with the trafficked person. Communication is a crucial factor to involve the trafficked person's voice/perspective in anti-trafficking programmes. The difficulties lies in the fact that many trafficked persons tend to re-migrate to other cities and/or other countries to find jobs.'* Institut Perempuan

*'They may want to just totally forget their negative experience but they also feel they need to speak out, share their stories, raise public awareness and join in the advocacy against trafficking.'* Batis Center

There are also some more covert dangers related to the misuse of trafficked persons' voices and personal stories. It is generally acknowledged that every trafficked person's experience is individual and unique, stemming from their particular economic and social environment, personal characteristics and trafficking situation. However, for advocacy and awareness-raising purposes it is not feasible or possible to include every single story and personal circumstances and certain generalisations need to be made. So how then do we select and prioritise the voices that we use? Perhaps we can draw a common voice from the (majority of) trafficked persons that we serve but we should avoid presenting it as a 'representative' voice for all trafficked persons, which often happens in advocacy or awareness actions. Do we favour the voice of a perceived majority or also of an individual?

An inherent quality of individual voices is that they focus on the personal story, the 'how and what' of trafficking and obscure any responsibility of the state for the 'why', i.e. for creating the conditions that allowed the trafficking situation in the first place. Most trafficking stories start with the trafficked person's circumstances and motivations for leaving, for example, 'she comes from a poor village' or 'she dreamt of a better life' but fail to interrogate any further why the village was poor and why her only option was to look for a better life abroad. A personal story does not allow for an analysis of the social and economic policies of the state, such as discrimination and social exclusion, or economic policies and austerity measures that create people's vulnerability to trafficking. Personal stories are just that – personal – an individual vulnerable person cheated and exploited by a ruthless individual, while the state is cast in the role of the 'protector' and 'saviour' and the status quo is left unchallenged.

Anti-trafficking activists (including NGOs, governments or international organisations) sometimes tend to privilege the most 'badly affected', the most 'severely abused' trafficked person because s/he amplifies the point that they want to make, which is that the experience of trafficking leaves strong marks on the person's life and that resources should be allocated to assist the person to rebuild their life. This might be a legitimate and perhaps justifiable goal but we need to be aware of the fact that we are unwittingly creating a hierarchy of suffering and seem to be saying that lesser degrees of

suffering do not merit attention. This 'privilege' is usually reserved for a certain type of an 'ideal victim' – an innocent young woman or a child (girl), who has been coerced into prostitution. The suffering of innocent women and children is widely used in anti-trafficking campaigns to garner sympathy, attention and funds but obscures many other voices, who may tell a different, perhaps less attractive story. It is not common to hear, for example, the voice of a woman who knew she would be working in the sex industry in another country but was deceived about the conditions of work or the money she would have to pay to the person who helped her. Thus the voice of the 'innocent' woman would be prioritised as more appealing. The problem is the way that the details of individual cases of forced prostitution are used in anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution campaigning, extrapolating from individual stories to estimate the size of the prostitution market and the profits to be gleaned from trafficking girls into prostitution and the assumptions that underpin it.

Similarly the voices of women exploited in sectors other than prostitution are less often heard, especially if their story doesn't involve sexual abuse. And the voices of male victims are almost completely absent from anti-trafficking discourse, which further reinforces gender and societal norms about gender roles and about trafficking and exploitation. This has real life implications for trafficked persons who don't fit into this stereotype and are, as a consequence, not identified and not offered services or their voices and concerns are dismissed as 'unrepresentative'. It can also result in the adoption of misguided anti-trafficking policy that centres on particular types of voices and prioritises, for example, increased border control, the criminalisation of the sex industry or the restriction of women's movement to prevent trafficking.

The voices of current or former, voluntary sex workers are even more often silenced, using different means. For example, it is often claimed that sex workers, as alleged victims of child abuse, trauma, drug abuse or patriarchy, simply cannot completely comprehend their true situation and suffer from 'false consciousness', therefore their voices and experiences should be ignored. Another way of silencing sex workers is to claim that they are somehow 'unrepresentative', compared to a perceived majority of those who have had negative experiences with sex work but 'cannot speak for themselves'. The former may then be called 'a few privileged women' or be portrayed as representing the nefarious interests of obscure organisations such as the 'pimp lobby' or 'the prostitution lobby'. On the other hand, no one ever doubts the stories of abuse and exploitation in the sex industry. So in the case of sex work negative experiences are much more easily believed than positive or neutral experiences. This may be out of compassion for a person's suffering, or it may also contribute to our feeling good about ourselves - that we're lucky to not be in that position or helping our desire to be 'heroes' and help those who suffer. NGOs need to be careful to avoid promoting or participating in the 'saviour complex' and which experiences to present in their advocacy or prevention work.

Another challenge is how trafficked person's voices may be used for an organisation's own purposes. Many organisations claim to be 'giving a voice to the voiceless'. But is it always 'giving a voice' or sometimes appropriating a voice to further their own agendas? The stories that NGOs publicise often aim to raise their profile, promote their work and bring in funds that may or may not benefit the people whose voices they claim to represent. This is especially true once an NGO discovers 'the market for suffering'. Within this context, sexual violence against women sells. For example, since 2012 there have been serious allegations that Somaly Mam, the founder and director of a Cambodian anti-trafficking NGO, had fabricated stories of trafficking that helped her popularise her NGO and raise millions of dollars. What Newsweek uncovered in 2014 was that Mam had made up her own story of being a victim of trafficking and had hired a young girl to read a script about being 'trafficked into sexual slavery'. It was in fact these chilling stories of exploitation and suffering that had propelled Mam onto the world trafficking stage and gained her political and media recognition. After the revelations of Newsweek, Mam was forced to resign from her organisation (and later re-opened a new one). In the ensuing scandal, some of her supporters denounced her but others



justified the telling of 'a few white lies' as necessary for the 'great work' that she and her NGO are doing. But we need to question the ethics of making up stories and writing scripts to raise money, even if it is meant to help survivors. Similarly, the 2012 American film *Eden* claims to be based on the true story of Chong Kim, a Korean girl trafficked to the US but two years after the film was released, Kim faced serious allegations of fabricating her story<sup>2</sup>. One consequence of such stories is the creation of an 'anti-trafficking industrial complex' that harms migrants and sex workers and pours money into 'rescue industry' NGOs and also plays into government agendas of increased border controls and the criminalisation of the sex industry as anti-trafficking measures. It is important to challenge the social context that creates a market for these stories, as well as the way in which these stories are mobilised politically.

## Media

The media often uses trafficked persons' voices to 'raise awareness' mainly through shock and outrage and attract readership. Similarly to NGO or government campaigns, the media usually focuses on stories of severe abuse and exploitation, mostly in the sex industry, and promotes those voices that can grab the reader and cause the strongest reaction. Although it is often survivors themselves who want their voices to be heard and spread through the media, the media may sensationalise them through its use of images, selective quotations and shocking headlines<sup>3</sup>. This too contributes to the creation and promotion of a certain type of victim and a certain type of trafficking situation that erases the complexity of trafficking experiences and silences people with different experiences. It also promotes a simplistic narrative that trafficking is the result of individual deviant behaviour and obscures the many complex social phenomena that contribute to the exploitation of people in the global economy.

## 'Celebrity humanitarianism'

In the past several decades celebrities too have increased their engagement with social and environmental issues, which has been received with mixed reactions. Some argue that celebrities can help activists gain access to policy makers and the public that they would otherwise never attain, and allow unpopular causes and marginalised groups to attract funding that would otherwise be difficult. However, others critique this engagement for its often uninformed narrative and shallow solutions. Human trafficking and 'modern slavery' have also recently become a so-called 'cause célèbre'<sup>4</sup>. Celebrities engaged in anti-trafficking activism include singers, artists and Hollywood actresses, to name a few. The problem with this celebrity humanitarianism is that celebrities quickly become 'experts' on the topic and their input is valued more highly by policy makers than that of service providers and long-standing anti-trafficking advocates. But celebrities rarely have a deep, nuanced understanding of trafficking and usually rely on bite-size catchphrases that can quickly capture the attention of the audience. Like media and some NGOs, when talking about trafficking and trafficked persons, they rely on shocking, sensationalistic stories and reproduce the image of the helpless

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Nolan Brown, Another High-Profile Sex Trafficking Tale May Be Falling Apart, 2014, <http://reason.com/blog/2014/06/12/eden-sex-trafficking-fable-falls-apart>

<sup>3</sup> Some random recent examples of news headlines include Survivor story: 'Shooting up meth, eating out of dumpsters and sleeping on park benches', Billings Gazette, October 2015; Human trafficking survivor: I was raped 43,200 times, CNN, November 2015; Sex trafficking victim: 'I felt disgusting and dirty', First Coast News, October 2015; 'Branded' victims of sex trafficking get fresh start in Clearwater, WFLA, November 2015; Sex trafficking in the UK: one woman's horrific story of kidnap, rape, beatings and prostitution, The Guardian, February 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Dina Haynes, When human trafficking becomes a Cause Celebre, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/dina-haynes/when-human-trafficking-becomes-cause-celebre>

victim. In this process the voices of women, workers and survivors are lost and there is little space left to critically analyse the conditions that allow trafficking and exploitation to occur.

The fight against exploitation requires a nuanced understanding of the broader issues around racial, economic and class inequalities that affect people's life. What is then more necessary in anti-trafficking work than individual voices is the creation of a safe space, where activists/NGO staff and trafficked persons can engage in a conversation. That is where the focus can shift from very individual stories to a broader understanding of socio-economic and political realities. Without diminishing the individual's experiences, a collective attempt can be made to understand the 'why' behind the 'what' and true feminist leadership can be built. This is where the assistance provider can play a catalyst's role in the empowerment process.

## Moving Forward

Based on the points discussed above, the following questions need to be explored further in the work of the grantees and at various fora:

- What is the aim of including trafficked person's voices in our work? Do we always need to include them and do we always have a clear idea why? Is it necessary to tell personal stories in our advocacy and prevention work and do they need to be real stories, in order to illustrate a point?
- If all experiences are individual and unique, how do we select which voices to use in our work? Is it those of a perceived majority? Is it those that illustrate the most severe abuse, the worst suffering?
- How do we avoid participating in the creation and promotion of a 'representative' trafficked person and a certain 'typical' situation of trafficking? Is it sufficient to use different trafficking scenarios and the voices of different survivors?
- With different experiences of women in the sex industry – a continuum between 'the happy hooker' and 'the survivor of prostitution' - how do we choose which voice to favour without silencing the other? Is it possible to have a balanced position regarding trafficking into the sex industry that takes into account all experiences?
- How do we avoid appropriating trafficked persons' voices for our own agenda? How do we balance between the need to popularise our work and raise funds and the use of personal stories? Do we, and should we, draw attention to the fact that some NGOs use trafficked persons' stories unethically?
- How do we deal with media requests for personal stories? How do we deal with trafficked persons' requests to share their stories with the media? Should we encourage this, as a means of catharsis of trafficked persons and to prevent others from being trafficked?
- How do we deal with celebrities who want to engage in anti-trafficking work, sometimes to the benefit of our organisation, but are unable or unwilling to demonstrate a more in-depth, nuanced understanding of trafficking?
- Can we, and should we, move away from an individual voice to a 'common voice' born out of trafficked persons themselves that takes into account the true complexities of trafficking and different experiences? How can we do this?
- How can we ensure that trafficked persons' voices and participation leads to their true empowerment and to a deepening of our own work on human trafficking?



### **Additional resources:**

GAATW, *Seeking Feedback from Trafficked Persons on Assistance Services: Principles and ethics*, 2015, [http://www.gatw.org/publications/GAATW\\_BriefingPaper\\_Principles\\_and\\_Ethics.10.2015.pdf](http://www.gatw.org/publications/GAATW_BriefingPaper_Principles_and_Ethics.10.2015.pdf)

Heidi Hoefinger, *Anti-Trafficking Review issue 7, Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism and Story-Telling: The case of Somaly Mam*, 2015

<http://www.antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atjournal/article/view/200/199>