

# Briefing Paper

## Unmet Needs: Emotional support and care after trafficking

### Introduction

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) believes that the impact of anti-trafficking initiatives is best understood from the perspective of trafficked persons themselves. This, according to us, is central to a human rights-based approach to anti-trafficking. To date, very little research has been done to consult trafficked people on the assistance services and to seek their comments on the efficacy of the services they received, or needed, but did not receive.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in 2013, 17 GAATW Member Organisations across Latin America, Europe, and Asia undertook a participatory research project to look at their own assistance work from the perspective of trafficked persons. GAATW members interviewed 121 women, men and girls who lived through trafficking to find out about their experience of assistance interventions and their recovery process after trafficking. The project aimed to make the assistance programmes more responsive to the needs of the clients and to initiate a process of accountability on the part of all anti-trafficking organisations and institutions.

The experience of being trafficked often includes harsh working conditions, betrayal of trust, and a lack of control over one's life. It is a serious human rights violation. The trafficking experience can include traumatic events, such as experiencing or witnessing extreme violence, death threats, serious injury, rape, and psychological abuse. Life after trafficking may involve new traumas: abuse and threats against life by police, being strip-searched and detained as a migrant in irregular status, and threats from traffickers. The impact of these events may result in psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety, which necessitate emotional support and care. However, while popular discussions on trafficking tend to assume all people who have been trafficked have post-traumatic stress disorder, it is important to note that not everyone experiences traumatic events in the same way, and not all trafficked persons are traumatised.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing paper is one of three in which we set out the main findings of what people who have been trafficked say about certain themes.<sup>3</sup> It presents the experiences and suggestions of

---

<sup>1</sup> C Rijken, J van Dijk and F Klerx-Van Mierlo, *Mensenhandel: Het slachtofferperspectief (Human Trafficking: The victim's perspective)*, International Victimology Institute Tilburg (INTERVICT), Tilburg, 2013, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> FAFO & NEXUS Institute/A Brunovskis & R Surtees, *A Fuller Picture: Addressing trafficking-related assistance needs and socio-economic vulnerabilities*, FAFO, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The titles of the briefing papers are: *Unmet Needs: Emotional support and care after trafficking*; *Seeking feedback from trafficked persons on assistance services: Principles and Ethics*; and *Rebuilding Lives: The need for sustainable livelihoods after trafficking*.

trafficked persons with regard to emotional support and care after trafficking, pointing to gaps as well as good practices. This paper is not meant to provide a final word or guideline on this theme. Rather, we are sharing it in the spirit that we would like to improve our own practice; with the intention to include the voices of trafficked persons into our work.

## Unmet needs

**“I might have the rent, or food, but if the heart is affected emotionally, psychologically that doesn’t let you go on.”**

Colombian interviewee in Ecuador

Researchers asked interviewees what helped, or would have helped them, in the recovery process after trafficking. Across different ages, genders, and nationalities, trafficked persons consistently emphasised the importance of the understanding and care of just one person for their recovery and healing. In between, they mentioned various unmet needs.

The sections below outlines six main issues around emotional support and post-trafficking care that the trafficked persons in this project emphasized in the interviews: informal emotional support; ongoing emotional support; psychological assistance for trafficked men; stigma attached to psychological assistance; involving the family and community; and peer group support. Under each issue, we present comments and suggestions of the interviewed trafficked persons. The paper ends with recommendations.

### Informal emotional support is a key factor in recovery

For trafficked persons, having access to psychological assistance is essential to be able to regain their human dignity and rebuild their lives.<sup>4</sup> GAATW members found that a large number of interviewees identified emotional support as more important than the material support they received. Such psychological assistance may be formal or informal, including from ad-hoc encounters.

A number of interviewees self-identified a need for counselling. Member Organisations provided referrals either within or outside their organisation. Existing research with trafficked persons however, makes clear that informal emotional support from shelter or assistance staff can be equally important as, or even more important than, their formal psychological assistance.<sup>5</sup>

Interviewees reported that informal emotional and moral support from the support organisation - from individual social workers or shelter staff - was a key factor in their recovery. Several people referred to staff at support organisations as their ‘family’.

**“If I look sad they don’t wait that I ask [for] help but they come to me and ask what happened, what can we help, and they show that they really want to help. And I feel that at least I have someone who loves me, who care about my life. That is very important to me to live further.”**

Thai interviewee in Germany

<sup>4</sup> UNODC, *United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, Annual Progress Report*, UNODC, 2014, retrieved 31 June 2015, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Human-Trafficking-Fund/UNVTF\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Human-Trafficking-Fund/UNVTF_Progress_Report_2014.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> FAFO & NEXUS Institute

It was the emotional support, interviewees said, and the affirming messages they received from support workers and counsellors, such as “*you’re a nice person*” and “*you just have to keep going*”, which made a difference to their self-esteem.

On the other hand, assistance providers found that offering this type of informal emotional support may encourage dependency, particularly for people in destination countries who are separated from their usual support social structures, or who do not have any to begin with. One interviewee spoke about returning to the organisation for support without having a particular current problem, but rather wanting to talk to “friends”. It can be challenging for assistance providers to balance the need to provide support to trafficked persons, while also encouraging them to develop their own social support structures in their post-trafficking lives, which sometimes involves adapting to a new country and foreign culture.

Ad-hoc encounters include the contacts between the trafficked person and the interviewer. A number of individuals interviewed by GAATW Member Organisations stated that participating in this research had done them “good” and that it “helped” them. One interviewee said having consented to be interviewed “in order not to keep it inside.” Several others said that telling their story enabled them to overcome what had happened to them.

Family members can give emotional support to trafficked persons, provided that they are nearby, and they are not involved in the trafficking. Peer group support is valuable too. The involvement of family in emotional assistance, and the use of peer group support are discussed further below.

Overall, the build-up of their own social support structures, either by identifying an existing positive presence or by forging new social networks, is key. The findings support earlier research<sup>6</sup> that avoiding friendships with clients, while maintaining equality and respect (maintaining a healthy professional distance), encourage autonomy in clients, as well as decrease stress for service providers.

### Complex assistance needs require ongoing emotional support

Often, persons who have been trafficked have complex assistance needs, that not only relate directly to the trafficking experience, but also to abuse and deprivation prior to trafficking, and stressful conditions after trafficking. Moreover, trafficked persons may have immediate or delayed reactions to their traumatic experiences.<sup>7</sup> Hence, emotional support is important in the immediate aftermath of trafficking, as well as towards the longer-term recovery and (re)integration in society.<sup>8</sup> However, psychological assistance, particularly in the long-term, is not always available.

A number of interviewees identified a need for emotional support immediately after their experience of trafficking, especially when confronted with stressful and typically long stays at the police station, like this Eastern European interviewee: “*They gave me food, toilet and water. But I needed to speak with some specialist; I had mental problems.*” Other interviewees reported that they felt the impact of the traumatic events much later. One interviewee in Ecuador approached the assistance organisation ten years after escaping from the traffickers because of “*hoping for some comfort*”.

<sup>6</sup> FAFO & NEXUS Institute; GAATW, *Making Do: Providing social assistance to trafficked persons*, Report on social assistance consultation meeting, GAATW, 2005, retrieved 24 June 2015, [http://www.gaatw.org/publications/GAATW\\_Making\\_Do-Report\\_DirectAssistanceConsultation.05.07.pdf](http://www.gaatw.org/publications/GAATW_Making_Do-Report_DirectAssistanceConsultation.05.07.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> R Surtees, *Listening to Victims: Experiences of identification, return and assistance in South-Eastern Europe*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2007, retrieved 24 June 2015, [http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/listening\\_to\\_victims\\_1007.pdf](http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/listening_to_victims_1007.pdf)

In many countries, assistance to trafficked persons is only short-term funded and conditional, i.e. it is linked to a willingness to participate in criminal law action against traffickers.<sup>9</sup> A number of the individuals interviewed who already had access to a psychologist and counselling, reported that they found this kind of support very important. However, psychological counselling was most readily available for those staying in a shelter-based assistance programme. Some interviewees said they did not receive psychological support, because services did not extend past their stay at the shelter:

**“I would have liked to have been able to receive the psychological support I was offered (...) if I had stayed for longer.”**

Colombian interviewee in Peru

Sometimes practical issues, such as safety, can hinder accessing support. An Eastern European interviewee assisted in Switzerland reported to initially have received counselling in a shelter, but was required to return to the canton where the trafficking took place, due to the jurisdiction over court proceedings and the granting of a residence permit. In this city, the interviewee had encounters with the traffickers, and subsequently stopped attending appointments with a new psychologist because of concerns about travelling on public transport.

Concluding, trafficked persons may need long-term emotional support (besides short-term support), as the impact of traumatic events around trafficking is often complex, and may be delayed. However, not all service providers have access to sustainable funding as a means to cope with long-term needs and high demands.

#### Trafficked men need equal access to psychological assistance

In many countries assistance has been developed with a focus on women and girls, particularly those trafficked for sexual exploitation. Men are less often identified as trafficked persons in need of support. There is a shortage of services available to trafficked men.<sup>10</sup> A number of men interviewed by GAATW Member Organisations reported they had not received psychological assistance.

Yet, assistance providers and researchers suggest that trafficked men, inside or outside of the sex sector, show similar mental health problems and support needs as trafficked women.<sup>11</sup> Men who received emotional support from staff, clearly appreciated that support:

**"[Important] for me (...) the support that you give me, the love you give me, the respect you give me and sometimes a nice word, a pretty action that you say: look, that person I can count on (...).  
The support of say, we are not alone."**

Cuban interviewee in Ecuador

In response to questions about what help they would have liked, or what changes they would make to the assistance they received, men consistently highlighted a need for psychological assistance:

<sup>9</sup> C Rijken, J van Dijk and F Klerx-Van Mierlo, p. 35

<sup>10</sup> GAATW, *More 'Trafficking' Less 'Trafficked': Trafficking for exploitation outside the sex sector in Europe*, GAATW Working Paper Series, GAATW, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> L Kiss et al., 'Health of Men, Women, and Children in Post-Trafficking Services in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam: An observational cross-sectional study', *The Lancet Global Health*, vol. 3, Issue 3, 2015, pp. 154-161.; GAATW, *More 'Trafficking' Less 'Trafficked'*.

**“Mental help. At that time I had no one I could share this with, no one I could talk to. And I think that if I’d received psychological help back then, I wouldn’t feel so bad now.”**

Togolese interviewee in The Netherlands

Gendered assumptions play an important role in the lack of assistance services available to men, and in the limited number of available services offered to them. There is for instance an assumption that men will not take up psychological help, because of the stigma associated with men expressing emotions. One problem with psychological help may be that trafficked men don’t want to be seen as victims.<sup>12</sup> Some men interviewed in the research said turning down psychological assistance was mostly due to social and cultural context, or individual beliefs, in wanting to avoid the label of mental illness.

Summarizing, men who have been trafficked have similar mental health problems and needs as trafficked women. However, psychological assistance is not equally accessible to men compared to women, nor offered to men in an acceptable way.

#### Address the stigma attached to psychological assistance

Trafficked persons come from various cultures, with differing ideas about health and illness, which may not recognise the symptoms of trauma in the same way. In many settings there is considerable stigma attached to mental health problems and psychological counselling.<sup>13</sup>

Where psychological counselling was available to trafficked persons, a number of the interviewees had negative reactions to accepting the mental health services offered to them. Trafficked persons may not understand the purpose of psychological assistance.<sup>14</sup> One Eastern European interviewee explained having declined counselling because of not associating the trafficking experience with the need for psychological help: *“I thought it’s only for sick people, this. And I didn’t like the idea that I will have a psychologist.”*

It is important to avoid forcing persons into a mental health system that is contrary to their belief system. For example, for several interviewees, the normal reaction to traumatic events seemed to be forgetting them, instead of recounting them. An Indonesian interviewee said recovery meant: *“Everything is deleted and not being remembered”*.

However, sometimes trafficked persons come to understand the importance of psychological support after a while.<sup>15</sup> One interviewee who declined psychological counselling at first, later accepted it, and over time came to value the support received, especially because the psychologist was from the same culture and spoke the same language.

From this, it follows that the way in which psychological assistance is offered, matters. Also, the individuals who shared their experiences with the GAATW Member Organisations in this project described a strong link between feelings of wellness, and positive, healthy relationships with a community and/or the family.

In short, due to the stigma on formal counselling, psychological assistance is not always offered in a way that is acceptable and helpful to trafficked persons. Also, the cultural and individual beliefs

---

<sup>12</sup> USAID, *Trafficking of Adult Men in Europe and Eurasia Regio*, Final Report, USAID, 2010, retrieved 6 July 2015, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnadw368.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadw368.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> FAFO & NEXUS Institute; GAATW, *Making Do*

<sup>14</sup> R Surtees

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

about illness and health may differ between service providers and their clients, while these differences are not always respected.<sup>16</sup>

### Involving the family and community

Assistance needs of trafficked persons are often intertwined with the needs of their family and dependants, e.g. children or parents. The trafficking experience can have a profound impact on those who are close to trafficked persons, whether they know about the trafficking or not. For that reason, support for them as ‘secondary beneficiaries’ is important as well.<sup>17</sup> Families played important roles in the lives of our interviewees. Family and community members can provide essential emotional support, but also be a source of harm.

**“The most important thing in your life happens (and) you don’t have somebody that you really trust, your mother... a hug from your mother just to cry.”**

Eastern European interviewee in Western Europe

One of the main reasons many interviewees returned home was the comfort they hoped to receive from their family. In the case of several interviewees cooperating in criminal trials in Western Europe, visits by family members (organised and funded by the Member Organisation) were highlighted as one of the most helpful services they received. Where family members had accepted their daughters, wives and husbands unconditionally, people described feeling relieved and happier.

In some cases, particularly where counselling had not been on offer, family members provided valuable emotional support. One person trafficked for work in a private household in Europe, and who had not received counselling, relied on the spouse for support: *“Up until now the only person that I talk to is my wife, no one else. Everything that’s happened, my feelings about what happened, [I talk about that] only with her.”*

However, across the three regions, many interviewees faced stigma from their family and community. They described feeling ashamed and embarrassed in their family homes. Interviewed persons reported that family members placed blame on them for being trafficked, particularly in cases where they were subjected to sexual violence, but also sometimes for ‘failed migration’. One Thai interviewee, who had returned home, reported that the criticism was so intense that some persons “have to leave again to do the same job.” One interviewee in Peru said the discomfort was so severe that the only solution was to lock oneself up in a room for months: *“What has happened has marked my life forever, and my family reminds me of the situation I have gone through, that makes me uncomfortable in my own skin.”*

This person, along with a number of others, wished that their family had received support so they might have understood the situation better. Next to this person, this was especially the case in a group of Nepali female interviewees in the project, who had not attempted to reconcile with their families, due to their fear of shame and rejection. These women consistently stressed the importance of educating the family and the wider community about trafficking. They felt that if family members understood trafficking as a human rights abuse and a crime, rather than as something trafficked persons are to blame for, it would be immensely helpful for them. This would allow them to return to their families:

<sup>16</sup> IOM/S Devine, *Psychosocial and Mental Health Service Provision for Survivors of Trafficking*, Baseline research in the Greater Mekong Subregion and Indonesia, IOM, 2009, retrieved 24 June 2015, [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/PsychosocialandMentalHealth\(Eng\).pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/PsychosocialandMentalHealth(Eng).pdf)

<sup>17</sup> FAFO & NEXUS Institute

**“What I feel is we have to make the family understand that the persons that get into these problems are innocent, that it is not their fault.”**

Nepali interviewee in Nepal

Indeed, when appropriate and where possible, some organisations work with the families of the trafficked person and the surrounding community to restore the relationship.<sup>18</sup>

All in all, understanding family and community members can be the source of emotional support, who however may require support as ‘secondary beneficiaries’. Working with the families and surrounding communities via sensitive mediation and education, can improve the acceptance of trafficked persons upon their returning home. However, this may not be appropriate or successful in all cases or contexts.

### Peer support groups

Meetings between trafficked persons, during which they can speak informally and share their feelings and concerns, prove to have important therapeutic benefits.<sup>19</sup> The interviews revealed that peer group support meetings were very helpful in restoring self-confidence and addressing feelings of isolation.

One organisation held a weekly group counselling session specifically for women from Southeast Asia. The meeting not only provided therapy, but also the opportunity to connect socially with others. A Filipina woman described the women there as her “sisters”.

Peer group support meetings were especially helpful for those people who, for fear of being judged, had not revealed their trafficking experiences to their family and friends. Several Thai interviewees who had been trafficked and were now back in Thailand, appreciated the meetings run by a GAATW Member Organisation, precisely because it was run by people who had lived through similar, or even worse experiences than themselves: *“At least there's someone who understands and that's enough for me. When I tell other people they don't believe me and I feel bad about it. In this place I know they know the truth and I feel better.”*

The peer group support meetings were also an opportunity to receive information on assistance services and training. Interviewees learnt about accessing loans to start small businesses and received information related to their legal case and compensation claims, which was very important to the majority of the trafficked persons interviewed. Several of them had also taken on responsibilities within the group, participating in educational trainings and dramas on trafficking and legal rights within communities in Thailand. It was clear that being part of this small community had given them a new purpose and self-esteem:

**“We used to walk to our community with the face downward and cannot keep eye contact with anyone. Right now, together with the group, we do dramas to spread the information on legal rights to everyone.”**

Thai interviewee in Thailand

In short, peer group support meetings can help restore self-confidence and address feelings of isolation of trafficked persons.

---

<sup>18</sup> GAATW, *Making Do*

<sup>19</sup> IOM, *The IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking*, IOM, 2007, retrieved 24 June 2015, [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/IOM\\_Handbook\\_Assistance.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/IOM_Handbook_Assistance.pdf)

## Recommendations

The trafficking experience, and the life after trafficking, may involve traumatic events. The interviewed trafficked persons consistently emphasised the importance of the understanding and care of just one person for their recovery and healing. Based on the research and in particular the suggestions of the interviewed trafficked persons, GAATW recommends the following:

- Service providers should help trafficked persons build their own social support structures, either by identifying an existing positive presence or by forging new social networks. Avoiding friendships with clients, while maintaining equality and respect (maintaining a healthy professional distance), is important to encourage autonomy in clients, as well as to decrease stress for service providers.
- Service providers should consider how best to cope with long-term needs and high demands, as the impact of traumatic events around trafficking is often complex, and may be delayed. They may do so by looking for alternative solutions, such as involving family, peer support, or cooperation with other organisations.
- Psychological assistance should be equally accessible for men who have been trafficked, as they have similar mental health problems and needs as trafficked women. Tailoring assistance to the needs of men and offering it in a way that is acceptable to men is critical.
- Given the stigma attached to formal counselling, psychological assistance needs to be offered in a way that is acceptable and helpful to trafficked persons. Service providers need to familiarize themselves with, and show respect for, the cultural and individual beliefs about illness and health of their clients. Psychological assistance responses might look beyond clinical treatment to focus more on the social ties of family, friendship, and community.
- Family members who take on a large emotional supporting role, listening to loved one's experiences of trafficking, and supporting them in their recovery, should have access to support as 'secondary beneficiaries'.
- Although this may not be appropriate or successful in all cases or contexts, Service providers could consider involving family mediation and community education in their work, depending on appropriateness and success in specific cases and contexts, to improve the acceptance of trafficked persons upon their returning home.
- Service providers may consider incorporating peer group support meetings, as these can help restore self-confidence and address feelings of isolation of trafficked persons.