Issue 2, April 2026

REFRAMING NARRATIVES

ANTI-TRAFFICKING FROM THE GROUND UP

GAATW
Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Reframing Narratives
Anti-trafficking from the ground up

Issue 2, April 2026
Theme: *Lived Experience Expertise*

Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

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The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is an international network of 100 NGOs from all regions of the world that advocates for the rights of migrants and trafficked persons. GAATW members provide direct assistance to migrants and trafficked persons, run information campaigns, and engage in policy advocacy at the national and regional levels. The International Secretariat of the Alliance is based in Bangkok, Thailand, and supports its members with research, knowledge building, and international advocacy. We focus on women's rights to mobility and decent work.

This report was designed by Rachel Deyis

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Introduction

Bandana Pattanaik and Eleanor Taylor-Nicholson

Welcome to the second issue of Reframing Narratives: Anti-Trafficking from the Ground Up. We launched this annual publication in 2025 to create a space for mutual learning among GAATW's members and to share members' knowledge and insight with the wider public. The articles in this issue both highlight the challenges members face and the shared principles of practice that will help guide organisations in the field. In this publication, you will find both the complexity of our work and the common threads that connect one to the other.

Summary of this issue: Lived Experience Expertise

This issue focuses on "lived experience expertise", a subject central to GAATW's work since its founding in 1994. It was listening to the lived experiences of migrant sex workers (considered "trafficked women" at that time) that led the Alliance's founders to question the simplistic, mainstream narrative of anti-trafficking. Through conversations and consultations with women in a range of precarious employment situations, the founders recognised that these women, far from being passive victims, were in a constant fight against unjust systems and laws, both in their homes and their workplaces. GAATW began advocating for a human rights-based approach to addressing trafficking that included the voices of trafficked women. Indeed, GAATW has always maintained that anti-trafficking policies and practices must centre the lived experiences of trafficked persons.

By bringing the praxis of listening to lived experiences into anti-trafficking work in the 1990s, GAATW members were following an established feminist tradition. Creating non-judgemental spaces where women can speak without fear of stigma, and ensuring women's voices reach policy makers, are well-known practices within feminist movements. Since the 1970s, women around the world have formed rape and sexual assault survivor groups, feminist circles of learning, and consciousness-raising groups based on lived experience. These groups continue to be integral to feminist movement-building, although the internet and social media have changed their formats.

While each one of us has experiential knowledge, making conscious efforts to listen to and learn from the lived experiences of survivors acknowledges that there may be significant differences of privilege and power between the service providers and the people they support. Listening with feminist ears enables social workers and others to design tailormade recovery programmes in consultation with the survivor.

Why focus on lived experience expertise now?

As the essays in this publication show, the practice of actively listening to survivors of trafficking and other abuses continues to be at the core of the work of our members. More than three decades have passed since the launch of GAATW.

GAATW has a diverse membership. Many of our members work exclusively on human trafficking and have engaged with survivors for many years. After a number of conver-

sations with members about how they keep the voices and concerns of survivors at the core of their work, we decided to create this opportunity for learning and reflection. We wanted to hear about how they ensure the holistic well-being of survivors and whether policymakers have adequate sensitivity and respect towards survivors now.

Some of our members do not focus on human trafficking. They work with workers in low-waged occupations, both migrants and locals. We also have self-organised groups of workers in our Alliance. We thought that their practices of incorporating insights from the experiences of workers, and examples of policy advocacy led by workers, would be useful for other colleagues.

How this publication was compiled

This issue was compiled by an editorial team at the GAATW International Secretariat, with the assistance of a consultant who has long association with GAATW.

All GAATW members were informed about the upcoming issue and invited to propose an article or other submission. Given that GAATW members engage with persons with lived experience in different ways, the editorial team felt that leaving the invitation open would allow members to share in a way that felt meaningful to them. At the same time, the team contacted specific organisations and individuals in the larger GAATW family who we know have experience with or ideas about engaging lived experience expertise. We sought a range of both personal and practice-oriented reflections.

The method of preparing submissions differed between contributors. Some wished to write articles individually or collectively and submit them for review. Others preferred to share their ideas and experiences through conversation and email. These conversations were recorded, translated and edited by the editorial team.

In structuring this issue, we also did not prescribe a specific definition of lived experience expertise. The context and constituency of members differs widely, as does the language members work in, how they engage with their constituents and how they view the issues they work on. To that end, we have allowed authors to choose their own terms, whether it is "persons with lived experience", "survivors", "victims", "colleagues", or "persons with lived experience expertise".

Summary of articles

This issue begins with an article from Borislav (Bobby) Gerasimov that reviews 'Meet Our Members' interviews on the GAATW website. These pages are based on interviews with members in which they discuss their work. Bobby identifies how the membership has long engaged persons with lived experience and incorporates lived experience expertise into their work, both explicitly and implicitly. This inclusion is often intrinsic to the organisation. The article also identifies risks and challenges to this work, including exposing survivors to further trauma or to state enforcement actions, as well as to tokenistic displays of inclusion that do not truly recognise the contributions that persons with lived experience can make. All of these issues are discussed in more depth in the articles that follow.

In the first section, **"Personal Journeys of Survivor-leadership"**, contributors from Shanti Foundation, ATKI Hong Kong and Girl Power Initiative share their inspiring personal journeys from being a victim of violence or exploitation, to becoming a survivor and finally a leader in their respective field of expertise. Swostika Danuwar also shares her experiences as the daughter of a survivor, who has taken on the leadership mantle from her mother. The contributors highlight how their lived experience provided them with unique knowledge and guided them to their current path, but not without tremendous challenge and loss. They also recognise the role that training, political consciousness and mentorship has played in their emergence as leaders, and how they hope to transmit this to future survivors.

We have also included a submission in this section from a feminist activist and organisation builder, Renu Adhikari who has provided training and mentorship for many years through her organisation, WOREC. Renu's perspective reveals what this work has required of her in terms of time, energy and commitment, as well as the deep relationships that have emerged as a result.

In the second section, we present four submissions that describe the **complexities of drawing on lived experience expertise** particularly for advocacy work. All submissions were prepared by NGOs that work closely with individuals in the sex work sector, although the challenges they describe could equally be described in other sectors. The first submission, by MIST, shares the frustration and re-victimisation survivors may feel when they share their experiences, only to have them questioned, minimised, or misunderstood. SWAN and CDCP describe how migrant sex workers are impacted by both immigration

and sex work policies and have valuable insights to share, but can be excluded from discussions on both. That may be because they do not wish to identify publicly as a sex worker and/or such identification could expose them to harsh consequences such as detention and deportation. Finally, Brigada Callejera discusses how the larger atmosphere of violence and regional insecurity can make standing up and speaking out in Mexico more dangerous.

Finally, we present three submissions that discuss **concrete strategies for promoting lived experience expertise**, or at least confronting these complexities. Collective Threads works with youth activists in Africa and describes its fellowship programme that seeks to build power across movements. Freedom Network shares its experience of engaging individuals with lived experience of trafficking in federal policy discussions, and how sharing such expertise has led to policy change. JELI also shares an advocacy initiative in a single case of labour violations, and the building of solidarity and community support that empowered the individual to advocate on her own behalf. Notably, each of these articles highlights the role of supportive and respectful relationships, and the need to care for the mental health of survivor-activists.

The division above is not intended to limit the power of each contribution, and indeed all of the contributions touch on all of the three themes. We encourage readers to spend time with each and consider the wisdom and the calls to action for those with lived experience and their allies.

Principles for practice

This publication, ultimately, is intended to support the practice of GAATW members and others involved in anti-trafficking work. With that in mind, we share six principles for practice that emerge from the submissions, and which reframe common assumptions or narratives around lived experience expertise. These are shared with the aim of enabling survivors of trafficking and other forms of violence to have a voice in the programmes and policies that affect them.

The necessity of incorporating lived experience expertise. Each of the contributions highlight, in their distinct ways, how lived experience expertise is essential to shaping and informing effective anti-trafficking work. Whether it is giving feedback on the real-world impact of policy or project proposals, building awareness and acceptance of stigmatised

communities, building solidarity, strength and inspiration among affected communities, or bringing others into direct assistance through peer education and outreach, the expertise of those who have direct experience with the subject is invaluable.

Lived experience can be harnessed in a myriad of ways. It is sometimes assumed that lived experience expertise is most relevant to policy advocacy work. The articles in this issue, however, demonstrate how lived experience can be relevant to anti-trafficking work from the ground up – whether in the structure and leadership of organisations, to the design of prevention and assistance programmes, to research design and methods, or community building and organising. Lived experience is multifaceted. While women who have experienced trafficking are often asked to speak publicly on their trafficking experience, the contributions in this issue highlight the diversity of experiences women have. Trafficking itself is intersectional, impacted by race, gender, class, immigration status, sexuality, health and many other factors, as is anti-trafficking work. The women who share their experiences here, and their allies, describe calling on the depth and breadth of survivor's knowledge and expertise to truly harness the wisdom held by women.

"Outness" is not a necessary requirement for contribution. Often, survivor engagement has required public-facing work, in which the individual must be "out", both about their traumatic experiences, and their membership of a stigmatised group such as sex worker or undocumented migrant. However, a number of these submissions highlight how being out is not a welcome or even safe option for many women. This does not mean, however, that they do not have expertise to share or contributions to make. These submissions are a call for creative thinking and inclusivity by organisations claiming to speak on behalf of women.

Safety and care must be prioritised. While it is a worthy ideal that lived experience expertise is incorporated into all anti-trafficking work, this should not blind organisations to the real emotional and practical risks that this can pose. Whether it is the closing space for public discourse in general, as ATKI documents in Hong Kong and Brigada describes in Mexico, or a tightening of restrictions for specific groups, speaking out can invite unwelcome attention and physical risk. Similarly, as several contributors make clear, sharing experiences and expertise can be a retraumatising experience if it is not invited in good faith and received in a respectful and safe environment.

Centring solidarity and relationships. Survivor engagement is sometimes discussed as a

one-off interaction or invitation to speak or comment. However, each of the contributions in this issue describe long-term and ongoing relationships of trust. These relationships take commitment and openness although it may look different in different contexts. On one end of the spectrum, WOREC describes having a shelter on the office premises has led to long-term multi-dimensional relationships that become almost like family. Similarly JELI describes holding support circles for workers that build solidarity. At the other end of the spectrum, the Freedom Network describes a professional relationship built on trust in which each partner is open to the other. They highlight that an effective working relationship may require handing over some 'power' in the dynamic and trusting survivors to speak on their own behalf.

Be intentional, adaptive, and responsive. Survivors are far from a monolithic group, just like NGOs and their staff. Each individual has her own experience, preferences and life priorities. A one-sized-fits-all approach to engaging lived experience expertise may lead to misunderstandings and lost opportunities. Plans may also need to change as people's lives change.

In conclusion: Listening with feminist ears is always a work in progress

Simple as it may sound, listening to and learning from lived experience is a complex and demanding process. Each person is unique and each context is different, so it is always a work-in-progress. Although many feminist researchers and activists have developed ethical guidelines and practical tools for listening, practice always reveals new dimensions. By inviting members to share their experiences of engaging with survivors and workers, and by presenting the varied set of practices contained in this issue, we hope to present a rich and nuanced picture.

Over the last few years, many international organisations and donors have emphasized the need to listen to survivors and to involve them in policy advocacy. Although this is certainly a welcome development, anything that becomes trendy and popular runs the risk of being over-simplified and tokenistic. If funding and fame are attached to the trend, it may even create undue pressure on trafficked people and anti-trafficking organisations. First, we need to acknowledge that not all trafficking survivors are keen to engage in anti-trafficking work. Some people just want to recover from traumatic experiences and get on with their lives. When donors insist on survivor-inclusion without considering the specific context and diversity among people, NGOs end up pushing survivors to join their

programmes.

Second, media hunger for and celebrity fascination with the "genuine victims of trafficking" have led some individuals to create fictional and gory accounts of the inhuman abuse they lived through. There are many examples of fake memoirs and journals in literature, and some have even received awards and accolades before they got exposed. Instead of blaming the people who told us their fake stories, we need to question the voyeuristic demand for sensational stories of abuse and trauma.

In the early stages of anti-trafficking work, survivors primarily played the role of educating activists, policy makers, and the general public. Organisers of programmes only had to make sure that the survivors did not feel retraumatised by telling their life stories again. They also had to take responsibility to conduct the events ethically and respectfully. In some contexts, the practice of listening to testimonies may still be very necessary. Some survivors may not want to do anything more. Some of them may not even want to share their life stories publicly. As our work with survivors deepens, we have to do more than just invite them to present their lived experiences and leave the rest to the activists and policy makers. We need to acknowledge that there are survivor leaders and workers with experiences of abuse who want to be part of the anti-trafficking, migrant rights, or labour rights activism. The survivors and the activists will need to work together to realise this goal. The activists will learn to share their power, privilege and space and the survivors will need to undertake specific education and training. These processes require long term planning, commitment and resources. But they are well worth the effort.

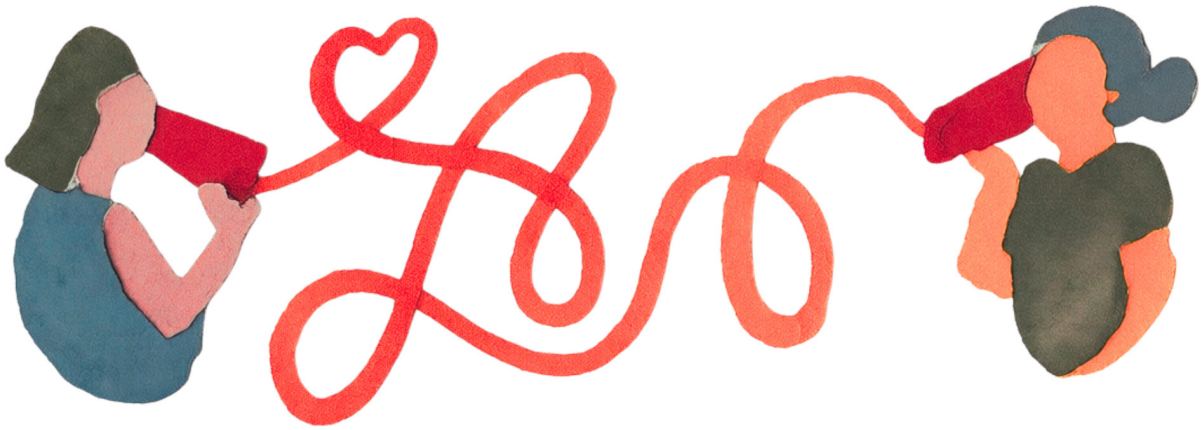
We are happy to note that several survivors are now part of anti-trafficking activism. Some workers who have experienced abuse and exploitation are now leaders of migrant rights and labour rights movements. Survivor leaders who want to engage in efforts to end trafficking and exploitation should be given opportunities to develop a grounded and critical understanding of the socio-political and economic paradigm that creates and maintains inequality, exploitation, and injustice. An individual's, in this case, a trafficked person's or an abused worker's, lived experiences are valuable, precious, and unique. But lived experiences by themselves do not enable us to analyse the factors which create those experiences. We are glad that some of our members have taken steps in that direction.
This conversation on lived experience expertise, centering voices of survivors and workers and ensuring their participation in the social justice movements, will continue within GAATW. We will periodically reflect on our feminist praxis of listening and taking collective

action, and also undertake some specific work examining and responding to the questions raised in this issue. We are in the process of creating a digital library of all our publications that focus on the lived experience of migrants and trafficked persons. Later this year we will bring out an anthology in which some of our members and partners have shared their organisational journeys towards participatory justice with migrants and trafficked persons. The April 2027 issue of Anti-Trafficking Review will also focus on 'Engaging Impacted Communities' and we particularly encourage contributions from service providers, advocates, and people with lived experience.

We are looking forward to a time when all of us in the social justice movements will be guided by the highest standard of accountability. When survivors and abused workers who join the movement are not patronised or dismissed, and when all of us learn to use our power with each other rather than over each other.

Chapter One

SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT AS AN EVERYDAY PRACTICE: HOW GAATW MEMBERS INCLUDE THE PERSPECTIVES OF IMPACTED COMMUNITIES INTO THEIR WORK



Borislav Gerasimov

Over the past ten or so years, anti-trafficking stakeholders have increasingly emphasised listening to survivors and other impacted groups, and involving them in policy and programme development. As a result, governments, NGOs, and international organisations formed survivor advisory councils, invited survivors to open anti-trafficking conferences, and published numerous manuals, guidelines, and toolkits on appropriate survivor engagement. In 2021, the United Nations chose "Victims' Voices Lead the Way" as the theme

of World Day against Trafficking in Persons, to highlight survivors' role in the fight against trafficking and urge UN Member States to "engage, listen, and learn from survivors".

This attention to survivors' needs and views is a welcome, and long overdue, development. But to some of us in the field, it has at times seemed performative of progressive or inclusive values, rather than a true change in approach. At the same time, organisations that consult survivors every day in different ways, but do not proclaim it loudly, have been overlooked or even accused of being not "survivor-informed".

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) has always valued experiential knowledge. We have facilitated the participation of survivors of trafficking and other groups impacted by anti-trafficking policies, such as migrants, sex workers, or domestic workers, in policy spaces since our founding in 1994. However, the Secretariat and our members had not systematically documented or promoted how we have done this. So, when we launched the "Meet Our Members" interviews, we decided to add the question "how do you incorporate the views and experiences of the people you work with into your work?"

The interviews highlight GAATW members' history, programmes, successes and challenges and offer fascinating insights into our Alliance. Here, I summarise the responses to this one question, on the basis of the 54 interviews we had published as of January 2026, which is just over half of all members.

A variety of practices

GAATW members employ diverse strategies to listen to the people they work with. These depend on each organisation's history, mission, structure, and programmes.

Several members **were (co-)founded** by individuals from the communities with which they work, thus incorporating lived experience and perspective into their very foundation. Some of these groups were self-organised while others' establishment was supported by existing organisations. All, however, were all driven by impacted communities' dissatisfaction with their living and working conditions and their desire to fight for their rights.

Others said they have constituents – survivors of trafficking, migrants, or workers from different industries – on their **staff or Board.** They contribute to programme develop-

ment, or create a more culturally sensitive environment for clients. As Anita Teekah from Safe Horizon ATP pointed out, "I want to make sure that our workers look like the clients we're serving". She explained that the social workers on her team are of different genders, migrant backgrounds, and sexual orientations because clients feel more comfortable disclosing their experiences to counsellors who are like them. Isabella Chen from LEFÖ – Information, Education and Support for Migrant Women in Austria made a similar point:

> *"In Europe, a lot of organisations are very white and may only work with migrant women when they need a translator. We have many colleagues from different backgrounds who often have experience of migration themselves".*

Some members have **nurtured the self-organisation** of their constituencies into separate entities. Platform for Labour Action (PLA) in Uganda, with support from GAATW, set up the Domestic Workers' Association in Uganda. As a result, according to Hellen Amagoro, *"the Ministry now doesn't call PLA to consult on issues affecting domestic workers – they engage domestic workers directly".* In Nepal, WOREC facilitated the formation of Shakti Samuha (an organisation of/for survivors of trafficking) and WOFOWON (of entertainment workers). In Singapore, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) has three affiliate worker groups: two for domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines respectively, and one for South Asian men. They are in constant contact with TWC2, sharing their needs and priorities. However, Alex Au explained that the groups can't become independent because *"the registration requirements are onerous. The only way they can operate is if it's under the umbrella of an organisation run by Singaporeans, like TWC2".*

Many members **conduct research** into their constituents' views and concerns and incorporate their findings into their prevention, assistance, and policy advocacy work. Capital Humano Social (CHS) Alternativo from Peru and Fundación Renacer from Colombia recalled a 2013 research project, through which they interviewed survivors who had used their services and asked them for their feedback on improving the assistance they received. Based on research findings, SWAN in Canada began organising English language classes for migrant sex workers, and Ban Ying in Germany began organising job coaching sessions. In Serbia, ASTRA-Anti-Trafficking Action involved survivors in preparing a report on human trafficking and, in Moldova, La Strada asked survivors their opinions of the National Anti-Trafficking Strategy. In the UK, Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) always involves community members as researchers. As Lucila Granada explained,

> *"Every stage of this process is to make sure that we ask the right questions and use the right methods to reach people. We also involve the workers in understanding the findings and analysing the findings within the wider context of their experiences as well".*

Other members **seek programme feedback through community events and spaces.** As Chandran Riymonds from Jan Vikas Samiti in India elaborated,

> *"by engaging with the women, listening to their life stories, understanding their struggles, and observing the situations around them, we gain insights that help us develop new approaches and strategies".*

As an example, he shared how JVS asked women about their experiences with microfinancing, including taking loans, use of funds, and repayments. Their stories led JVS to form microfinancing cooperatives where the women themselves are the members and shareholders and the profits stay in the community. In Lebanon, ARM operates a Migrant Community Center where migrants meet, make friends, share resources, learn languages, and become leaders of change. Others organise community events that are primarily social but also provide space for sharing challenges and receiving help.

Many members **support survivors to share their stories** as case studies for advocacy, training materials, and prevention campaigns. For example, in Mexico, Brigada Callejera publishes comic books to raise awareness of trafficking and sex workers' rights based on real-life stories of the women they work with. Others facilitate constituents expressing their voices directly. Mist in France produces a podcast, where members of the association discuss their daily lives both to reach other (potential) victims of trafficking, and to sensitise government institutions and civil society. In Nepal, WOFOWON runs a campaign where entertainment workers record and publish folk songs to improve community perceptions of their work.

Direct service provision, such as counselling, hotline support, shelter assistance, and legal aid is also an avenue for learning about constituents' needs, which can then be incorporated into future service provision and advocacy. As Lelia Hunziker from FIZ – Advocacy and Support for Migrant Women and Victims of Trafficking in Switzerland said, *"we bridge our counselling and advocacy work, where our advocacy work finds solutions to the problems and structural hurdles we identify in our daily counselling".* Similarly, Mariah Grant

from the Sex Workers Project in the USA shared that she regularly speaks with the legal team to discuss themes in clients' experiences, which she then connects to her policy advocacy work. As a result, they joined a campaign to dismantle the VICE unit of the New York City Police Department after hearing from multiple clients, especially trans Latinas, that the unit is violent and discriminatory.

Challenges

The interviews also pointed to risks and challenges when involving impacted communities in NGO work, especially policy advocacy. Farah Salka from ARM in Lebanon stressed that putting migrant workers at the forefront of efforts to abolish the kafala system places them at risk of detention and deportation. Alex Au from TWC2 noted that the real risks of criminalisation and deportation of non-nationals are absent from the international discourse on survivor engagement:

> *"the idea that the migrant worker should be at the forefront of campaigns is one of those framed from a western context where the migrant can speak up. But in places like Singapore, which are very quick to deport, encouraging migrants to speak up is self-defeating. It happened recently when someone was deported for criticising the Covid policy for migrants".*

We have heard similar concerns from GAATW members in Germany, the UK, Italy, and Canada, suggesting that even in a "western context", calling for non-national survivors to speak out on policy issues can end up as empty rhetoric, or worse.

Others cautioned that survivor participation in policy development is often still only a token effort toward inclusion. They noted instances where survivors of trafficking are invited to high-profile events to share their story of being trafficked, but are then excluded from the substantive policy discussions. They also noted that survivors have experience not only with trafficking, but also with many other issues that affect their lives, including immigration policy, racism, drug policy, healthcare, social welfare, and anti-trafficking responses, but they are rarely asked to comment on these issues. This ignores the fact that, as persons with lived experience, survivors have insights that are extremely valuable to the policy-making process. As Megan Mattimoe from Advocating Opportunity said,

"survivors have degrees and years of professional experience, but nobody talks about that; they only refer to them as survivors".

A related consideration when encouraging the participation of impacted communities is whether the input will actually be heard, and whether there are personal costs. As Luz Stella Cárdenas from Fundación Renacer said:

> *"we still have challenges for the State to allow the active participation of victims in a respectful manner. Exposing them to tell a painful story just to make other people feel sorry doesn't contribute anything, it only revictimises them".*

Thus it is important to manage expectations about what participation and contribution could achieve.

Furthermore, lived experience alone may not be enough for survivors to analyse the larger sociopolitical and economic issues that led to their trafficking experience. Both Meera Raghavendra from Women's Initiatives and Purabi Paul from Sramajeevi Mahila Samity in India emphasised that they mentor and build leadership among the women they work with.

Conclusion

The interviews with GAATW members reveal that engaging with survivors of trafficking and other impacted communities does not have to be a project, or some other extraordinary activity. Our members have been engaging survivors in a multitude of ways over many years because it makes sense from both a philosophical and practical point of view. It is not a new idea of the moment – for them, survivor engagement is an ordinary, quiet activity, integrated into their daily work, that must be done with care and intention.

Part One

Personal journeys of survivor-leadership

Chapter Two

THE JOURNEY FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR TO SURVIVOR-LEADER

A conversation with Sanja Maya Tamang (Shanti Lama) and Swostika Danuwar

In Nepal, survivors of trafficking lead anti-trafficking organisations and engage directly in policy discussions. Notably, several of these leaders came from the same group of 128 women and girls rescued from Mumbai, India, in 1996 and returned to Nepal.

In a conversation with GAATW on December 2, 2026, two leaders of the movement shared their journeys to becoming a 'survivor-leader'. Their experiences reveal both pain

and complexity, as well as resilience and a determination to be heard.

Shanti Lama, the Executive Director of the Shanti Foundation, describes her lived experience of being a trafficking survivor and person living with HIV Aids. Swostika Danuwar is the daughter of the late Sunita Danuwar, a survivor-leader who co-founded Shakti Samuha and later, in 2019, the Sunita Foundation. After Sunita passed away in 2024, Swostika took over as Executive Director of the foundation.

Shanti

I was trafficked to India and forced to provide sexual services at the age of twelve. I spent four years of my life in the Red Light District of Kamathipura, Mumbai. Then, in 1996, when I was around fifteen years old, the Maharashtra Government launched a rescue campaign and, in less than two hours, I was picked up by the Mumbai Police. They rescued around five hundred of us, both women and children, from many countries.

All of us were taken to a remand centre and I can't tell you how difficult it was in that place. They treated us like animals. It was so crowded that we had nowhere to sleep and people were fighting. We didn't have enough food. But they told us we had HIV and we were going to die, so we should be silent and not complain. I had many questions when I heard that but no place to ask them. I felt so small and alone there, and thought I would never make it back to Nepal. But at the same time, something began forming in my mind that, if I made it home, I wanted to do something with my life.

Eventually, despite resistance from the Nepali Government, some anti-trafficking organisations managed to arrange our return to Nepal and it was a big story when we came back. Journalists were waiting at the airport and followed our car. Then, I was officially "reintegrated" to my village, but I wasn't welcome there. Everyone in my family rejected me because they thought I was a criminal and that I was sick. So I left again, this time for Kathmandu, and, finally, one good thing happened to me: an anti-trafficking organisation found me a job in a hotel. And that was my first turning point. When I was able to support myself financially, I began to change from a victim to a survivor.

Unfortunately, when the hotel changed ownership the new owner forced me to leave after finding out about my HIV status. Around that time I found some of the women I had met in the remand centre in India who had started an organisation, and they took me in.

It was a beautiful place where I got to know other survivors and I learned about my rights. But it was still not an easy time because not everyone accepted me. Some women made fun of me and told me I couldn't do anything because I was sick. They mocked me because I also had a five-year old daughter by then, and they saw I couldn't support her easily. I felt very hurt in the beginning.

I also had to advocate for myself because I needed medicine. I was one of the first 25 people in Nepal to receive anti-retroviral therapy (ART) starting in 2003. Sadly, twelve of those people have now passed away. I had to stand up and advocate again when the medicine stopped working around 2012. I started to get sick, and needed more expensive treatments from India, which at first the Nepali Government did not want to pay for. It was through convincing the government to pay for these treatments that I first began to become a survivor-leader.

Then in 2015 an earthquake struck Nepal and I lost my home. Sleeping outside I became very sick with a cold and fever. My medication ran out because the roads to India were blocked. I truly thought I would die and began making plans for my daughter. But eventually I was given a tent, and another international NGO, called Direct Relief, found me and found medicine for me. I started to get better, and I began to think, 'If I survive, I have to do more'.

So when I did survive, it was like I was reborn. I and a group of other women survivors with HIV started providing emergency medical relief after the earthquake. In 2016 we started the Shanti Foundation. Our aim was to empower victims of trafficking and to provide free HIV/AIDS testing and treatment to women and children.

It was very hard at first. We had a lot to learn, including how to write emails, how to write proposals and reports, and how to speak in English. To bring the survivor movement to a national level and amplify the voices of survivors across the country in solidarity, we also founded the National Federation of Human Trafficking Survivors in 2025, which I currently lead as Chairperson. Today, I am proud to say we have achieved a lot.

I will say it again today and I will say it again tomorrow. Other girls do not need to suffer the pain that we have suffered. Today I am working at Shanti Foundation and I am bringing young people with me because they are the leaders of tomorrow. I did not have support

like that. It was very difficult for me to become a survivor-leader. So I am proud of myself and feel I am contributing to my society now.

Swostika

I realised my mother was a trafficking survivor when I was around twelve or thirteen years old. Before that, I only knew that she was hardly ever at home with us because she was out working as an activist in the field. I used to cry a lot because I felt that her being away from home meant she didn't love me. But then, she explained that she was a trafficking survivor, and she said to me, "I'm not only your mother, I'm a mother to hundreds of girls out there. They are looking for me, so I need to support them."

That's the moment I realised that my mother was a superhero. She was doing a lot for the community. I didn't understand the meaning of "trafficking" exactly, but I knew it was wrong. I decided I wanted to support my mother in this journey of uplifting and empowering survivors. I started becoming involved in my mother's anti-trafficking work and participated in activities at Shakti Samuha, where she was the director. When she formed Sunita Foundation in 2019, I was involved from the very beginning.

Being a survivor also affected how my mother raised me and my upbringing was different from other children whose parents have not suffered that kind of pain. She knew the risks that our society holds for its daughters so she was quite possessive of me. You could say my home was restrictive, but I would prefer to call it protective, maybe over-protective, so that I would not have to face the kinds of struggles that she had faced.

I am proud to share that I am an advocate now- I studied law because my mother always wanted that for me. She believed that her children should become lawyers so that they can advocate for the rights of survivors. When survivors stand stronger, when they are united, and when their children are empowered, there can be real change in society.
It was difficult at first for society to accept my mother, a survivor of trafficking, as a leader. They could see her as a victim who had become a survivor, but not as a leader. She dreamed of survivors joining the government, from the national parliament down to the local administrations, so that survivors' voices would be represented by survivors themselves, not only by others.

And now I'm in the foundation, and I am trying to fulfill her dream. But the pain of losing her is still within me. Sometimes it's difficult, but I'm trying to move forward and I'm trying to create the society that she had always dreamed about. She was a ray of light for many, including hundreds of women who have shared with me how she supported them during their most difficult times. That is what is driving me to continue this work.

Chapter Three

MY JOURNEY WITH SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING

Renu Adhikari

Renu Adhikari is the founder of the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), a non-governmental organisation established in Kathmandu in 1991, which works to prevent violence against women, its causes and consequences, and to ensure the economic, social and cultural well-being of women.

As Renu shares in her piece, WOREC began as an organisation to support survivors of trafficking. Through Renu's early work listening to survivors, WOREC developed its approach

based on empowerment and leadership. In this piece, Renu shares how she came to start WOREC, and came to work closely with survivors of trafficking who now run their own organisations.

WOREC's beginnings

In 1990, I met a Nepali girl who had been trafficked into prostitution in India at the age of eleven, and her story opened my eyes to the situation for women and girls whom society at the time considered "fallen". She was at a police station in the small town of Batar, Trishuli, in Central Nepal and was from a marginalised community in that area. She had been born to a disabled mother and her uncle, her own family, had forced her into the sex trade, an area of work she had wanted to neither enter nor remain.

This conversation was my first exposure to the concept of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and was the impetus for me to establish WOREC and to fight against the trafficking of women and girls from Nepal.

I began by learning as much as I could. I travelled to remote parts of the country and met with families whose daughters were in Mumbai working, they believed, as domestic workers. I also travelled to Mumbai and met Nepali girls, some as young as ten, working in the sex industry. I listened to their horrific stories.

At the same time, WOREC was approached by several young women who had returned from Mumbai HIV positive. Almost all had gone back to their home communities after being "rescued" by police or expelled from their brothels due to their HIV status, but their families had rejected them. They were severely traumatised, not only by their experiences in India, but by the stigma they experienced at home.

These young women stayed at our new shelter home and at first we were convinced we needed a rehabilitation programme to "heal" them. However, after listening to their stories and witnessing the depths of their trauma, I realised that the rehabilitation model, based on a top-down welfare perspective, would not meet the needs of these women. Instead, we began to focus on building trust. They had been betrayed by their own people and did not trust anyone. Gaining their trust was a challenge and required time, as well as compassion and empathy.

The arrival of 14 women from Mumbai

My learnings from this early period served as a solid base when a large group of trafficking survivors returned from Mumbai in 1996. The police in Mumbai had "rescued" 128 women and girls who spoke Nepali and were holding them in a remand center in India. However, as none of the rescuees had proof of citizenship, the Government of Nepal was reluctant to accept they were Nepalis or facilitate their return. It was civil society who took the initiative and brought them back. A group of seven organisations arranged their return and agreed to house the returnees. WOREC agreed to take fourteen of this first group of returnees. It turned out a number of this group had strong leadership capabilities.

The arrival of these young women had been reported in the media, and when we collected them from the airport, all loaded into taxis, journalists started to follow us and take pictures. We argued forcefully against taking the women's pictures without their permission. When they ignored us, I picked up some stones and threw them at the journalists to keep them back. I did not hurt anyone, but this action began to build the survivors' trust in me. Settling into life in the shelter

The first weeks were challenging for all of us. The WOREC shelter at that time took up the first two floors of our building, with the offices on the upper floors. Although we did not have a large shelter, we were intent on housing the survivors in a way they felt neither isolated nor locked up. Working in the same building in which the survivors were living gave me the opportunity to spend time with each and observe their emotional and physical changes. It is no exaggeration to say that their emotional reactions changed every hour, day and month.

Meanwhile, journalists continued to hound us to request meetings with the survivors and they published highly stigmatising stories that blamed the supporting organisations for assisting them. My refusing media access to the survivors made journalists particularly unhappy and they targeted me personally, accusing me of running a brothel.

We also had challenges with our neighbours. Our shelter home and office building was in a residential area and the media reports made our neighbors aware of the returnees in our shelter. During those days HIV/AIDS was a very dangerous term for "clean and moral" people, and they were furious.

The survivors themselves did not make this situation easier. The young women in our shelters were used to dressing up in a certain way in the evenings when the offices closed. They put on full faces of make up and stood out on the balcony catching the attention of young men passing by. WOREC staff members started to feel the community's disapproval and became very unhappy with me.

All these demands took a heavy toll on my family life, as I was away from home all of the time. Even with the support of trusted staff staying in the shelter overnight, I spent more than 20 hours a day in the office.

Slowly with our support however, the survivors' behaviours and expressions began to change. With the commitment I demonstrated by protecting them from the media and the long hours spent with them at the shelter like members of my own family, they began to relax and trust us.

Confronting HIV Aids

As I already mentioned, HIV/AIDS was a terrifying word in those days. The Ministry of Health had an HIV/AIDS Control Center and they insisted that the survivors from Mumbai be tested. I was able to negotiate that we would arrange for the testing ourselves, after the group had received counselling, and I would report the numbers to the government. The survivors themselves helped us with this by agreeing to visit various hospitals and clinics for the tests.

We discovered that a number of the survivors were HIV positive. This made us nervous, both because of the discrimination towards HIV positive people in those days, and because we were unsure we could provide the care that HIV positive women and girls needed.

Based on these concerns, we decided to hold a 10-day health training for all the survivors in our shelter and several from other shelters, not separating them based on their status. We wanted everyone to understand that HIV is not transmitted by living together or using the same toilet or the utensils. We taught them how to take care of their health, infection prevention, and clear information on HIV transmission. We emphasised that although they were staying with WOREC at the moment, at some point they would be leaving and

would need to be able to care for and advocate for themselves. I was so happy to see the relaxed faces of all of the trainees at the end of the training.

The formation of Shakti Samuha

Our self-care training was so positive and everyone was feeling so empowered, that, on the last day, the participants agreed to form an organisation. Many were skeptical that they could manage this, but with our commitment to help them, they decided to move forward. I suggested the name Shakti Samuha (Power Group) and they liked this suggestion. We formed Shakti Samuha within WOREC.

The original members of Shakti Samuha were the women from our shelter, who comprised the trafficking survivors from Mumbai, other survivors brought to us by police, and several others. We found seed money for Shakti Samuha's first programme to educate young women in carpet factories about the risks of trafficking. Listening to survivors, we had realised that carpet factories were a common place for girls to be recruited and trafficked to India. Leading and implementing this programme, with WOREC's support, was empowering for the Shakti Samuha members.

At first, funds for Shakti Samuha had to come through WOREC's accounts, but eventually we registered Shakti Samuha as its own organisation so the members could manage the finances and run their own projects. It was difficult to do this under Nepali law, because many of the women did not have the required citizenship documents. But we found a way, and Shakti Samuha was formally registered and started functioning from the WOREC offices.

By this time, around six years had passed since the girls had arrived from Mumbai. Some new members had joined, and some had left, but a group of emerging strong leaders had worked with WOREC on various programmes, and developed the skills to run an organisation. I started to think about how we could create a safe platform for them to become independent. By coincidence, we were also looking at finding an office for the national network organisation, Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and Children in Nepal (AATWIN), which I had helped to create in 1997. So we decided to hire a place for AATWIN that could also house Shakti Samuha.

After finding the location, the Shakti Samuha leaders and I began looking for funding. I

remember the days of standing together waiting for the donors to call us. Finally a few donors agreed to provide support, but this created its own problems as each had their favourites within Shakti Samuha and tried to divide the organisation. I had to be constantly vigilant and act as a gatekeeper to ensure the organisation stayed together.

Moving towards independent lives

Although Shakti Samuha as an organisation moved out of WOREC, the young women who were leading it still stayed in our shelter. Unlike other organisations who sent survivors back to their home villages under police escort after a few months, we had never been in a hurry to send them back and we were not comfortable taking help from the police. I believed that most survivors were too traumatised to return for a long time, and their communities were not ready to receive them. Some survivors were still minors, and I worried that if they went home too soon, they would fall into another trap of violence and abuse. Instead, we had invited other young women at risk of trafficking to also stay in the shelter, which helped the survivors feel less isolated and to reintegrate into society. During their time with us, both survivors of trafficking and those from the community were offered opportunities to build skills, continue their education, or take up paid internships at WOREC. We also arranged a six month health training for the WOREC residents and essential life skills such as cooking, cleaning, marketing, and even supporting others.

However, I knew that eventually they would have to move out. A year after Shakti Samuha moved to the AATWIN Offices, a few of the survivors were in serious relationships and I took this as a turning point for the group to leave the shelter home and start living independently. Many people did not like this decision. The survivors and even my board were very critical. I was firm in my decision because I was convinced that as long as they lived at WOREC they would not feel independent or empowered.

In short it took more than seven years to support these young women, to make them independent and work on their own behalf. I always played the role of incubator, facilitating their growth. Throughout, I had to be flexible, to adjust to their needs, and make them feel they are not alone. When some of the women married, I stepped in, almost as the mother of the bride, to organise the ceremony and document the celebrations. I told them I would protect them if things did not work out as planned.

Conclusion

Working over many years with these young women was both a difficult and rewarding journey. I helped them to start their own organisation and was both an incubator and a mentor. I remained in a formal advisory role for a long time, and still act as an informal advisor. Shakti Samuha's leadership also joined WOREC's board. We became co-workers, co-organisers and co-campaigners against trafficking.

Now Shakti Samuha is a large, independent organisation. It was painful at first to see the original group fragment, but I am proud that several new organisations have come into existence. Together, they are supporting thousands of women to break the chain of trafficking and have become powerful stakeholders in the government anti-trafficking committee. It took a long time and much energy for survivors of trafficking to become visible within government, society and within the human rights movement. Now they are everywhere and are essential in making visible and responding to the causes and consequences of trafficking.

Chapter Four

A LONG JOURNEY STARTS WITH SMALL STEPS - THIS IS MY JOURNEY

Romlay Rosidah (Rosi)

Romlay Rosidah (Rosi) is the director of the Assosiasi Buruh Migran Indonesia (Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong) or ATKI Hong Kong. ATKI was formed in 2000 as a mass movement of progressive Indonesian migrant workers based in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a major destination for Indonesian migrant workers, with most working in housekeeping roles.

ATKI's main objective is to assert and defend the rights and welfare of Indonesian migrant

workers and it has challenged anti-migrant policies of both the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments. ATKI members also provide on-site welfare assistance, mobile counselling, education on workers' legal entitlements, and social activities for workers. Rosi shares her own journey.

In this article, Rosi shares how she became an activist and the challenges today for migrant domestic workers seeking to organise and share experiences in Hong Kong.

My experiences as a migrant worker in Hong Kong

My name is Romlay Rosidah, but people call me Rosi. I have been an Indonesian migrant worker in Hong Kong since 2000. I am married and have a 13 year old son. My husband has also been a migrant worker, but in Malaysia.

I first decided to seek work overseas to pay my university fees. At the time I was in my fifth semester of university but my parents had seven children and the earnings from their farm were not enough to pay for everyone's schooling. So I decided to pause my studies to go and work in Hong Kong, hoping to earn enough to soon start studying again.

But the first time I went abroad, I was underpaid by almost half of what was promised, and all of my wages went to my agent for the first four months. After eight months my employer ended my contract without any reason and I was sent home. My employer did not pay me any of the entitlements under my contract, however, such as leave or termination payments, and I knew absolutely nothing about the law or labour regulations of Hong Kong at that time.

So I felt I had no choice but to travel back to Hong Kong again the next year. Yet again I was underpaid and my contract was terminated early without payment of my entitlements. This time my employer also refused to pay for my flight home as required, so I was left stranded in Hong Kong.

Fortunately, I found my way to the Mission For Migrant Workers (MFMW) and they supported me to report my case to the Department of Labour. The employer and agent lied repeatedly through the claims process, and refused to pay me, so the case took a long time. Neither the Indonesian consulate nor the government of Hong Kong provided me with any assistance during this time, either to file my case or to find a place to live. More

than that, Hong Kong law prohibited me from working, so I had to struggle alone to survive.

Becoming an activist and a leader

While my case was ongoing, I was able to stay at the Bethune House shelter. It was here that I first met the Indonesian Migrant Worker Association (Assosiasi Buruh Migran Indonesia, ATKI) Hong Kong. I became an ATKI member and began actively learning about the labour law in Hong Kong and understanding the contents of migrant worker contracts, including the obligations of employers toward their domestic workers.

ATKI empowered me to become an independent migrant woman, progressive, and capable of handling any situation or condition I encountered. At ATKI I learned a lot about how to protect myself from oppression and injustice, how to care for fellow migrants, and to turn for help when facing migrant-related problems in Hong Kong.

In 2005, ATKI asked me to help organise muslim women migrants, and we formed the Association of Indonesian Muslim Migrants in Hong Kong (Gabungan Migran Muslim Indonesia di Hong Kong, GAMMI), which still exists today. I have been elected leader of GAMMI almost every year since then, and I became the head of ATKI Hong Kong in 2023. The narrowing space for migrant worker activism in Hong Kong

Many people think Hong Kong is a better place to work than other Asian countries because housekeepers are included within the Hong Kong Labour Law. It is true that when I first arrived, we were allowed days off, to socialise in public places, and speak openly about our experience. At the same time, domestic work is also the lowest-paid sector in Hong Kong, despite rising prices, and we are prohibited from changing employers.

In recent years, since the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen conditions further deteriorate. Expenses rose but wages did not. Violations against workers are increasingly tolerated. The government also used the crisis to justify limiting the few rights we held. Our rights to gather and express our opinions through public protest have been severely limited. Only registered organisations can organise protests, but an office is required for registration and most grassroots organisations cannot afford the rent. This has become one of the biggest obstacles to us meeting and sharing our experiences with each other and with the public in Hong Kong.

However, Indonesian migrant domestic workers are not giving up just like that. When COVID happened and the government turned away from us, migrant worker organisations took the initiative to help and care for each other and assist those in need. After COVID, organisations like ATKI and GAMMI stayed committed to being on the front lines and educating migrant workers.

This period has also offered us new opportunities. For example, instead of meeting in public we now go to migrant workers' places of work. We rely more on social media to share experiences with each other, and also share our views with the public.

Working with other organisations and building solidarity with other migrants and with locals, we want to be a light in the midst of the current darkness. We want people to know that there are still people who care and who are willing to sacrifice themselves to fight for the welfare of others.

My journey

I believe that the challenges I faced were truly a catalyst for me to study legal rights and mechanisms for justice. Through ATKI and my involvement in the movement for migrant workers' rights, I have found not only solutions to my own problems, but also the capacity to help others face their own situations.

Every experience that at first feels like an injustice can become a seed for personal growth and social contribution. Now, as a community leader, I help to create space for many voices to be heard and for solutions to be found together. My journey proves that from pain can be born motivation to create social change.

Chapter Five

FROM SURVIVAL TO SOLIDARITY: HOW LIVED EXPERIENCE SHAPED MY WORK AS A SEXUALITY EDUCATOR

Blackee

GPI is a feminist, youth development, nonprofit organisation established in Benin City, Nigeria, in 1993. It now has activities across five states of Nigeria, as well as a national liaison office in Abuja. GPI seeks to empower girls, especially those between the ages of 10-18 years, and to promote their sexual reproductive health, rights and responsibilities, through educational programmes, counselling, referral services and social action. Blackee has been a sexuality educator with GPI since 2015. In this piece, she shares her journey

from being a survivor of intimate partner violence, to becoming a teacher and mentor for girls and young women as they learn to find their own voices. Her lived experience is now integral to her professional role.

By Blackee

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is often spoken about in statistics, policies, and programmes. But for many women, it is lived quietly—behind closed doors, under cultural expectations of endurance, silence, and shame. My own experience of surviving IPV in marriage did not end when I left. Instead, it became the foundation of how I now work with adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) as a sexuality educator and GBV counsellor.

Breaking silence, reclaiming voice

I consented to share my story publicly because silence nearly cost me my life. In my marriage, abuse was emotional, physical, sexual, and economic. It was sustained not only by my partner's violence, but also by cultural and religious narratives that told me to endure—because I was the eldest daughter, because bride price had been paid, because marriage was meant to last at all costs.

For a long time, I internalised shame and fear. Speaking out felt like failure. Leaving felt like betrayal of family, culture, and faith. But eventually, survival demanded honesty. Rejecting silence became my first act of healing.

That same rejection of silence now defines my work.

From lived experience to professional practice

I became a sexuality educator through Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) in 2015, following years of training, mentorship, and field experience across Nigeria. This journey coincided with my own recovery. I do not separate my lived experience from my professional role; instead, I use it responsibly, ethically, and intentionally.

Being comfortable linking my personal story to my work has allowed me to connect deeply with girls and young women. They do not just hear information from me—they see

someone who understands power, coercion, fear, and survival from the inside. This survivor knowledge strengthens trust and creates safer spaces for learning and disclosure.
Teaching consent, power, and healthy relationships differently

My marriage reshaped how I understand consent and power. I learnt firsthand how marriage can be used to erase women's voices—how decisions are made without consent, how authority is justified by gender and culture, and how love is used to excuse harm. Because of this, I now teach AGYW that:

Love does not require suffering
Respect must be mutual, not enforced
Marriage is not automatically safe or healthy
Consent matters at every stage of a relationship

I encourage girls not to be blinded by love, but to pay attention to early warning signs, boundaries, and how power is exercised. Education, for me, is prevention.

Prioritising mental health and safety

One of the strongest shifts in my teaching is my emphasis on mental health and safety. During my marriage, the psychological impact of abuse was devastating—fear, emotional instability, dissociation, and loss of self. These experiences now inform how urgently I speak to girls about emotional well-being.

I tell them plainly: life does not have a Part II. Safety comes first. Endurance is not a virtue when violence is present. If there is life, there is hope—but only if you stay alive.

This message challenges deeply rooted cultural ideas that prioritise reputation over survival, especially for girls and women.

Trauma-informed listening and safeguarding

When girls share difficult experiences with me, I listen differently because I know what it feels like not to be heard. I listen actively, thank them for trusting me, and act quickly where support is needed. Disclosure is never treated lightly.

At the same time, my journey has taught me the importance of protecting myself emotionally. Through training and organisational support, I have learnt emotional regulation, boundaries, and self-care—essential tools for survivor-educators working in GBV spaces.
Navigating stigma and cultural resistance

Even as a counsellor, I face judgment. Some question how I can counsel others when I left my marriage. This mirrors the same cultural logic that once pressured me to stay. I no longer allow this to define me.

My authority does not come from marital status; it comes from competence, training, lived experience, and impact. In my work, I directly challenge harmful cultural and religious practices—such as early marriage and control of girls' bodies—while encouraging AGYW to seek help from NGOs, networks, and institutions.

Turning pain into purpose

One of the most powerful moments in my work was supporting a woman who returned to an abusive home after intervention and was beaten again. That experience confirmed what survivors often know: apologies do not always mean change. With counselling and support, she chose safety, economic independence, and life over societal approval.

This is why I believe information is life-saving. What girls do not know can harm them. Silence protects abusers, not families.

A message to girls and young women

My message is simple: never keep quiet. Seek information. Ask questions. Learn your rights. Speak out. Study the background of anyone you plan to marry. Love should never cost you your life.

Turning my pain into purpose has reshaped who I am. Today, people look to me for guidance on adolescent and marital issues—not because I am perfect, but because I survived, learnt, and chose to help others do the same.

Survivor voices matter. When we speak, we save lives.

Chapter Six

"NO PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT"
OPEN LETTER ABOUT LIVED-EXPERIENCE AT MIST

MIST

MIST (Mission for Intervention and Awareness Against Human Trafficking) is an association of people with lived experience of human trafficking who are now engaged in collective peer-support work ("members"). MIST was formed in Paris in 2020, and has activities across France. Half of MIST's Executive Board are survivors of trafficking. This open letter was written by four women members of MIST at a writing workshop, and was then reviewed by an editorial committee comprising two other MIST members. MIST writing workshops are spaces for sharing and expression, with no obligation to publish the texts

produced, but in this case the participants were writing for this issue of Reframing Narratives. The writers explained that "the letter is intended for readers interested in trafficking, or who think they already know what trafficking is". It shares the many obstacles that survivors of trafficking face when sharing their experiences, and the power of peer support for rebuilding trust and the confidence to speak out.

After filing the complaint, they ordered an examination at the Medico-Legal Unit. The next day, a police car dropped me at the hospital. I walked alone through endless white corridors toward the basement. Every step was painful after the beating I had received the day before. It felt like descending into a morgue, as if everything was ending: my life in the network, my illusions, maybe even myself. Nothing resembled care. Everything felt like abandonment. The forensic doctor examined each injury silently: fifty-four bruises across my body. A bite on my arm so deep it left the limb nearly paralysed; the skin torn, blood rising, bruises spreading in black, purple, blue, and yellow. She observed and marked everything on a diagram; mechanical, detached. Not a word, not a sign of recognition. I was examined like an object to be catalogued.

And then, at the end, came the question meant to sound humane: "How are you feeling psychologically?" I answered: "I feel wonderfully well. It's all over. I feel alive again. As if everything is already forgotten." I did not want to appear weak. I refused to be a victim. I believed that minimising my suffering would protect me. And so, beneath the record of fifty-four bruises, the report concluded: "No psychological impact."

This sentence captures the paradox many victims live with: people see only what they want to see, even professionals.

Silence keeps everything inside

Many stay silent because they fear being judged or shamed. Sometimes speaking up can be painful or even damaging. Sometimes you feel ashamed to talk to a friend about your situation, or you feel you have no one. Seeking help from outside the cage constructed around us can be very difficult because some people or institutions do not have the right experience to support a victim. Some might not believe you; some might say you are lying.

The first time I asked for help from a so-called professional, I was met with judgement and prejudice. I was asked to prove that my story was real and valid. I felt destroyed and

disgusted. It is very difficult to describe to a stranger the horrible things you went through in your personal life. It is hard to ask for help when you were raised to ask for nothing, to keep everything to yourself, pretending you are fine.

Traffickers create another reality where you do not know you are a victim, that you are being trafficked, that this is about money and you are a product. They tell you that you have no value, just to break you and make you believe you have no future. They build a prison around you and convince you they are your saviours, the only people who truly love you. Their aim is to isolate you so you remain alone.

When you have suffered years of abuse, your trust is broken. You assume anything is dangerous, especially another's intentions. But silence only creates more pain and frustration. Silence does not stop the nightmares, the flashbacks, or the emotional torture.

Words are not enough

The only way out is to speak up and be heard. You must stay courageous and find strength to fight for yourself. You have the right to fight for your freedom and your peace of mind, so do not be ashamed.

You must start from square one. Everyone expects you to be fine in a few weeks or months but for us, survivors, this is when the real challenges begin and the suffering resurfaces. You may have sleepless nights, constant anxiety, the feeling of being watched. You start forgetting things, yet never forget your past. Eventually, it may be diagnosed as PTSD. Then everyone expects you to see a psychiatrist or psychologist, and medication will likely follow. I am not saying this to scare you, but to let you know that life after trafficking is not as simple or peaceful as others imagine.

Before entering the corridor of reconstruction, one must first walk the path of acceptance. This path—so difficult to travel and so heavy to bear—is the only way to prove to the so-called "competent" authorities that we are victims. Words are not enough. We go from one appointment to another to prove just how much the violence inflicted upon our lives has devastated us.

This is part of the process, and even if we do not want it, we accept it. The real problem arises when we have to lay ourselves bare before strangers who, in all likelihood,

have never experienced anything similar. Doctors, police officers, lawyers; although they may—in their own way, show empathy—in our eyes it often looks like pity.

Those who are supposed to help us are often the first to not pass on information in a way that makes us feel safe enough to speak. How can one confide in someone who is unable to understand the root of the problem because they have never lived it? Perhaps it is time to ask whether these actors should be better trained or supervised in their communication with victims of any type of violence.

Violence does not disappear because a victim stands upright or smiles. Because I "looked good," I must be fine, as if psychological suffering left no trace, as if trauma could hide behind a smile, neat clothing, or degrees. Yet invisible wounds are the ones people most often refuse to see, even those whose mission is to protect us. As long as we confuse appearance with reality, thousands will remain invisible. Victims have no single face. Nothing about our appearance, background, or social standing protects us from control and violence. Society still struggles to accept that trafficking can happen to absolutely anyone.

The authorities, society in general, are not "ready" to accept the fact that behind these women may be a mother who left her children to offer them a more dignified life; or a student who dreamed of continuing her studies in another country; or a young woman who simply wanted to help loved ones in difficulty. All of these paths make our stories exist.

Being a victim of human trafficking leaves irreparable scars, but that does not prevent us from starting over and writing a new story. Instead of labelling us as weak, consider us survivors. We lived with the fear of judgment and of never regaining a "normal" life, but over time, these fears fade, and we learn to envision life differently.

We bring together our experiences, our knowledge, our hearts, and our questions

That is where a peer-education association like MIST plays a role. Outside you might be stigmatised, labelled, judged, and discriminated against. Peer educators, despite fighting their own battles, will show you compassion and give you hope to keep going. They will show you love and try to help you: exactly what is needed when you are afraid and vulnerable.

At MIST, we find a safe place to share our stories without being doubted or treated as if our lives are an invented fantasy. When you receive help from someone who has gone through the same hell as you, they can understand quickly and offer real support. Other survivors, with their own journeys, help us find words we don't have ourselves. There are thousands of victims; nobody is alone in this.

Today we have decided to combine our voices because together we feel they are stronger. There are thousands of victims out there. We are not alone, and when one voice becomes several, power emerges, information strengthens. From our different perspectives and angles, we bring together our experiences, our knowledge, our hearts, and our questions.

We hope our writing helps you understand that anyone can be a victim, that trafficking does not discriminate, and that after years of pain and manipulation, speaking up is a way to move forward—a way to restart a life worth living.

We wish for every person affected by trafficking to find someone they can confide in, someone ready to open their arms and take them in. Many people are ready to help, even if trusting that is incredibly difficult. We wish for peace and acceptance with what has happened to us, so the feelings of shame, betrayal, and emptiness dissolve, and our hearts learn to believe in good again, pain becomes lighter and strength comes to keep going, day by day, fighting for a better and safer life. I wish that each night, when you are about to sleep, you feel less alone in your pain and sorrow—because it is in the silence of the night that pain speaks the loudest.

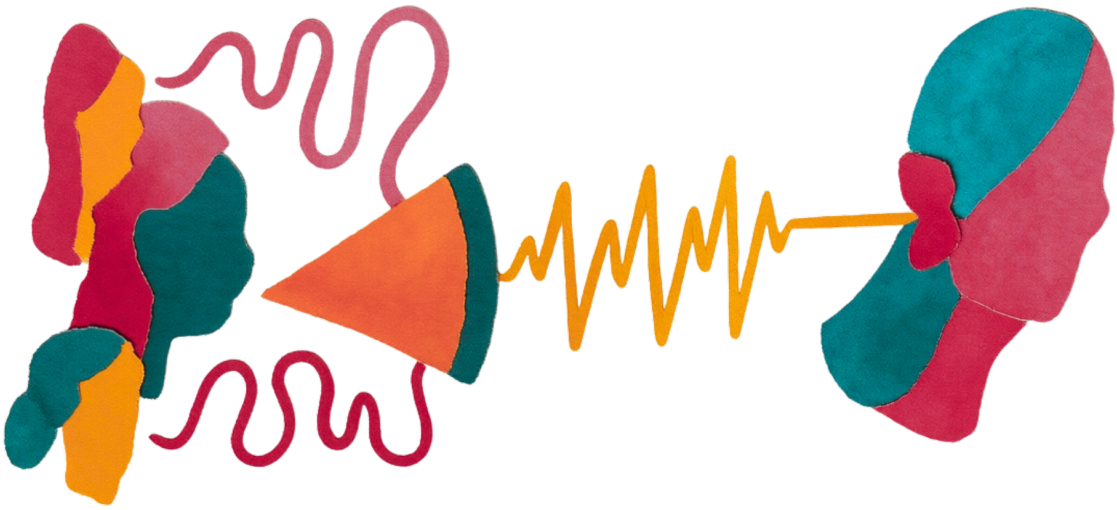
If you know nothing about trafficking, it is okay; just reading this far is already an important first step. But please, do not give us your opinion, judge, explain, or suggest solutions. Many survivors, like us, are willing to teach you about the mechanisms of trafficking and their journeys. And after you have listened, maybe then we can have a real debate.

Part Two

The complexities of drawing on lived experience expertise

Chapter Seven

WHOSE VOICE COUNTS: RETHINKING LIVED EXPERIENCE, LEADERSHIP, AND SOLIDARITY IN IM/MIGRANT SEX WORK



Kelly Go

Supporting Women's Alternatives Network Society (SWAN Vancouver or SWAN) has provided frontline support to immigrant and migrant (im/migrant) communities engaged in sex work for over 20 years in British Columbia, Canada. Our work centres the safety, rights, and health of im/migrant workers, many of whom face intersecting challenges including language barriers, immigration status, and racism. Our approach is also grounded in anti-carceral principles where we reject solutions that rely on policing, surveillance, or punitive systems. SWAN was formed in 2002, after a pilot health outreach project revealed the

multiplicity of challenges facing migrant women working in massage parlours. In 2017, SWAN became a registered charitable organisation.

SWAN Vancouver is situated on the stolen ancestral lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. We are also honoured to work in the territories of the QayQayt First Nation, Kwantlen, q̓íc̓əy̓ (Katzie), Semiahmoo, Tsawwassen First Nations, kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem) and Stó:lō Nation.

Kelly Go (She/her) *is the programme manager at SWAN. She has been with SWAN since 2016, and started out as an outreach volunteer.*

Vancouver has long been home to a strong and influential sex worker rights movement. Advocacy efforts over several decades have focused on decriminalisation, workplace safety, access to non-judgmental health care, and resisting policing and surveillance that disproportionately harm sex workers. These movements have played a critical role in challenging stigma and advancing sex workers' rights locally and nationally.

Nationally, the focus on lived experience has always been central to the sex worker rights movement. Indeed, movement communications often prioritise self-identification, or "outness," as the most important or only marker of authenticity.

However, for our community members, safety concerns, immigration risks, and desires for privacy, do not always align with more public-facing or visibility-driven advocacy strategies. SWAN supports im/migrant newcomers who work in indoor sex work venues such as massage parlours, apartments, and condominiums. Over 90% of the community we support are from East Asia. The community includes women with a wide range of immigration statuses, including folks awaiting immigration application approval, as well as those with precarious immigration status or no status.

SWAN works alongside and remains in dialogue with sex worker–led and allied organisations where values align, particularly around decriminalisation, harm reduction, and opposition to policing-based solutions. At the same time, our mandate requires us to remain accountable first and foremost to the im/migrant communities we serve.

This context is essential for understanding the tensions discussed in this piece. Our reflections emerge not from opposition to sex worker rights movements, but from long-stand-

ing engagement within them and from the responsibility to raise concerns when dominant narratives or strategies risk excluding, silencing, or endangering im/migrant workers.

A desire for privacy and respecting choice to disclose

Power imbalances and privilege exist in every interaction and space. No one should be forced to disclose their identity, experiences, or status in order to gain acceptance or legitimacy. Respecting people's choices around disclosure is essential to building genuine solidarity, safety, and inclusion.

Im/migrant sex workers navigate a complex web of realities: migration, economic necessity, family obligations, precarious immigration status, racism, stigma, and sometimes coercion or exploitation. Many make careful choices about disclosure, including whether to share their work and experiences of exploitation, or to participate publicly in advocacy.

Some im/migrants do not self-identify as sex workers. For example, people who work in massage parlours or similar workplaces do not self-identify as sex workers (though they may provide sexual services), and yet still face the same, if not more, structural risks and vulnerabilities.

Others may self-identify, but do not wish their involvement in sex work to be disclosed publicly, and although they want justice and accountability, they do not seek visibility. We have had community members explicitly ask SWAN, for example, to act as an intermediary to share their experiences confidentially with other social justice organisations and policymakers.

This has at times created tensions in how SWAN can engage with movement-wide advocacy campaigns. We have encountered resistance when advocacy actors prioritise campaigns requiring a publicly "out" spokesperson, a recognisable face, or a narrative that could be easily mobilised within mainstream activist frameworks.

This excludes the migrant workers we support who cannot safely participate in this way. Public identification as sex workers could have irreversible consequences for their immigration status, their safety, their families, and their futures upon return to their home countries.

Exclusion from discussions about trafficking and exploitation in the sex work sector

Advocacy related to trafficking has been particularly complex. While SWAN has engaged in this work for many years informed by the lived realities of im/migrant communities, these perspectives have not always been taken up within broader advocacy or policy discussions.

At the heart of these tensions lies a growing assumption that legitimacy, authority, and strategic competence must flow exclusively through "by and for sex worker" structures. One of the reasons that this framework emerged was as a necessary corrective to the harms of anti-trafficking discourse which has historically erased the agency of sex workers. Yet, when applied rigidly, it can replicate similar harms; we have witnessed that experiences of exploitation or trafficking are sometimes dismissed, minimised, or rejected outright when shared by people who do not fit the preferred identity of an "out" sex worker. When movements assert that only one organisational structure or disclosure model can represent a community, they risk creating a hierarchy of legitimacy that mirrors the same exclusionary dynamics that anti-trafficking systems have historically imposed on sex workers.

While we recognise and respect the leadership of im/migrant sex worker–led organisations, our frontline experience highlights the need to examine how rigid claims of representation or "outness" can inadvertently exclude the very people the movement seeks to support. Many who experience exploitation or coercion cannot safely become public advocates. Yet their experiences, insights, and needs are critical for shaping effective policies, programmes, and services. Movements that dismiss or question these experiences reinforce the very forms of control they aim to resist.

Experiences of exploitation have been repeatedly scrutinised or dismissed not because harm did not occur, but because the individuals sharing them did not align with dominant understandings of who counts as legitimate. We were often met with critiques that advocacy must be exclusively "sex worker–led," even when community members themselves did not self-identify as sex workers, yet were directly impacted by criminalisation, immigration enforcement, and the inhumane laws that produced their vulnerability. In these moments, advocacy spaces replicated the same logics of surveillance and exclusion that im/migrant sex workers already face from the state.

In our work, SWAN has also supported migrant workers who experienced serious harm after being pressured directly or indirectly into forms of visibility that did not reflect their realities, both by social justice movements and through contact with law enforcement. For example, in one case, a migrant worker's involvement in sex work–related venues was disclosed, against their wishes, by immigration officials to their family.

Within social justice movements, pressure to be visible operates differently. As noted above, it often takes the form of structural exclusion, where advocacy spaces prioritise publicly "out" sex workers as primary voices. While this approach is grounded in important efforts to ensure sex workers speak for themselves, it can become exclusionary when treated as the only model of legitimacy. As a result, individuals and organisations that are not publicly identified as sex workers may be excluded from decision-making or talked over.

Addressing the reality of race and immigration status

Im/migrant sex workers are far from a monolithic community. Safety needs are different depending on workplace, province, immigration status, language skills, and personal circumstances. Programmes, policies, or advocacy strategies that assume a one-size-fits-all approach risk leaving people behind.

Nationally, parts of the sex worker movement are tightly controlled, and at times, the space for nuanced conversations about how race and immigration status shape safety differently across communities within the sex industry in Canada is narrowed.

Within a predominantly white-dominated sex work advocacy landscape in North America, race, immigration, and criminalisation can also become sources of tokenisation. For example, a small number of racialised members are invited into leadership or public-facing roles, or racialised communities shoulder the burden of naming harm and proposing solutions.

When we raise issues of racism within the movement, they are not "accusations," nor attempts to divide or distract. Naming racism is an act of care, accountability, and solidarity. It strengthens collective work by ensuring that strategies, leadership, and priorities reflect the full diversity of im/migrant communities, rather than reproducing the same inequities and exclusions that punitive and carceral systems impose.

For dialogue and solidarity, we must grapple with the conditions that determine who is heard and who is rendered invisible. This requires a critical examination of how whiteness, white fragility, and tokenism operate within sex worker advocacy spaces. Anti-racist practice must be a shared responsibility, grounded in accountability rather than defensiveness.

Rethinking lived experience

SWAN's long-term work with racialised migrant communities demonstrates that lived experience is not singular, static, or easily categorised. Migrant sex workers hold diverse and often contradictory experiences shaped by precarious status, racialisation, labour precarity, cultural expectations, family obligations, and fears of deportation.

However, in recent movement discourse, lived experience has been framed not as multiplicity but as authority used to determine which voices count, who is "qualified" to speak, and what strategies or experiences are deemed legitimate.

SWAN's more than two decades of frontline engagement teach us that effective advocacy and support must account for diversity within communities. For example, at SWAN, people do not need to provide real names or personal information to access our services. Across the organisation, including in our staff, board, and volunteers, no one is required to "out" their lived experiences doing sex work. Community members' goals may not include advocacy, and we respect this choice.

These practices are grounded in lived realities, not assumptions about what counts as legitimate experience. Centering the safety and choices of individuals means respecting those who do not wish to take public leadership roles, do not disclose their work, or hold different perspectives on strategy and politics.

When advocacy spaces assert singular approaches to messaging, representation, or strategic decisions, they risk penalising other groups, narrowing acceptable viewpoints, and indirectly reinforcing the surveillance and control long-imposed on im/migrant sex workers through policing, anti-trafficking frameworks, and immigration enforcement.

The implications for the broader movement are clear. Solidarity requires embracing complexity and multiple forms of lived experience. It requires space for disagreement, differ-

ence, and alternative approaches.

Organisations must examine how claims of authority or legitimacy might unintentionally silence others and create hierarchies within the community. Mainstream advocacy groups can take concrete steps to include the voices of those who cannot safely be out, or who choose not to be. This includes creating mechanisms for confidential input, supporting intermediary organisations trusted by im/migrant communities, and valuing anonymised, collective, or indirect forms of participation as legitimate contributions to strategy and decision-making. It also means resisting the urge to equate leadership with visibility, and recognising that safety, not outness, is often the primary concern for migrant workers.

This piece is therefore an invitation to return to the complexity of lived experience and to recognise the wide spectrum of migrant sex workers' realities. If movements insist that only publicly self-identified community members can shape strategy, they risk sidelining those who cannot safely be out. If they dismiss experiences of exploitation because they complicate preferred narratives, they risk reproducing the silencing effects of the anti-trafficking systems they oppose. Lived experience should be understood as multiple and complex, as a guide for practice, and a foundation for solidarity, not a tool for gatekeeping or exclusion.

Chapter Eight

SEX WORKERS RIGHTS: MOVING FROM THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE TO A POLITICAL AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Letonde A. Hermine Gbedo

Letonde A. Hermine Gbedo coordinates the anti-trafficking project at The Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute (Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, or the Comitato) in Trieste, Italy. The Comitato was formed in 1982 as the country's first self-organised group of sex workers and allies. Today, the Comitato carries out cultural activities to guide social policy, to improve conditions for those in prostitution, to raise awareness

about the dignity and human rights of sex workers, and to deliver training to sex workers to empower them to improve their quality of life.

The comitato's beginnings: Sex workers speaking out

In 1982 a group of Italian sex workers and allies met to discuss the working conditions of sex workers in Italy. Their aim was to denounce police violence and discrimination. They also sought to challenge the Merlin Law of 1958 which criminalises aiding and abetting prostitution (although not sex work itself) and had the effect of penalising independent sex workers.

The group's founders, Carla Corso and Pia Covre, were aware of the political potential of their work as sex workers. They realised that to fight injustice, they must bring their personal struggles as sex workers into a public and political arena.

As the first self-organised group of sex workers and allies in Italy, the Comitato pledged to speak out against arbitrary treatment and discrimination, starting from their own experience, and to disseminate accurate information about HIV/AIDS. Sex workers speaking on issues that touched them directly, instead of letting others speak for them, was a political act that led institutions and the public to question themselves on sex work in political terms, not just as a moral act.

Working with migrant sex workers

In the late 1990s the population of sex workers in Italy began to change with the arrival of migrant women on Italian streets. Migrant sex workers arrived from Eastern Europe, including Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova, the former USSR, Ukraine, and Romania, as well as from Nigeria, and South American countries such as Brazil and Colombia.

The arrival of migrant sex workers in Italy was a turning point for the Comitato. The Comitato's statute addresses the conditions of migrants and emphasises the protection of their rights to combat their exclusion and social marginalisation. Thus with the presence of foreign women on the streets of Italy, the Comitato immediately expanded its work to include migrant as well as Italian sex workers. The association's founders approached them as colleagues and realised that many migrant women were on the streets against their will, and were in fact victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

With this realisation, the Comitato embarked on new strategies. In 2004, the Comitato took part in a Europe-wide project to train peer educators to meet with sex workers, and to identify those forced into prostitution. The programme enhanced the formal recognition of sex workers as professionals with expertise who can convey important information within their communities.

The introduction of cultural and linguistic mediators was key to building trusting relationships with migrant women on the streets during outreach, to understand their situation, and to propose meaningful legal assistance. The project also created jobs for peer educators who completed the course, enabling them to become self-employed. The educators formed cooperatives capable of providing their expertise to local services in need. Several Ukrainian women who completed the training worked as peer educators for Comitato in Modena, and two others worked in Venice with the outreach team. All settled in Italy and had families and now their daughters have graduated from university.

The Comitato also developed new outreach and educational tools based on the lived experience of migrant sex workers. For example, Puttanopoly is a board game developed with migrant sex workers and is an excellent training tool for new staff and volunteers. By playing the game, players gain an understanding of the many complex and challenging decisions migrant sex workers face in their lives. Although created in 2001, the issues portrayed in the game are still important today as they tackle rapid changes within the sex work sector, and restrictive migration policies, which impact on migrant sex workers' living and working conditions.

It is in this same spirit that sex workers were involved in developing a comic strip named Augusta's Way to share their experiences about the risks of street sex work with each other. The principle behind these awareness campaigns was to empower sex workers to have self-determination, and to know their rights.

New immigration restrictions and forms of violence

While the first twenty years of the Comitato focused on protecting victims coerced into sex work, today we are also confronted with large numbers of people who face multiple forms of trafficking, violence and violation of their rights. We are meeting many migrant women from Asia, for example, who arrive through the Balkans after a long and exhausting journey. They report gender-based violence both in their country of origin and during

the trip, as well as labour exploitation in countries like Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, and Romania.

Our association continues to challenge violence and discrimination against sex workers, and to call for amendments to the Merlin Law which would allow thousands of independent sex workers to enter into rental contracts without extortion and in a safe working environment. All sex workers remain vulnerable due to stigma and discrimination, the isolation caused by the crime of facilitation, municipal ordinances, and police raids.

In addition, migrant sex workers are even more vulnerable due to increasingly severe immigration policies. It is not easy for a migrant sex worker to publicly declare that they engage in sex work, especially if they do not have a residence permit. Fear of being denied or losing residency status also makes it hard for migrant sex workers to be involved in public activities on sex workers' rights. In addition, unemployment, unstable housing, health issues, stigma, and discrimination mean their priorities must be finding solutions to the challenges of their lives.

Further, not all migrant women we meet feel the need to identify as sex workers, perhaps because they chose to do this work for only a short period of their lives. From our privileged observation point, we also see that, although migrants are cognisant of the many rights violations they have experienced, they decline the appellation of 'victim of trafficking'. Instead, they recount their history of violence and oppression to assert their rights.

Migrants are forced to fit their voices into other specific categories, such as asylum-seeker, victim of gender-based violence, or as a victim of sexual or labour exploitation. To what extent does a migrant woman feel ready or compelled to tell a story to fit a box that allows her to obtain a document? To what extent can a social worker ask questions to obtain a "truthful version" of a migrant's life story? There is no easy answer to these questions.

But, despite these challenges, we are making progress and continuing to find opportunities for sex workers to come together and make their voices heard. For example, in mid-2023 in Bologna we organised the International Sex Workers' Day, "Sex Workers Speak Out." This day was primarily dedicated to creating a space for community, healing, and peer discussion. Attendees reflected on the negative impact of criminalisation on the lives and work of Italian and migrant sex workers. The following day, collectives, associations,

and individual sex workers, including cis and trans migrant sex workers, participated in the national public meeting, open to journalists.

Looking to the future: New collectives and new ideas

Today, the Comitato believes sex worker movements and organisations are still necessary to defend the rights of the sex worker community. To this end, we see more and more young women independently forming collectives, pursuing the same labour demands, and working with us on joint actions and advocacy. Young women are also taking on roles of increasing responsibility at the Comitato and bringing innovation and different perspectives to the regional trafficking project. The growing involvement of young activists further enriches our work. Their experiences broaden our viewpoint and analytical perspectives, which we then integrate into our actions and evaluations in Trieste.

Chapter Nine

LIVED EXPERIENCE IN A CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

Elvira Martínez

Elvira Martínez is the President of Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer "Elisa Martínez," (Brigada). Brigada Callejera is a non-governmental organisation that has been working with sex workers in Mexico since 1995. Brigada Callejera offers education and other services to sex workers to help them find dignity in their work, or transition to other work. Brigada Callejera's main programme strategy is to support sex workers to form cooperatives, which distribute condoms and health information, and mobilise sex workers to pre-

vent trafficking and sexual exploitation. This article was adapted from an interview with Elvira about lived experience expertise in a context of violence and insecurity.

Good morning Elvira, thank you for meeting with us today. To start with, could you share a little about Brigada Callejera and the context in Mexico for your work?

Mexico is a country not at war, but where more than 130,000 people are missing. It's a country not at war, but with many mass graves of people who have been killed.
Brigada Callejera has two community centers, one in La Merced, located in the Historic Centre of Mexico City, and another on the southeastern border, between Guatemala and Mexico. We also have 3,500 peer support workers in 28 states of the Mexican Republic. Last year in Tapachula, we had colleagues from 122 different countries, and we served 40,200 women.

The work we've been doing in Mexico has been very difficult. Our organisation has faced harassment because, sometimes, public officials are involved in trafficking networks. And now, with drug trafficking in Mexico, it's increasingly difficult to report these cases. Someone from the Ministry of the Interior —the very institution responsible for people's safety—actually called me and told me that I couldn't file complaints about public officials who are traffickers. And I say, well, they can do their job, but I'm also doing mine because I'd be complicit if I didn't report what's happening in Mexico.

We also need to look at the political situation. Mexico is right next to the United States, which has a lot of influence over Mexican politics through threats of tariffs or taking our water. So, the Mexican government responds by increasing the persecution of migrants. Many migrants, because of the conditions they experienced in their countries of origin, whether under blockade, like Cuba or Venezuela, or in extreme poverty, like in Central America, can't go home. Some migrants engage in sex work to survive, and many victims of trafficking are also migrants.

How do the members of Brigada Callejera share their lived experience in this context?

Most sharing is done between colleagues to build solidarity, awareness and confidence. At Brigada Callejera, we have our own newspaper, Noti Calle, and we meet every week to

write articles. The authors write from their experiences, including police violence against sex workers or the challenges seeking justice for trafficking. We also discuss and write about other problems that we see in the world.

Other members do peer-to-peer prevention work. They understand what others experience because it is their lives. For example, we have health promoter colleagues who are HIV-positive. They meet sex workers who have the virus and who think they are going to die. When they meet our colleagues who are strong and doing well, they say: "Yes, I'm going to live." It is very important for us that they hear information from their peers.

We also write comics focused on trafficking prevention and centering the experiences of trafficked persons. The language allows readers to identify with the stories. Sometimes they don't realize they are victims of trafficking until they read stories that are similar to their experiences, and it makes them reflect. Then, when they ask for help, it is much easier to assist them in filing a report or reintegrating into their daily lives.

In what ways does the lived experience of your members change perceptions of trafficking in persons?

When we talk about trafficking at Brigada Callejera, we don't speak only of victimisation. Rather, we share how our colleagues have managed to overcome their victimisation. That part is not talked about often. Their story isn't always about someone coming along to rescue them, because that kind of rescue isn't real. Instead they find their own ways to improve their lives. They find another way to survive, and not just remain stuck in pain. There are two women we have worked with that I want to mention.

One of the women was kidnapped by traffickers at the age of fourteen and, to keep her under their control, they impregnated her and addicted her to drugs. But she found a way out and now she's a professional wrestler, which is a very beautiful story. She teaches us that leaving is not just about getting out of a bad situation, but about becoming stronger, receiving psychological support—because I know the scars remain— and developing a life plan for herself. I find it impressive, don't you?

The other woman comes from Tenancingo, Tlaxcala, which is widely known for sexual exploitation and trafficking. She had no family support, so she was easy prey and easily manipulated into doing things she did not want to do. She had three children with her

pimp before she finally had the courage to leave. Now, she is still doing sex work, but she also finished high school and enrolled in a first aid course, which is what she likes. We are encouraging her to keep studying, maybe for a degree in nursing or medicine.

We are happy to see many sisters over the years obtaining a profession. It also strengthens other women to see that a profession is a possibility for them. Many people want to teach trafficking victims to sew, cook, or cut hair, but those professions don't help them get ahead financially. If someone finishes a technical degree, they can get ahead.

We believe that our colleagues should be empowered, that they learn to read and write, that they finish elementary school, middle school, and high school. Knowing more about your rights, knowing more about yourself and how to live, makes you more resilient.

Those are the kinds of stories we need to keep revisiting to change the narrative about women who have been trafficked, not to portray them only as victims. That's why it's important that they also empower themselves to speak out on their own behalf, because sometimes the government's rhetoric doesn't want them to speak out.

Do you ever experience violence conducting peer education work and filing cases? And does this change how you approach your work?

Unfortunately, over the years they have beaten us, tried to imprison us, tried to kill us. But we are here for a reason. Some of our comrades, if they haven't run away, have lost their lives, especially when they've denounced very powerful officials. The violence our members experience in their lives is not just in the past when they were trafficked, but is ongoing and constant.

During the past year, the north of Mexico has been particularly violent, including many murders of sex workers. Twenty-five of our colleagues disappeared in a single incident when organised crime tried to extort protection money. Initially, we felt we shouldn't travel up there to support our sisters because our lives would also be at risk and we could do very little. But, finally, seeing their situation, we decided to go. We take a lot of precautions but we are supporting them because no one else is listening to them.

For us, it's important that people keep sharing their experiences. And, despite the dangers, all of our colleagues are still willing to speak out. They know that if they don't speak

up, the situation for others will be even worse. And these are colleagues who are able to speak out because, as I mentioned, their lives have already changed- they are already involved in work to prevent trafficking and defend human rights.

People think Mexico is a left-wing country that respects the human rights of vulnerable or working people. In practice, the laws are good, but they aren't enforced. Women are always subjected to violence and the State is not doing enough to prevent human trafficking or support them to take their lives back into their own hands.

Sharing our experiences with others in other countries is also important. I'm very worried about all of us who are fighting to change this world. If we don't have support from activists in other countries, it's easier for our own countries to eliminate us. It's not in their best interest for us to continue doing this work of prevention and support. Despite all these adversities we've experienced, we can keep going, but only with solidarity.

Chapter Ten

A CROSS-MOVEMENT NATURE OF CARE RETREAT

Sophie Otiende, Elizabeth Maina, and Chris Ash

The Collective Threads Initiative (CTI) was founded by Sophie Otiende and Chris Ash in Kenya in 2024 to mobilise resources to communities worldwide for prevention of exploitation and ensuring human dignity. CTI's unique approach emphasises meaningful engagement of people with lived experience in all aspects of work, through a pan-African, queer, feminist lens. CTI has developed a Meaningful Engagement Toolkit to support engagement

of individuals with lived experience as experts. CTI also seeks to work across movements, recognising that human trafficking and exploitation are interconnected with labour rights, gender justice, and climate change movements.

Sophie Otiende, Elizabeth Maina, and Chris Ash

When Sophie and Chris founded CTI, we had seen, and been frustrated by, the Western anti-trafficking field's exceptionalism – viewing human trafficking as a uniquely traumatic form of abuse disconnected from other forms of oppression. We had been equally frustrated by funding dynamics that exported that exceptionalism into countries where it made no sense for anti-trafficking efforts to exist in isolation. However, we did not have existing frameworks for cross-movement collaboration.

As we brought on a third co-director, Elizabeth, the three of us wondered what cross-movement collaboration would look like if it involved people equally committed to all kinds of rights violations, working in ongoing partnership rather than one-time collaborative events.

In 2024, during our first year of work and envisioning CTI, we held meetings with movement leaders, activists and persons with lived experience to co-create a plan for CTI's cross-movement work. Out of these discussions we decided to prioritise uplifting youth leadership with the hope of connecting with activists before they were too entrenched in their individual silos. We also heard the importance of integrating care throughout our work. Activists from all movements emphasised that care is not an add-on but a fundamental part of all that we do. The year-long Care and Wellbeing Fellowship was a product of these discussions.

The CTI Care and Wellbeing Fellowship

In September 2025, after a nomination and selection process, a cohort of 12 young activists ranging in age from twenty to thirty-five, from three different African countries, became the first CTI fellows. These activists included survivors of trafficking now working on anti-trafficking, survivors of gender-based violence working in feminist spaces, trans activists working on LGBTQ rights, and a survivor of conflict-related violence working on peacebuilding in South Sudan. Their work crosses movements including refugee rights, gender justice, climate, and labour rights.

The care fellowship advances cross-movement collaboration among activists with diverse lived experiences by creating spaces to build solidarity through shared healing practices rather than just political alignment. By centering lived experience as expertise and acknowledging that trauma lives in collective bodies, not just individuals, the fellowship addresses a critical gap: movements often fail to collaborate because unaddressed wounds create conflict across different survival strategies and communication styles. The fellowship combines a three-circle structure (full cohort, mentorship circles, accountability partnerships) with trauma-informed frameworks, indigenous healing practices, and explicit power analysis. In this way, it seeks to create lasting cross-movement infrastructure where activists learn each other's "dialects of care," practice boundaries as bridges not walls, and develop shared language around sustainable resistance. This model recognises that authentic collaboration requires relational capacity and collective healing before joint action. It starts with questions like "Whose am I?" to ground identity in community belonging, integrating rest as resistance, and building year-long support systems. These systems transform brief solidarity into sustained mutual aid networks that are rooted in Ubuntu philosophy and decolonised leadership.

The first retreat

The fellowship launched in October 2025 with a week-long, in-person retreat, just outside of Nairobi. This was a nourishing space for relationship-building, mutual support, and deep reflection on the role of collective care in their work.

The retreat curriculum was co-developed by the CTI weavers (co-directors), along with two seasoned activists invited to serve as lead facilitators. Both facilitators have a background in care and healing and roots in Africa, one a South Sudanese practitioner of traditional healing and revolutionary activism for liberation, and the other a Kenyan artist experienced in art as a healing practice.

The curriculum centred on preventing burnout. This was in response to common care models which assume burnout as inevitable, and thus emphasise treatment rather than prevention. Fellows participated in personal and group reflections on movement, identity, sustainability, healing, burnout, disappointment, motivation, and intergenerational healing.

These reflective practices were interspersed with activities like movement, art, journaling, ritual, and walks to connect with nature. Because everyone in the group had lived experience and worked across movements, we were able to go beyond asking, “How do you navigate being a survivor of human trafficking working in anti-trafficking?” to, “What does it mean to be a human in a community resisting oppression and colonial responses to that oppression?”.

Fellows also reflected on the sustainable and culturally specific ways that they were taking care of themselves already, and how the CTI fellowship and fellows could add to these practices.

This care retreat sparked many insights, such as how to build resources that sustain both activism and supportive care networks that the fellows are excited to implement in their communities. Without a need to reinforce and maintain divisions of who was a survivor and who was an “ally” (complicated by the multiple lived experiences centred in the retreat), solidarity could be practiced in a way that centred care for all the fellows and their diverse lived experiences.

During the retreat, participants noted that they wished this retreat had been their introduction to movement work, as many had already become disillusioned. Participants’ blog posts after the retreat highlighted the profound impact the retreat had on their lives, their self-understandings, and their work. Inspired by the overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants in the care retreat, we plan to expand its cross-movement approach to CTI’s other work, and look forward to the creative approaches that emerge from these relationships.

Part Three

Concrete strategies for promoting lived experience expertise

Chapter Eleven

FROM SYMBOLIC STORIES TO ACTIVE TEACHERS:
A CASE STUDY ON SURVIVOR-LED POLICY WORK

Emma Ecker, Freedom Network USA and Chris Ash
Collective Threads Initiative (formerly National Survivor Network)

Emma Ecker leads the policy programme at Freedom Network USA (FNUSA). Formed in 2001, FNUSA is the United States' largest coalition of human trafficking service providers, attorneys, survivors, and academics. FNUSA takes a transformative approach to human trafficking grounded in anti-racism and anti-oppression. Together, we envision an anti-trafficking movement where survivors have what they need to thrive and all advocates are committed to dismantling harmful systems that create vulnerability

Chris Ash is a member of FNUSA, the former Chair of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking and co-founded Collective Threads Initiative – a global, cross-movement initiative that mobilises tailored resources to communities worldwide. From 2021-2024, Chris managed the restructure and relaunch of the National Survivor Network – co-creating its transformation into a values-based network.

Emma writes: In 2023, Freedom Network USA (FNUSA) decided to engage survivors directly in federal policy advocacy by organising a survivor-led briefing to Congress. We had discussed this idea many times before, but the events of that summer had made the idea more urgent. The release of the film, Sound of Freedom, which spread wildly sensationalist and inaccurate details about child trafficking, alongside a growing anti-immigrant sentiment in government, had led to a string of rushed legislation purportedly to help survivors, but that would cause immense harm.

For example, the bill H.R.2601 was proposing that all "confidential" human trafficking hotline calls (including third-party tips) be reported to law enforcement regardless of the survivor's consent. FNUSA felt that members of Congress needed to hear the real impacts of these proposals, and about real solutions informed by the lived experience of survivors of trafficking.

Our first step was to reach out to longtime partner, the Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking (ATEST), to coordinate the briefing. ATEST agreed to join the initiative and pay honoraria and travel expenses for six people. FNUSA and ATEST co-provided logistical support, including scheduling the briefing room, and sending invites to all 535 offices in Congress. We also arranged a nearby meeting space for lunch and time to talk through logistics beforehand.

In respect to the content of the briefing, Terry FitzPatrick from ATEST and I realised quickly that survivors should lead. We both agreed that Chris, as the head of the National Survivor Network, was the perfect person to invite to design the agenda and identify the experts who would testify.

Chris writes: When I got the invitation, I appreciated the idea that members of Congress would have an opportunity to see survivors as teachers rather than only as storytellers, sharing their unique expertise. Often in congressional briefings, survivors would share their stories and plead for action, but policy strategists would come in behind them to

frame the policy recommendations. Briefing agendas have listed speakers with lived experience as "survivors" and speakers who do not have (or have never disclosed) lived experience as "experts." Survivors who presented recommendations were often given talking points or a script they had a minimal role in developing, leaving us to feel used as puppets. So when FNUSA and ATEST confirmed that this event would be genuinely survivor-organised, I quickly agreed to participate.

I started our partnership by meeting with Emma and Terry and asking them to share frequent misunderstandings about trafficking among members of Congress. These notes guided my speaker selection. I wanted to prioritise people who could speak knowledgeably about both lived experience and systems, and who aren't often heard in Congress. I also chose to prioritise survivors who are people of colour, as the US anti-trafficking movement has historically given more opportunities to white survivors to attend meetings with decision-makers. Finally, all invitees had lived experience of multiple forms of oppression and multiple identities, including trafficking survivor, migrant worker, undocumented minor, Black, Latine, Indigenous American, transgender, man, woman, LGBTQ+, adult sex worker, survivor of domestic servitude, forced criminality, or child sexual exploitation, and others.

In my invitation to each person, I reinforced that we were not requiring, or even expecting, them to share details of their lived experience unless they found it helpful to illustrate a point. I also assured the speakers that their remarks would not be edited to align with FNUSA or ATEST's goals, rather than their own.

At one point, FNUSA unexpectedly requested all speakers to submit their remarks in advance for review, which caused me some concern that I would be breaking my word. However, I met with Emma to discuss my concerns, and we found a solution that addressed both our needs. Namely, Emma and I scheduled blocks of time to be available for any speakers who wanted additional support drafting or revising their comments. About half of the speakers booked time with one of us, and appreciated the coaching. In each coaching session, we reminded them that we wanted their comments to reflect their ideas and that they could reject any of our suggestions.

Emma writes: It can be difficult at first to give up the oversight we are used to, especially when our organisation's name is associated with an event. Also, I was not even a year into my position at FNUSA at that time, and I was nervous about making a mistake and of-

fending colleagues whom I deeply respected. When my colleagues requested I review the talking points for accuracy, I brought the request to Chris and immediately understood Chris's concerns. The next morning, Chris and I had an honest discussion about what it means to truly share power and give up control. We decided to equip the speakers with tools to do their jobs well without creating a power imbalance by sharing our opinions about what they should say.

Chris writes: I had been anxious to raise my concerns, but I knew I needed to be accountable to the speakers, and also to practice the kind of honesty with FNUSA that I wanted them to practice with me. Ultimately, working through a tense moment in our planning strengthened the trust between us.

On the day of the event, we met before the briefing and had a "run-through" of the comments. As each speaker heard the others' comments for the first time, they took notes to make sure they could support each other's ideas and that the flow would make sense. FNUSA and ATEST staff answered technical questions.

At the briefing, I invited attendees to challenge their assumptions of "survivors" as a different category from "professionals." The speakers addressed, variously, forced criminality and police violence, how migrant workers may not understand labour protections in the U.S, diplomatic immunity and trafficking of foreign-born household staff, and the link between forced labour abroad and exploitation in the United States when oppressed people here must then take on unsafe work. Another speaker addressed H.R.2601 directly, explaining that it would make many trafficking victims ***less*** safe – particularly those who were migrants, were from communities that received disproportionate rates of incarceration and police violence, or for whom criminal legal professionals were involved in their trafficking.

Questions from congressional staff focused largely on H.R.2601. Many had assumed that notifying law enforcement would universally increase safety. This was their first time hearing about the potential harms of nonconsensual law enforcement involvement, and that removing confidentiality (beyond existing mandatory reporting laws) might have a chilling effect on survivors' willingness to call the hotline. After the session ended, two staff members from the office of the congressperson who had introduced the bill and from the office of Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, who had been the only Democrat to support the bill, approached me to ask further questions.

Emma writes: After the speakers highlighted the flaws in H.R.2601, we finally, after many months of advocacy, saw the tide turn against the bill. Representative Jackson Lee sent a letter to her fellow legislators asking them to vote against the bill, and the bill lost the votes it needed to pass. Members of Congress were finally taking survivors'6 concerns seriously.

The success of the briefing revealed to us the necessity of sharing power and creating spaces for survivors to be seen as experts. As advocates, we must also take responsibility for perpetuating the narrative that survivors do not have expertise, for example, by inviting them to policy events only to share their stories, providing them with scripts to follow, or censoring their recommendations. In the current political climate, censorship is becoming widespread, and immigrants, Black and Brown communities, and LGBTQ+ communities are being demonised. It is more important than ever that advocates make space for leadership by those with intersecting lived experiences. It is also critical that we support these leaders by preparing them to speak confidently and to handle potential negative backlash.

FNUSA recognises that formal education and professional experience are often barriers to survivors participating in anti-trafficking advocacy work. Policy positions in the United States are also limited and difficult for survivors to access without prior experience. FNUSA sees our next steps as continuing to create spaces for survivors to meet with decision-makers, and creating a pathway for survivors to gain the policy expertise needed to do this work confidently themselves. Chris and I are planning a policy academy that will provide intensive legislative and regulatory advocacy education to survivors. The goal is for participants to identify an issue that concerns them, and then understand the landscape at all levels of government sufficiently to identify policy solutions. We want the curriculum to meet people where they are, and enable them to communicate effectively, without reinforcing elitist norms.

Chapter Twelve

SOLIDARITY AND SAFETY:
SUPPORTING WELLBEING IN SURVIVOR-LED ADVOCACY

Aranya Pakapath and Prapakorn Winaisathapornis

Aranya Pakapath is a programme officer at the Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI), based in Bangkok. JELI advocates for the protection of labour rights in Thailand and supports workers' initiatives. In late 2023, JELI was contacted by Prapakorn Winaisathapornis, also known as Dr. Keng, a former academic at a Thai university. The university had unfairly dismissed Prapakorn during a mental health crisis, and then sued to recover unused scholarship funds. JELI supported Dr Keng to share her experience with lawmakers, the media,

and government officials, until eventually the case was withdrawn.

The article below was composed from email correspondence with both Aranya and Dr. Keng about their experience with this case. They reflect on the power of solidarity and the need for more mental health support for survivors of labour rights violations.

Prapakorn writes: In September 2013 my academic career—and my life—was derailed by the onset of a severe medical condition, schizophrenia, which made it impossible for me to continue fulfilling my job requirements. However, instead of receiving compassion, accommodation, or mental health support, my employer fired me and filed a lawsuit demanding I repay my scholarship. Over the next decade, I was forced to act as my own defence counsel, navigating complex legal arguments and procedures and at the same time battling severe psychotic symptoms. I lost my job, income, and my career path. In turn, the high-stakes legal environment, combined with the debt, anxiety and social isolation, intensified my hallucinations and delusions. I found it virtually impossible to mount a strong legal defence.

Aranya writes: After she was dismissed, Prapakorn was left wandering the streets until her family found her and admitted her to hospital. Then they received notice of a claim for a huge sum filed by the university and the ministry that had funded her scholarship.

When she recovered, Prapakorn reached out to various institutions for help, but, although they expressed sympathy, no one felt able to assist. In May 2023, I returned to Thailand from Europe where, by coincidence, I had been helping a family member through a mental health crisis. Suddenly, Prapakorn sent a message to JELI's webpage that she needed labour and human rights advocacy for her case, and after meeting her, I took the case up.

We petitioned the Thai Parliament for a meeting and, on 14 December 2023, the Parliament's Higher Education Commission hosted a dialogue meeting with Prapakorn, myself, and Sirasak, from the Network of University Workers. The meeting took place at the House of Representatives in Bangkok. Prapakorn gave detailed testimony, describing her experiences from the time she was employed at the university until the onset of her illness, and her sudden, illegal, termination. By this time, Prapakorn had also shared her experience with the media and Thai national newspapers and television stations had widely reported her case. Members of Parliament in the meeting room expressed their sympathy and offered their support. I accompanied Prapakorn throughout and provided additional

information for clarification.

We held several dialogues with the government, and all parties (except the university) agreed the case against Prapakorn must end. The court case has indeed now ended. The Ministry also agreed to find a new job for Prapakorn, although she is still waiting for her new employment.

Prapakorn writes: The Supreme Administrative Court eventually cleared me of any wrongdoing, but my former employers never apologised or offered any remedy. This is hurtful, and taught me even if legal truth prevails, emotional justice may still be missing.

Aranya writes: JELI primarily works with women workers who have a history of collective struggle. Throughout her case many of us from the worker side accompanied Prapakorn and gave her confidence to share her story. Prior to the formal dialogue meetings, JELI invited Prapakorn to join our meetings with women workers. The participants were women workers who were struggling day-to-day so the feelings of collective care and togetherness were there and Prapakorn felt she could trust the participants and was able to share her story.

Prapakorn writes: Finding JELI felt like finding a home; I experienced an insightful sense of empathy and sisterhood. At that time, I was still fragile and struggling with depression. I didn't feel brave to share my experiences, but I felt safe because I had strong allies like JELI and others. They helped expose the inhumanity of my former employer's treatment. I am deeply moved by their selfless support.

Aranya writes: Working with Prapakorn, we learned that many workers need mental health support, not only to process the violence and exploitation that they have experienced, but also to sustain a long legal battle for accountability. For us, mental health support is not just professional therapy, but is about a constant, reliable emotional presence and listening without prejudice. We foster safety through sisterhood and solidarity through our principles of peer support, confidentiality, and non-extractivity. That is, we don't 'extract' stories from survivors. Instead, we create a space where survivors can share their lived experiences whenever, wherever, and however they feel ready.

In the end, supporting Prapakorn reinforced our belief that survivors possess immense internal power. We learned that our role is not to 'lead' them, but to be a facilitator and a

companion. In the future, JELI will place even more emphasis on survivor leadership. We are moving toward a model where survivors don't just tell their stories, but actively shape the advocacy strategies.

Prapakorn writes: Although my case was resolved, the system failed to change, and more needs to be done. Working with a mental health condition remains a long and difficult journey. For myself, as an unemployed person with schizophrenia, I am limited in what I can do to push for change. However, I still share my struggle on social media and provide peer counselling to others in a similar situation. I do what I can within my capacity to ensure others don't feel as lost as I once did.

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