



Atlas Free®

Human Trafficking of Children

**A Survivor-Led Global Examination
of Government Responses,
Awareness & Education,
and Prevention**

Survivor Advisory Council

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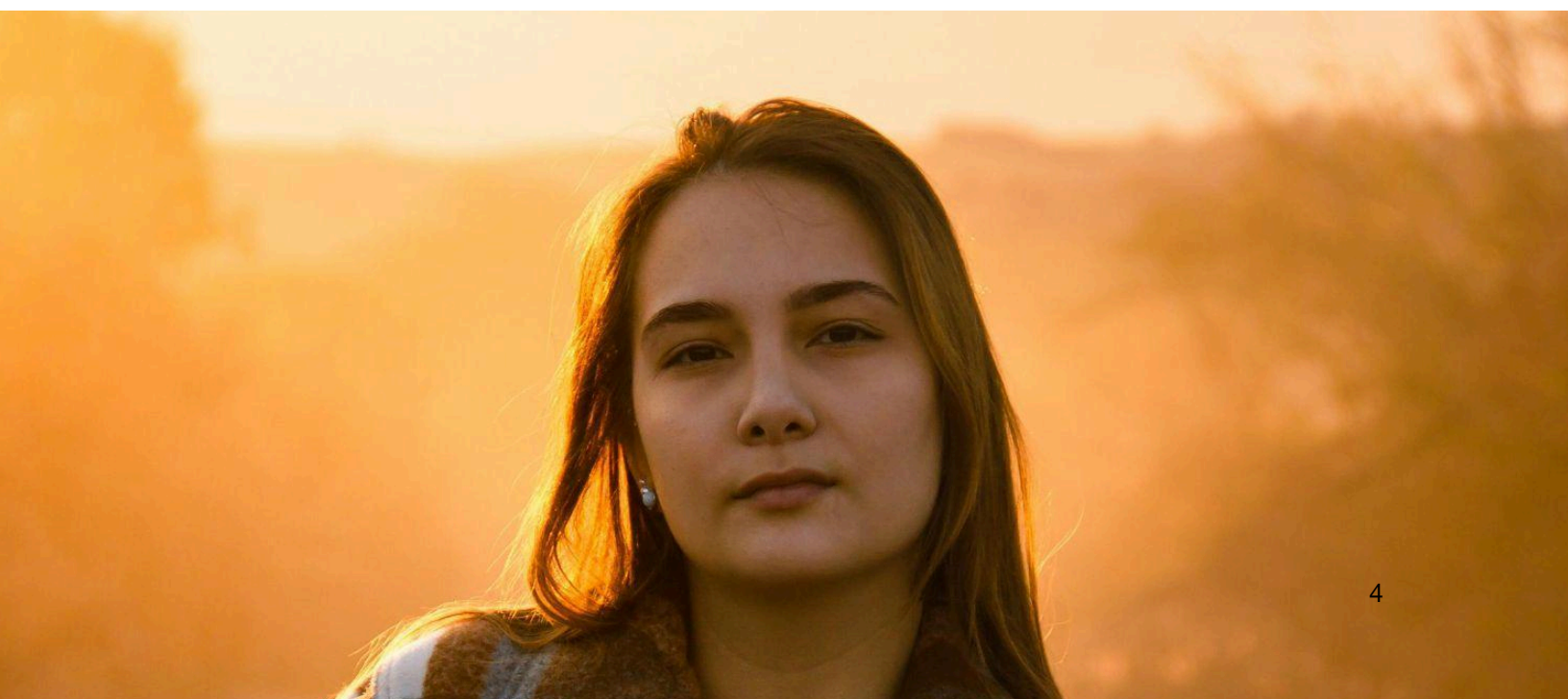
Introduction

1.1 Preface

Human trafficking is a global crisis, demanding urgent attention from the international community. Even more troubling is the fact that children, who are among the most vulnerable in society, are so often targets of this heinous form of exploitation and violence. In the global context, several international laws and conventions have been established to combat human trafficking, especially against children. On November 20th, 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasized the protection of children from all forms of exploitation, including human trafficking. More than a decade later, members of the United Nations adopted the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (often referred to as the Palermo Protocol). These, along with many others, represented a monumental shift in the international community to prioritize the fight to end human trafficking, especially against children.

This fight has continued for more than 30 years. Moreover, while policymakers, practitioners, and prevention advocates have increasingly focused on this issue and developed collaborative approaches to combat child exploitation, a critical gap persists worldwide: the lack of survivors' voices in these conversations. Though it is becoming more common to include survivors' input in policy creation and implementation, known as "survivor-informed", gaps still exist (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2019). Specifically, these survivor-informed approaches may not always be led by the voices and lived experiences of survivors.

By survivor-led, we mean that survivors should have the leading voice in the creation, development, and publication of this report, addressing critical issues related to human trafficking.



1.2 About the Council

To address this *critical* gap in the international anti-trafficking community, Atlas Free took a bold approach and created a global Survivor Advisory Council to address issues within the field of human trafficking with a unique goal in mind: **to convene survivors from all over the globe to use their lived experience to address the ever-present issue of human trafficking in all its complexity**. In doing so, the Survivor Advisory Council presents an opportunity for a survivor-led framework to inform strategies for prevention, support, and reintegration, drawing on testimony, research, and council insights. The first Survivor Advisory Council was assembled in October 2024. This inaugural council comprises five survivors with diverse lived experiences and countries of origin from around the world: Colombia, Nepal, Spain, Uganda, and the United States.



Faythe Kadona, M.S.

Faythe is a Subject Matter Expert in human trafficking, addiction, gangs, and domestic violence, holding a Master of Administration of Justice and Security and keeping God at the center of her life. She serves as a founding member of the Street Grace Survivor Advisory Council and as co-chair of Atlas Free's Global Survivor Advisory Council. She is the first woman in Georgia licensed to facilitate the TYRO Mom's Leadership program, has created curriculum for women overcoming trafficking and addiction, and has mentored youth in the juvenile justice system through H.O.P.E. Court. Faythe has trained Delta's in-flight crew, churches, youth groups, and community organizations on human trafficking, and has helped draft key Georgia legislation, including SB435 (2019) and SB34 (2021), to protect and empower survivors. Her greatest joy is her children, writing, art, and growing in her faith.



Carolina Córdova

Carolina Córdova, 27, is a survivor of human trafficking and the 2024 Equiano Award recipient from Atlas Free. Originally trafficked and later rescued in Madrid, Spain, she has since dedicated her life to speaking out on behalf of those who are still silenced. After nearly four years in recovery, Carolina now works with Amar Dragoste, the same organization that accompanied her healing journey. There, she leads awareness and advocacy efforts to combat modern-day slavery across Europe. Carolina describes herself as a thread of hope against the injustice of the 21st century — a living example of how what was once used to enslave her is now used by God to bring freedom.



Chhorki Bomzon Tamang

Chhorki Tamang is a Management student at British Gurkha University and works as a school accountant in Nepal. She is also a passionate advocate against human trafficking and child sexual exploitation. Having survived trafficking and sexual exploitation at the age of 11 or 12, Chhorki now uses her voice to raise awareness, support other survivors, and educate her community about the importance of prevention. Her lived experience has shaped her dedication to promoting safety, dignity, and justice for vulnerable individuals. Through her work and studies, she

continues to fight for systemic change and survivor centered support in Nepal.



Nakimuli Doreen

Doreen is a survivor leader, leading a community of 30 other survivors. They work together to eradicate human trafficking in the world through creating awareness and advocating for policy changes. Doreen has a diploma in cosmetology and various certificates in business. She loves the lord and is a born again Christian. Doreen is the chairperson of a survivor lead organization that moves in the communities creating awareness of human trafficking, providing peer to peer support to survivors, providing skills, participating in research, and volunteering where survivors are victims of human trafficking. Doreen is a member of a survivor advisory committee that speaks directly to Willow programs and how they affect the victims and survivors of human trafficking. Doreen is also on the disciplinary committee of Willow International which promotes accountability among survivors at the shelter and supports personal growth and development. Doreen is a lead coach of a street business school where she teaches communities and survivors how to start businesses with the resources around them. Doreen uses her cosmetology skills to empower women and girls in the communities to bring about self reliance and reduce vulnerability. She is a sole proprietor of two businesses and employs two girls to reduce their vulnerability. Doreen is a mother of three babies and one adopt.



Estefania Gómez

Estefania Gómez is a student of Government and International Relations who has actively collaborated with organizations combating human trafficking, including UNODC, Empodérame, and Atlas Free. As a dedicated activist, she has contributed to the development of trauma-informed protocols that prioritize the dignity and safety of trafficking survivors. Her advocacy is deeply personal, as she is herself a survivor of child sexual exploitation. Estefania continues to use her voice and expertise to raise awareness and drive systemic change in the fight against human trafficking.

1.3 Executive Summary

After a year of ongoing conversations, the Survivor Advisory Council decided to focus its inaugural report on issues related to the human trafficking of children. **This report aims to provide insight into the needs of children who experience human trafficking, better facilitate healing from their experiences in safe environments, and support their resiliency.**

Specifically, the Survivor Advisory Council members identified three critical areas that demand urgent reform based on their lived experiences: **(1) government responses, (2) education and awareness, and (3) prevention.** Governmental responses encompass how institutions at all levels—from local law enforcement to federal agencies—identify, investigate, and address trafficking cases, as well as how they support survivors through legal processes and recovery services. Education and awareness initiatives include public campaigns, professional training programs, and community outreach efforts designed to help people recognize trafficking situations and understand their complexity. Prevention strategies involve policies, programs, and interventions aimed at reducing vulnerability to trafficking before exploitation occurs. These issues were not selected arbitrarily but emerged as central themes woven throughout Survivor Advisory Council members' personal narratives of trafficking and recovery.

For Survivor Advisory Council members, these three domains represent more than policy categories—they are the very systems that either failed them during their exploitation or could have intervened to change their trajectories entirely, making their perspectives on reform both profoundly personal and uniquely informed. In doing so, the Survivor Advisory Council offers survivors' insights on key areas of addressing the trafficking of children as well as actionable recommendations for policymakers, service providers, government systems, and more.



Notably, this report is not a comprehensive review of all forms of human trafficking or even every policy intervention available. Instead, this report aims to reflect the lived experiences and priorities of the inaugural Survivor Advisory Council, grounded in personal narratives, collaborative discussion, and empirical evidence. **It is with hope that this report serves as a survivor-led foundation for global leaders, partners, and organizations to deepen their work in combating human trafficking of children, prevention, and survivor support.** Additionally, it presents a unique opportunity to provide insights on crucial topics where survivors' voices have previously been absent; therefore, this report is for everyone.

In short, this report is written by survivors to share their knowledge and to speak for those who need to be heard. In the words of one survivor:

***“Real prevention is not just awareness—
it’s justice, dignity, and opportunity for everyone.”***

– Survivor A [Europe]



1.3.1 Report Highlights

The Survivor Advisory Council identified three key areas they wanted to discuss in relation to the human trafficking of children: government responses, education and awareness, and prevention. Each section had key themes and takeaways:

1. Government Responses: In this report, survivors share how government institutions play a critical role in creating necessary legislation to remove barriers and protect survivors. They also highlight how corruption, inaction, and fundamental response gaps undermine the basic structures necessary to protect victims and instill fear among those seeking help.
2. Education and Awareness: Current efforts to educate and spread awareness about trafficking struggle to capture the reality of many survivors adequately. In an effort to capture the attention of the general public, often outdated or sensationalized images or examples are used, which can cause significant harm to survivors. In this report, survivors share the types of education they believe can benefit individuals in various communities and outline the changes needed to enhance ongoing efforts. By providing accurate, survivor-informed information and education to anyone who needs it, communities around the world can be more aware of what trafficking is and who is at risk.
3. Prevention: There are many risk factors that can make individuals more at risk for exploitation. This report discusses survivors' perspectives on those risks and how best to address them. From the root of the issue, such as economic factors, to institutional responses, including legal barriers, survivors share how and why these issues must be addressed to prevent future generations from experiencing the same harm.

After an in-depth review of these key areas, the Survivor Advisory Council had several recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and anyone else motivated to end human trafficking against children. Though more in-depth and practical recommendations are discussed in the section "Recommendations for the Future", all recommendations stemmed from at least one of the following key takeaways:

1. **Survivor voices must take center stage**
2. **Address the root causes of trafficking in addition to intervention**
3. **More research on effective intervention and treatment**

1.3.2 Survivor Voice Integration

The method used to elevate survivors' voices on these issues involved several approaches. First, a comprehensive review of meeting notes from the Survivor Advisory Council was conducted, during which key priorities were discussed. They were asked what mattered to them and why these particular issues resonated with their lived experiences. Through ongoing discussions, the areas of government responses, education and awareness, and prevention efforts were the universal priorities. Then, the Survivor Advisory Council, in addition to the broader network of Atlas Free members, was invited to respond to a brief survey (nine responses were received), along with a handful of case studies and testimonials, to capture a broader range of survivor input regarding these three topics. In total, nine survivors shared their thoughts, including members of the Survivor Advisory Council. These perspectives have been consolidated and present a comprehensive overview of what these survivors identify as the most critical areas of concern, what is working well, and future recommendations for reform. Each person who shared their testimonies with us were given the option to use their name or a pseudonym.

Important Note: The quotes provided aim to illustrate the lived experiences of those who provided them and do not necessarily reflect the views of all survivors. All quotes were used in their entirety with only minor changes for spelling or grammar.

Background

There is no singular, universally accepted definition of human trafficking of children. Human trafficking of children is a complex and multifaceted violation of human rights. As such, there are many variations in how human trafficking of children may appear across the globe. Oftentimes, this definition varies by a nation or locality's laws, cultural identities, and so on. For example, human trafficking perpetrators in the United States may have similarities to perpetrators in Colombia, but then may appear drastically different compared to perpetrators in Uganda.

Although this report aims to be as broad and globally inclusive as possible, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of all contexts in which children are exploited worldwide. Instead, this report is led by the Survivor Advisory Council members' experiences and insights into a handful of the contexts in which children can be exploited. Examples from specific countries are purely illustrative and do not intend to condemn any particular nation.



2.1 Defining Human Trafficking of Children

While various countries will have differing legislative and policy definitions regarding what constitutes human trafficking and exploitation, there are unifying perspectives. One of the most recognized international definitions can be found in the Palermo Protocol (2000), convened by the United Nations, which stated:

"Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.

"Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age."

Across the globe, there are two forms of human trafficking of children that are most widely recognized:

Sexual exploitation: While each country has a definition for sexual exploitation, the premise of these definitions is the same. For children, commercial sexual exploitation occurs when anything of value is given in exchange for a sex act. A sex act can be sexual touch, stripping, pornography, webcamming, or escorting, along with other acts. Sex trafficking involves the commercial sexual exploitation of individuals by force, fraud, and/or coercion (Palermo Protocol, 2000).

Labor exploitation: Forcing individuals to work in conditions that violate human rights, often in industries like agriculture, construction, domestic work/domestic servitude, or manufacturing, and includes debt bondage, slavery, peonage, and involuntary servitude through force, fraud, and/or coercion (USCRI, 2024). The International Labour Organization (ILO) refers to this as forced labor.

The Survivor Advisory Council members provided many examples and case studies regarding how human trafficking of children may manifest in different contexts, which are included throughout this report. Nakimuli Doreen, for example, shared a case study from their organization involving young girls from Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda who are taken into Uganda and are made to provide commercial sex in bars, spas, and so on. This survivor also provided case studies involving children being taken from other countries and being forced to work in supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, plantations, and mines, and, as a result, often subjected to abuse and harm.

2.1.1 Additional Contexts for Exploitation

Beyond these overarching definitions, the Survivor Advisory Council members have insights into several specific contexts in which children are exploited worldwide. For the sake of clarity, we provide the following general definitions of types of exploitation or situations that a trafficker might exploit when harming victims. Given that laws vary by location, these definitions may not capture all experiences for all regions, states, or countries.

Sextortion:

Sextortion is defined as “a form of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) in which the threat to distribute images, videos, and intimate information is used to coerce the behavior of others” (O’Malley, 2024). In the United States, for example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in partnership with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, issued a national public safety alert in response to an explosion of incidents of children and teens being coerced to send explicit images online and then extorted for money (United States Attorney’s Office, 2022).

Children involved in Armed Conflict:

A child associated with an armed force/group is defined as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (UN, 2007, 2025). In 2024, the UN identified 7,402 verified incidents of children being recruited and involved in armed conflict— an increase from prior years (United Nations Secretary-General, 2025).

Forced marriage:

Forced marriage is defined as “a marriage with one or more elements of force, fraud, or coercion, and where one or both parties do not or cannot consent to the marriage. Consent means that you have given your full, free, and informed agreement to marry your intended spouse and to the timing of the marriage. Forced marriage may occur when family members or others use physical or emotional abuse, threats, or deception to force you to marry without your consent. Forced marriage can be both a cause and a consequence of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking” (USCIS, 2025). In the United States, each state legislates marriage involving minors (with parental consent) differently. In 2025, Massachusetts permits children as young as 14 years old to be married with parental consent, regardless of the age of the person they are marrying (World Population Review, 2025). Most states allow children between the ages of 16 and 17 to marry with parental consent. Only six states require a person to reach the age of majority (i.e., 18 years old). In 2024, Colombia’s Congress passed legislation banning child marriage, which was previously legal for children 14 years old and older as long as there was parental consent (The City Paper Staff, 2024). It is essential to recognize the distinct context in Colombia, particularly in relation to its Indigenous communities. These communities have a wide variety of practices around marriage, some of which involve marriages with persons under the age of 18.

Illegal adoption:

Another context where children are exploited involve illegal adoptions, defined as “adoptions resulting from crimes such as abduction and sale of and trafficking in children, fraud in the declaration of adoptability, falsification of official documents or coercion, and any illicit activity or practice such as lack of proper consent by biological parents, improper financial gain by intermediaries and related corruption” (OHCHR, 2017).

2.2 How Exploitation Definitions Vary in International Contexts

Despite the broad definitions of human trafficking provided previously, countries have considerably different contexts and legal language to denote the scope of human trafficking in their nation. Indeed, one of the purposes of forming the Survivor Advisory Council was to bring together experts with lived experience from a diverse range of countries of origin—specifically, Colombia, Nepal, Spain, Uganda, and the United States. Even across these five countries, there are key differences and similarities when defining human trafficking (Contreras Pardo, 2016; Laws of Nepal, 2025; Laws of Uganda, 2009; Ragas, 2023; *TVPA*, 2000; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). It is worth noting that all five countries fundamentally adopt the Palermo Protocol's three-element framework: Acts, Means, and Purpose (Palermo Protocol, 2000). These countries, however, diverge significantly in how they elaborate and apply these elements.

First, when it comes to Acts (meaning, what traffickers do), the convergence across these countries includes a standard that follows the Palermo Protocol regarding acts of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and receipt of persons. Some main points of diversion include:

- Spain adds "exchange or transfer of control over persons"
- Uganda includes "maintains, confines," and specifically "facilitates the aforementioned acts"

Examining Means (or, how a trafficker compels a victim), the universal elements across these countries include threats, use of force, fraud, coercion, and language around abduction, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, and the giving or receiving of payments. Some of the main differences are:

- Colombia notably omits explicit means from its trafficking definition, yet Constitutional Court case law has interpreted the "Means" requirements through the Palermo Protocol
- Nepal, Spain, and Uganda all explicitly include the full range of "Means" stated above
- U.S. emphasizes force, fraud, or coercion as the core "Means"

Finally, Purpose (meaning the types of exploitation) is where we find the most significant contextual variation. Regarding sexual exploitation, the overarching consensus across these countries is to criminalize sexual exploitation. Despite this, there is a different emphasis depending on the country:

- Spain includes "sexual exploitation, including pornography"
- Uganda provides a detailed definition covering "prostitution, sex tourism, pornography, production of pornographic materials, or use for sexual intercourse or other lascivious conduct"
- Colombia references "exploitation of prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation"

For labor trafficking, there is broad agreement that forced labor, slavery, and servitude are key components of the definition, but within these contexts, there are nuanced differences. Including:

- Uganda explicitly defines "forced labour" as work "exacted under threat of penalty" without voluntary offer
- Spain covers "forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude"
- Nepal references "forced labor or services, slavery or similar practices to slavery, servitude"

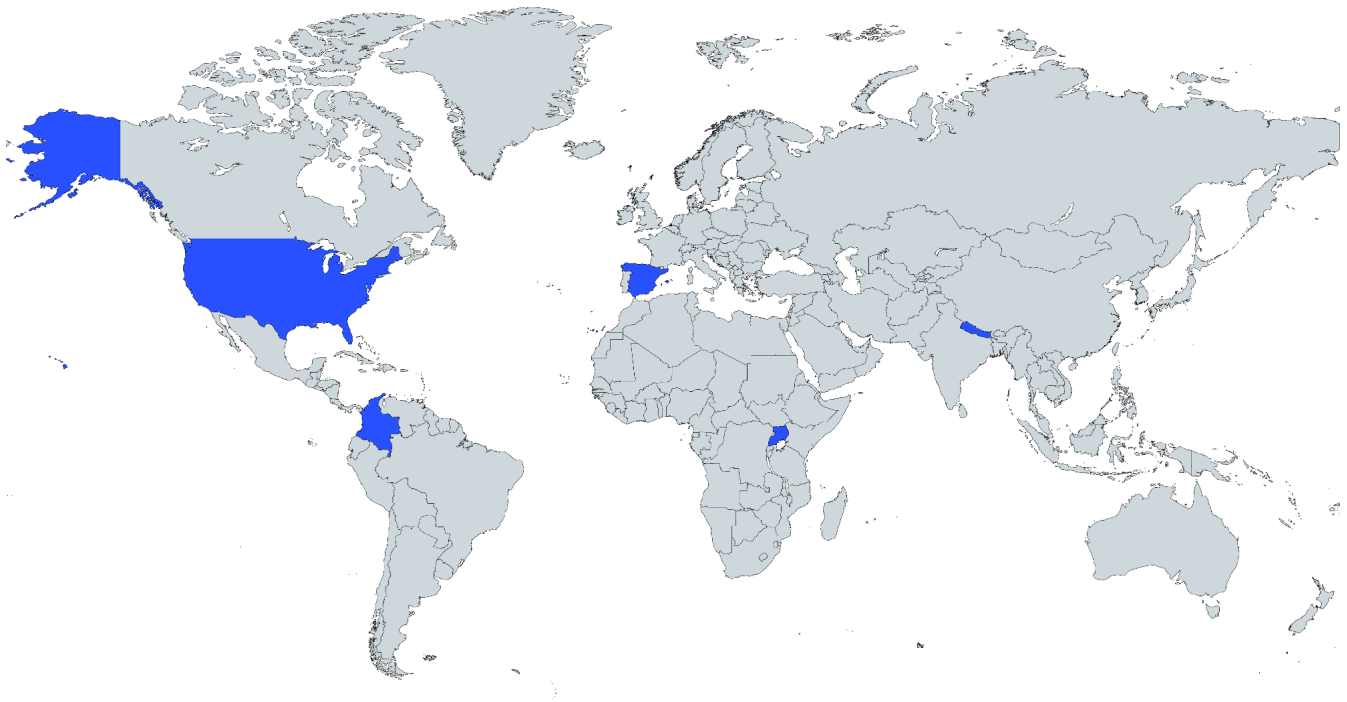
Most striking is the inclusion of various country-specific actions within the specific definitions. For example, Uganda has a very comprehensive list of violations ranging from human sacrifice and organ removal "for purposes of witchcraft, rituals or harmful human practices", the use of children in armed conflict, harmful child labor, and debt bondage. By comparison, both Nepal and Spain also include

organ removal (with a medical focus), forced marriages, and general exploitation for criminal purposes. Finally, Colombia is also inclusive of marriage, terming it “servile marriage”, as well as sexual tourism. The United States, in contrast, has no federal legislation on organ trafficking; forced marriages, however, may be criminalized on a state-by-state basis.

Across these countries, all recognize that children cannot consent to trafficking, and use 18 years of age to delineate who is a minor. However, each country's approach differs slightly:

- Colombia, Spain, and Uganda explicitly state that child consent is irrelevant
- Nepal implies this through separate provisions addressing human trafficking of children
- The U.S. states that force, fraud, and coercion are not required to prove sex trafficking of children

While all these countries embrace the international legal framework, their conceptual elaborations reflect distinct priorities. The variations suggest that while international standards provide a foundation, effective anti-trafficking laws require contextual adaptation to address local realities, cultural practices, and the capabilities of the legal system. Broadly, this has practical implications for international collaboration to address human trafficking when it crosses borders. This includes cross-national law enforcement investigation, resource allocation, and demonstrates the need for established protocols where various countries agree on procedures and response options so survivors do not fall through the cracks.



These examples underscore the need for context-specific approaches to reform, while also broadening our understanding of human trafficking to encompass a global effort. The challenge lies in maintaining international coherence while ensuring domestic relevance and enforceability. Although the purpose of this report is to provide broad, globally inclusive perspectives from survivors with lived experiences, it is important to acknowledge that the most actionable efforts will likely be specific to a particular region and context.

2.3 Taking an International Perspective

Adopting an international view on human trafficking is complex and nuanced. The fragmentation of response systems poses a significant barrier to effective anti-trafficking efforts worldwide. The European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) documented in 2023 how legal and social systems across Eastern Europe frequently operate in "institutional silos", with police, social workers, and judicial authorities maintaining limited information-sharing policies (FRA, 2023). In 2024, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) convened the ASEAN Workshop on International Legal Cooperation on Trafficking in Persons to validate a zero draft of a compendium specifically for the ASEAN region to address intra-region coordination concerns and strengthen regional and international cooperation in preventing and combating trafficking in persons (UN, 2024). In 2021, the African Union (AU) published a policy document outlining the trends of trafficking in persons across the continent and presented strategies and actionable commitments for AU member states to address the pressing need for a coordinated plan of action to guide AU states (AU, 2021). The increasing demand for cooperation is essential to prevent significant delays, re-traumatizing survivors, and dismissals of cases, all of which undermine the purpose and moral duty of delivering justice (TIP Report, 2024).

Additionally, the global legal context around human trafficking of children continues to exhibit significant gaps. Many nations lack comprehensive legislation capable of furthering successful trafficking investigations and prosecutions (Childress, 2025; Sarkar, 2015). For example, legislation is slow to account for the quickly changing online and digital landscape that traffickers leverage to exploit children (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2024). In studies based in North America and Europe, prosecutors routinely cite the need for legal reform in order to better hold traffickers accountable (Dianiska et al., 2023; Farrell et al., 2014; Mitsilegas et al., 2019; Quas et al., 2023). Moreover, international judicial systems frequently fail to implement child-centered approaches when handling trafficking cases (Yaman Kennedy, 2024).

2.4 The Impact on Survivors

Human trafficking represents a pervasive issue that permeates all communities and crosses national boundaries. While anyone can be a victim of human trafficking, children in particular face various vulnerabilities across exploitation contexts due to limited resources, their developmental stage, and their limited ability to control their environment or those around them (Querol & Lerner, 2024; Warria, 2022). Survivors of human trafficking have long discussed the various impacts on their lives that are a direct result of the exploitation they experienced, from negative mental and physical health outcomes, stigma, social isolation, financial precarity, addiction, housing instability, and difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Clifton, 2020; Marburger & Pickover, 2020; Nikkel, 2024; Wagner et al., 2024).

The health implications of trafficking for survivors are both immediate and enduring. As growing evidence suggests, significant impacts of exploitation include chronic physical harm as well as profound psychological impacts (Beyrer & Stachowiak, 2003; Klabbers et al., 2023). Across samples of trafficking survivors, research shows that the overwhelming majority of survivors experience significant health complications, including neurological disorders, traumatic brain injuries, malnutrition, and complex substance abuse addictions (Albright et al., 2020; Armstrong & Greenbaum, 2019; Beyrer & Stachowiak, 2003). These vulnerabilities are often described as mechanisms of control used by traffickers, especially substance use, creating additional barriers to exiting exploitation (Aljadeff & Titchen, 2024; Furlong & Hinnant, 2024; Hopper, 2017).

“I have developed a complex post-traumatic stress disorder, a metabolic disorder, plus a moderate degree of dissociation, which makes it much more difficult to perform than other people at work, study, and has greatly impacted how I build relationships with others, so I have had to try three times harder to achieve what others do. The worst thing is that to get out of the abusive environment, you do not have the tools or help. In Colombia, there are no specific shelters for this problem. When my sexual exploitation ended, I continued living physical, psychological, and emotional abuse by my mother; it was very difficult to get out of that environment.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

The psychological effects of trafficking are severe and usually long-lasting. Many child survivors develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and dissociative disorders. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, in the United States, children who have been trafficked frequently suffer from hypervigilance, nightmares, and difficulty forming trust-based relationships (NCTSN, 2021). Research from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Global Report on Trafficking in Persons shows that victims recruited before the age of 15 are more likely to suffer from long-term cognitive and emotional impairments, including memory loss and reduced executive functioning (UNODC, 2024).

Survivors often talk about the social stigma they experienced and the alienation that victims of human trafficking face because of misconceptions about exploitation (Laurie & Richardson, 2021). These misconceptions often center on victim-blaming narratives that question why individuals did not escape their situations, fail to recognize the complex psychological manipulation employed by traffickers, or assume voluntary participation in exploitative activities (Constantinou, 2020; Davy, 2016; Reid, 2016).

CASE STUDY

Criminalization of Survivors

“...we received the case of a woman who had been sold by her friend to a pimp in Cartagena. She was there for two years and was unjustly imprisoned along with her captors because she agreed to sell drugs to maintain her own dependence created by her captors when she was taken. Most of these girls had previously experienced sexual abuse by people close to them when they were kids.”

– Shared by a member of the Survivor Advisory Council

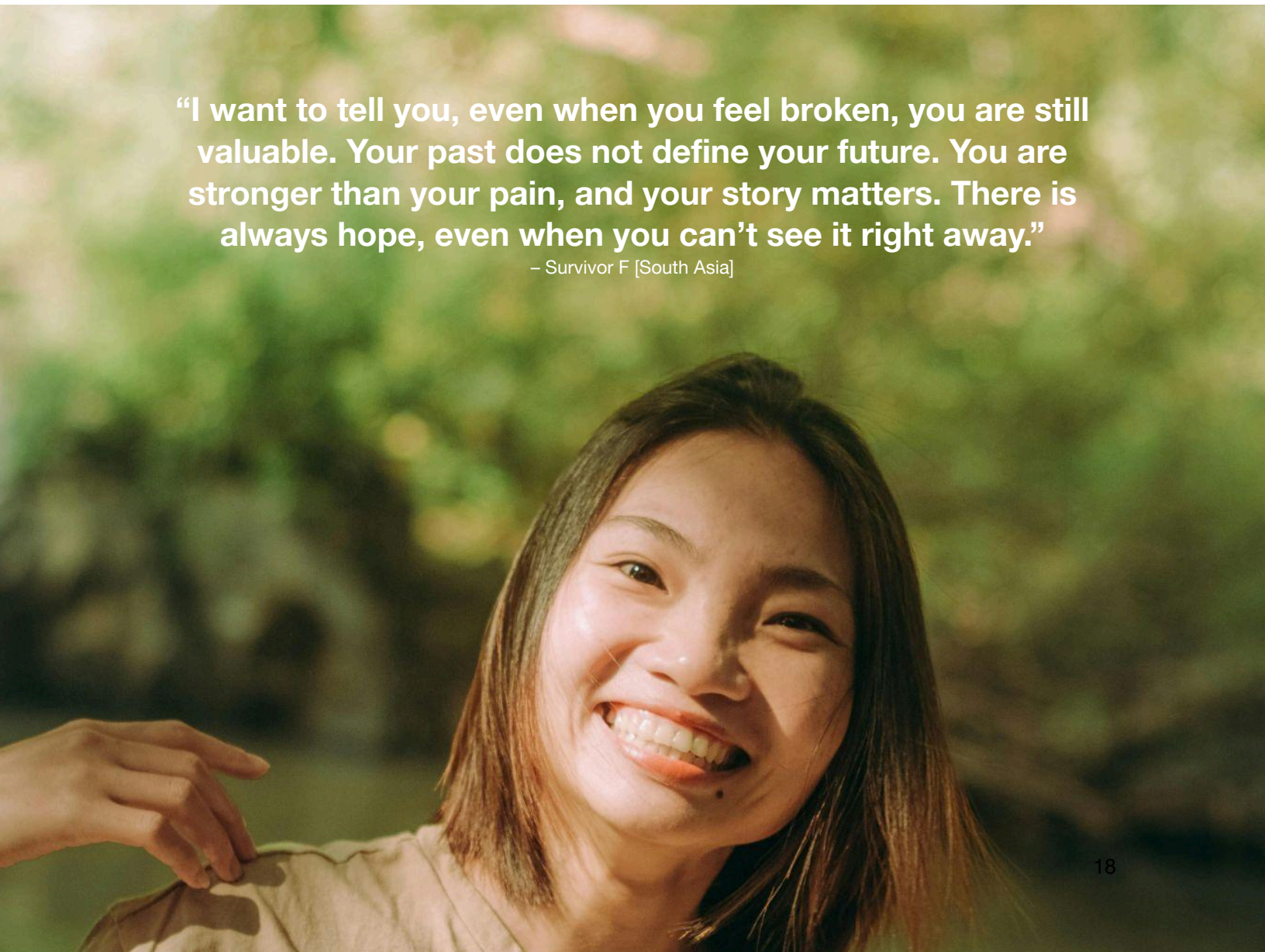
In recent years, research has posited that stigma is not as singular as it is often discussed, but rather, a multifaceted construct requiring intervention across all societal levels, institutions, and nations (Fukushima et al., 2020). Addressing the root causes of shame and stigma experienced by survivors necessitates understanding the “multiplicity of stigma”, a framework that recognizes how stigmatization operates simultaneously across individual, community, national, and international contexts (Fukushima et al., 2020).

There are multiple facets of change needed to address human trafficking of minors. For this reason, one of the main goals of this report is to amplify survivors' voices by sharing their insights on how to promote healing and support others on their healing journeys worldwide. As previously stated, based on the Survivor Advisory Council's lived experiences, we present three main areas of the problem: **(1) government responses, (2) education & awareness, and (3) prevention**. In each section, survivors share their perspectives and first-hand knowledge on these issues and propose solutions.

Despite these impacts, survivors are resilient. For those reading this report, especially anyone who has had these experiences, here are words from one survivor to you:

“I want to tell you, even when you feel broken, you are still valuable. Your past does not define your future. You are stronger than your pain, and your story matters. There is always hope, even when you can't see it right away.”

– Survivor F [South Asia]



Government Responses

Around the world, governments have increasingly raised concerns about human trafficking, particularly of children. It is vital, therefore, to establish the role of governments and their responsibilities when it comes to addressing pressing concerns related to human trafficking and exploitation. In this regard, government responses to human trafficking reflect fundamental questions about the role of the state, domestically and internationally, in protecting human dignity and fulfilling the obligations of safety, protection, and prosperity for its citizens. Governments have the authority to define legal boundaries of acceptable human behavior. In this context, a nation's government defines the scope in which various forms of exploitation are criminalized and what constitutes unacceptable treatment of human beings. This authority comes with profound responsibility: when states fail to protect their most vulnerable populations from exploitation, they abdicate their basic duty to safeguard human rights. Since human trafficking often transcends nations' borders, governments worldwide must extend their protective reach beyond their own citizens to global communities. In this context, intergovernmental cooperation is as much a practical necessity as a signal that human rights are universal and the exploitation of any person, regardless of nationality, undermines the shared values that bind our international communities together.

Nevertheless, this concentration of definitional and enforcement power in governmental hands raises critical questions about whose voices shape these responses and whether state-centered approaches adequately address the complex realities that survivors themselves understand and experience.

3.1 Reviewing Institutional Support Systems

3.1.1 Government Officials

Survivors noted that corruption within governments and among government officials can either promote or be complicit in perpetuating exploitation. Certain reports, such as the United States Trafficking in Persons Report (OMCTP, 2024), outline that often, certain governments conduct state-sponsored human trafficking. Meaning, trafficking and exploitation are facilitated or promoted by state officials or government policies, so that "officials use their power to exploit their nationals" (OMCTP, 2024, p. 28). In numerous studies across international contexts, state and government corruption is cited as a prevalent and significant barrier to addressing human trafficking, as it contributes both as a root cause of vulnerability and facilitator of exploitation (Agbu, 2003; DiRienzo, 2018; Studnicka, 2010).

For example, state corruption undermines the essential institutional foundations that citizens rely upon, disrupts and impedes the rule of law, fosters distrust among citizens, and engenders instability within both the private and public sectors. While it is noteworthy that government officials have been found to contribute to bribery, either for documentation or leniency for traffickers, permit illicit border crossings, and disregard areas of risk and concern that precipitate trafficking (McCarthy, 2009; Surtees, 2008; Waziri-Azi, 2024), it is an often under-discussed area of concern. Most pressing is the participation of officials in human trafficking, which previous researchers and advocates have pointed out "undermines the basic structure of government and the moral responsibility of its officials to uphold and protect the integrity of the law" (Studnicka, 2010, p. 30). According to survivors, it is this last point that receives less attention, yet is a significant concern for victims wishing to seek help.

“...the government has tried so much to put human trafficking at bay, although there are a lot of challenges like corruption among the officials. Here you find that sometimes the traffickers are not convicted because they bribe the officials and this sometimes makes the victims afraid to look for help from police.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

“... trafficking survivors are people who have experienced deep physical and emotional harm. Many may react negatively to authority figures, especially when those authorities were absent or failed them in the past. Government responses must reflect this reality.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

Due to the difficulties in identifying abuses of power, such as those described here, and because many perpetrators may never be caught, it is hard to find concrete evidence of such abuse. Indeed, there is a lack of research on how prevalent government officials, such as law enforcement, may (un)intentionally facilitate human trafficking through engaging in misconduct. Despite this lack of research, there is evidence that government officials, in this instance, law enforcement, have been arrested for soliciting sex from prostituted individuals while on duty (Stinson et al., 2016). Moreover, this has been covered in the news. Until 2014, for example, Hawaii law provided an exemption for law enforcement officers from prostitution statutes during undercover operations (Associated Press, 2014; Dockterman, 2014; Lincoln, 2014). Legislative reforms eliminated this exemption following documented allegations that officers engaged in sexual contact with prostituted individuals under the guise of investigation before making arrests (Associated Press, 2014; Dockterman, 2014; Lincoln, 2014). In these examples, it would, therefore, be reasonable to assume that such misconduct has the consequence of facilitating sexual exploitation, especially of children. Additionally, one study in Pakistan found that corruption among officials that facilitates exploitation often went undetected (Khan et al., 2018). For survivors, this lack of empirical evidence is not a true reflection of their experiences. As noted by one such survivor:

“Survivors are all too familiar with buyers that are in government roles, the military, and law enforcement. They are aware that they can’t report for fear of retaliation.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

Trust in government is a multi-faceted concept that has to be addressed if survivors of human trafficking are to receive help. First, the institution of government, as a system, needs to be responsive to the needs of victims and proactive in reducing risk factors leading to exploitation. Furthermore, when a government body claims to be working on its response, there should always be accountability and transparency measures in place for the public. It must also be able to hold traffickers, including government officials themselves, accountable. In a review of Nigeria’s legal framework for combating human trafficking, Anume (2025) recommends offering resources and incentives for law enforcement agencies to reduce corruption in their jurisdictions. The second concern is that those who are elected or involved as state officials must themselves be trustworthy. Fear of government officials being perpetrators, or of retaliatory measures taken by government officials on behalf of perpetrators, is a global concern that plagues ongoing anti-trafficking responses.

Nevertheless, there is promise. Some survivors note positive views of government efforts, particularly when discussing positive coordination and partnership with relevant agencies and community partners. To date, little research has included the positive evaluations of survivors and their views on government actions. In part, this is likely driven by research questions seeking to understand ongoing issues and gaps, as well as policy-driven initiatives to examine where survivors deem government actions inadequate. Survivors noted that change can be slow, but demonstrating a willingness to implement protections goes a long way to providing support for victims.

“The government has been very effective in responding to human trafficking. For example, when I was trafficked in Nairobi with many other children, the government through police came to our rescue, fed us, and identified anti-trafficking organizations ... who offered [temporary] residential shelter with empowerment programs and reintegration.”

– Abura Joanita [Africa]

“I think the government does things it can eventually put into action. It’s never fast or overnight. Changes happen slowly over time. I also don’t feel everyone is treated fairly or equally when it comes to human trafficking. The government’s response is satisfactory. Not the best, but it is evolving to meet more needs of survivors.”

– Survivor B [North America]

“I do believe our state is ahead of most already. Out of the 20 laws and or bills associated with combating human trafficking, our state has passed 18 out of the 20.”

– Survivor C [North America]

Building trust with trafficking survivors requires governments to take concrete, visible action. Legislative reform serves as a crucial mechanism because it demonstrates official recognition of the problem and the government’s commitment to addressing it. When survivors see their government passing laws that specifically criminalize trafficking, protect victim rights, and fund support services, it signals that their experiences are taken seriously.

3.1.2 First Responders

One of the most common responses to human trafficking is the activation of first responders, especially law enforcement. As human trafficking is often defined as a criminal-legal issue, one of the most common strategies to identify and respond to trafficking falls upon law enforcement (Bello, 2018; Farrell et al., 2019; Villacampa et al., 2022). Nevertheless, despite the activation of many training initiatives, awareness, and specialized task forces, many survivors of trafficking often point towards training and sensitivity issues related to law enforcement as part of their experiences.

“When I went through my personal experience of trafficking, I didn’t know who to trust. I had seen both good and bad sides of law enforcement. I waited a few years before I actually reached out for help when I escaped.”

– Survivor B [North America]

“We are located in a rural area, which is between two destination cities. I don’t feel listened to by local officials, and in what I see, I don’t believe the law enforcement is educated enough in solving the problem of human trafficking. It has to be 100% clear before action is taken. When we have worked in the field for awhile understand that it is

beneath the surface w[h]ere it thrives.”

– Reverend Allysa McKenzie [North America]

Routinely, the types of training law enforcement receive on human trafficking tend to have three common critiques: 1) focus on the sex trafficking of only girls and women (at the exclusion of other types of trafficking and populations) and highlight the most severe forms of exploitation 2) often do not provide adequate attention to meeting the needs of victims in an trauma-informed and victim centered capacity and 3) do not include enough survivor input, meaning that these trainings do not include the perspectives of those who have first hand knowledge how law enforcement should respond to trafficking victims (Farrell et al., 2017, 2019). Too often, studies across global contexts find similar trends: contact with law enforcement can be a very negative experience for trafficking victims (Klabbers et al., 2023; Villacampa et al., 2023; Zervos, 2015). Evidence is especially high that victims are often treated disrespectfully, can be revictimized or exploited by law enforcement while seeking help, and are not believed (Nguyen et al., 2020; Omojola, 2023).

“Honestly, based on my experience from both sides of the story, I’ve witnessed the clear differences in how state security bodies respond to trafficking and sexual exploitation, depending on their level of training and awareness. Police forces that are not trained in these issues tend to lack sensitivity when interacting with survivors, while certain specialized units of the Guardia Civil demonstrate a much more informed and respectful approach.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

Another unifying theme across survivors’ experiences is when systems failed to recognize their abuse, or a lack of resources presented challenges for receiving help, which is partially due to a lack of funding and resources. For example, three survivors share how a lack of resources is a significant barrier to helping children who may be experiencing exploitation:

“There is often a quick reaction when someone calls for help, but there is no consistent or adequate follow-up response tailored to each individual case. This creates a great deal of uncertainty and fear for victims. The system responds, but not always in a way that meets the complex needs of those who have been exploited.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

“In Colombia, there are currently no specialized shelters dedicated to victims of human trafficking, especially not for children. The existing governmental institution, the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), provides shelter for children facing a wide range of issues—including domestic violence, abandonment, [behavioral] challenges, and, in some cases, trafficking. However, the system is overwhelmed. Temporary shelters, or "casas de paso", are often unregulated, and many children placed there experience further victimization, including abuse by the very individuals tasked with their care.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

“The government lacks the shelters and specialized services for victims, especially the boys, men, and those in the rural areas. Sometimes the government lacks sufficient funding and staffing to fulfill its mandate.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

When the government's response to human trafficking of children is lacking, then survivors have an even more difficult time escaping their abusers, which means they will not be able to access resources or assist in any form of investigation to hold the perpetrators accountable.

3.1.3 Official Responses for Survivors

The voices of trafficking survivors reveal critical gaps in institutional responses that must be addressed through comprehensive, system-wide reforms. These perspectives illuminate how current systems often fail to provide adequate protection, support, and pathways to recovery for those who have experienced exploitation. Survivors consistently emphasize that effective anti-trafficking efforts require not only reactive measures but proactive changes to the very systems designed to protect the vulnerable population. Specifically, meaningful progress depends on addressing structural barriers, resource limitations, and institutional failures that perpetuate cycles of risk and re-victimization.

“Many may react negatively to authority figures, especially when those authorities were absent or failed them in the past. Government responses must reflect this reality....The system itself must change. That means faster and more humane immigration processes, stronger protections for people reporting crimes, and more inclusive social policies. No one should have to choose between hunger and exploitation [emphasis added].”

– Survivor A [Europe]

“I have seen the systems that are meant to protect fail many times, and it is because of a lack of leadership, training, and resources. It is easier for people to look away than it is for them to truly help.” – Faythe Kadona [North America]

Unsurprisingly, the need for easily accessible reporting mechanisms is one of the many ways governments and anti-trafficking systems need to improve. These challenges transcend national boundaries and require coordinated responses across various sectors, including immigration, law enforcement, social services, and community groups. Survivors’ experiences show how fragmented efforts and inadequate resources create additional trauma for those seeking help, while insufficient training and leadership failures within protective systems compound the original harm. True survivor-centered responses must encompass both immediate safety measures and long-term structural changes that target the root causes of institutional failures.

“Communities need safe, anonymous, and responsive ways to report trafficking. Promoting hotlines, mobile applications, and other digital tools will increase detection and response, particularly in isolated or underserved areas...Despite the existence of legal frameworks and modest progress in recent years, trafficking continues to thrive due to gaps in enforcement, limited victim services, and insufficient state presence in remote territories. A more structured, victim-centered response is urgently needed.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

The institutional gaps identified by survivors point to a fundamental issue that extends beyond policy reform and resource allocation, and point to the widespread lack of understanding about human trafficking among both the general public and key stakeholders. While structural changes to protective systems are essential, these reforms must be accompanied by comprehensive education and awareness initiatives that address the knowledge deficits and misconceptions that enable trafficking to flourish undetected. In this endeavor, governments must meaningfully include survivors in the development and design of all anti-trafficking efforts. Survivors possess invaluable insight, understanding, and lived

experience that cannot be replicated, providing essential guidance on systemic issues.

3.1.4 Legal Accountability

Countries demonstrate considerable variation with regard to their legislation combating human trafficking of children, and even within countries, such as the United States, there can be considerable variation in legislation between different jurisdictions (see, e.g., Branscum et al., 2021). In Nigeria, for instance, the “Criminal Code Act” applies exclusively to the Southern part of Nigeria, whereas the “Penal Code” applies exclusively to the Northern part of Nigeria (Amune, 2025). This creates enforcement barriers because the definition of trafficking and its associated penalties can vary significantly across jurisdictions. This includes how victims navigate these systems, which are often rife with legal barriers such as criminal justice cooperation, immigration concerns, and overall belief that the law will not work for them (APRAMP et al., 2023; Barrick et al., 2021; Yaman Kennedy, 2024).

“There should be clear support in navigating government procedures, especially regarding documentation and legal residency. A dignified recovery and reintegration process starts with being seen, believed, and supported by the system.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

In general, these existing legal frameworks have been heavily criticized for inadequately addressing the human trafficking of children (Amune, 2025; Contreras Pardo, 2016; Sultana, 2024; Surtees, 2008). In the context of the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) recognizes that anyone under the age of 18 years old cannot consent to engaging in commercial sex. However, the penalties for purchasing commercial sex, on average, are less severe than the penalties associated with prostitution (Bach & Litam, 2017; Smith & Samantha, 2010; Tidball et al., 2016). Therefore, even with anti-trafficking legislation, the legal framework to address the demand for commercial sex is often lacking (Bach & Litam, 2017). One survivor reflects on the inadequacies of the legal frameworks in the United States in the following:

“I would then address laws that need to be strengthened regarding buyers...Survivors are arrested every day for prostitution charges and, oftentimes, criminal charges related to their trafficking experience. They face more jail time and fines than buyers. This is backwards and needs to be addressed not only at the federal level, but also the state level as well.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

“I would also tell the government officials to hold traffickers responsible. Many times, survivors see their abusers walk free while living in fear and shame. Make the justice system safer for victims to speak out.”

– Abura Joanita [Africa]

In another example, Amune critiques the fact that some forms of trafficking of children are punishable with a fine rather than imprisonment in Nigeria (2025). Additionally, the author notes that given the prevalence of transnational trafficking of children in Nigeria, the government should strengthen agreements with neighboring countries to strengthen international cooperation and coordination in law enforcement efforts.

“We are not criminals—we are victims of crime. Many survivors carry criminal records for actions we were coerced into under threat, violence, or manipulation. These records block our access to employment, housing, and healing.”
– Survivor C [North America]

Additionally, Survivor Advisory Council members note that the lack of government regulation exposes children to labor exploitation in addition to sexual exploitation. Most anti-trafficking government responses emphasize the criminalization of certain behaviors without addressing the importance of regulations on working conditions and restrictions on child labor (ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2025; Pruthi & Purohit, 2024). As Feasley (2016) notes, “vulnerability to labor exploitation can also manifest itself in a country's laws or political situation” (p. 18). This regulatory oversight facilitates child labor exploitation both within a nation and within global supply chains (Feasley, 2016; Yagci Sokat, 2022). For example, in 2023, the United States began investigating Perdue Farms and Tyson Foods for violating state labor laws and exploiting children in meat-packing facilities across the country (Kim et al., 2023).

That said, countries may also inadvertently facilitate child exploitation through purchasing goods produced with exploited labor. For example, in 2024, several major corporations were accused of aiding and abetting the exploitation of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo to mine cobalt (Ogao, 2024). Similarly, children as young as nine years old face extremely hazardous conditions in Ghana's cocoa production (Mull & Kirkhorn, 2005). The complexity of global supply chains and their cross-border nature make regulation difficult for individual nations. In this regard, the International Labour Organization and UNICEF released a joint report documenting efforts by Costa Rica, Jordan, Turkey, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam to end child labor exploitation (Alshehail, 2023). From a demand perspective, California's 2012 “Transparency in Supply Chains Act” is a novel law that mandates companies to disclose information about their supply chains, encouraging more oversight (Yagci Sokat, 2022).

In summary, these legal inadequacies highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reform at multiple levels of governance to effectively combat the human trafficking of children. The disparate legal frameworks, varying penalties, and enforcement gaps create conditions where traffickers can exploit jurisdictional weaknesses, leaving children vulnerable to ongoing exploitation. The testimonies of survivors underscore how current legal approaches often criminalize victims while failing to adequately punish those responsible for creating demand for trafficked children. Without coordinated legal reform and international standards that focus on protecting children rather than solely prosecuting victims, these systemic vulnerabilities will continue to hinder efforts to eliminate the human trafficking of children.

3.2 Improving Government Responses

The global response to human trafficking has been fundamentally shaped by its legal classification as a transnational crime requiring coordinated governmental action. Governments worldwide have primarily approached human trafficking through criminal justice frameworks, emphasizing law enforcement, prosecution, and legal remedies. Even when public health or social work approaches are utilized, there are key gaps in responses that protect and serve survivors. This criminalization approach has positioned government agencies, from local law enforcement to federal prosecutors and immigration authorities, as the primary responders to trafficking cases. Unfortunately, due to the overwhelmed criminal justice systems, which cause low rates of prosecution and convictions, many survivors report that they were either not able to hold their traffickers accountable or the system itself did not pursue human trafficking convictions.

Furthermore, the inherently international nature of many trafficking operations has necessitated unprecedented levels of intergovernmental cooperation, requiring countries to harmonize their legal definitions, share intelligence, coordinate investigations across borders, and develop mutual assistance protocols. While governmental and legal responses have laid important groundwork for addressing trafficking, survivors' experiences highlight both the strengths and the critical shortcomings of relying primarily on criminal justice frameworks. Framing trafficking mainly as a criminal issue risks obscuring its deeper nature as a human rights violation rooted in complex social, economic, and political conditions.

A key component of strengthening governmental responses to human trafficking will have to include strengthening existing legal frameworks. This should be done collaboratively, taking into account the current technological and digital age in which we live, such as online social media use and the use of gaming systems. This includes how to keep children safe by providing the necessary tools and resources they need, as well as helping parents understand the complexities of online exploitation.



Awareness and Education

The Survivor Advisory Council recognizes that combating the human trafficking of children requires proper awareness and education for the public and those traffickers target. These terms, often used similarly, can include public campaigns, training programs, and community outreach efforts.

Awareness aims to share information with the community. This can include teaching people how to identify warning signs of trafficking, what common misunderstandings are, and how to build safer communities for children. Education is more focused, targeting specific groups of people who are most likely to see trafficking situations or interact with victims. These groups learn specific skills to recognize trafficking early and respond in ways that help victims. This can include training in early detection and proper response strategies tailored to frontline professionals, such as advocates, teachers, doctors, and police (e.g., Kenny et al., 2019). While separate, these are interconnected actions that are required to address trafficking across communities properly.

Put another way, awareness is the safety net cast to let the community know about trafficking, while education gives specific tools to those who need it most. Both approaches are needed to stop exploitation, and everyone can do their part.

4.1 Raising Awareness: Dispelling Myths, Rejecting Sensationalism

The Survivor Advisory Council has had a variety of experiences with efforts to raise awareness about human trafficking. We believe that raising awareness is a primary goal for any group committed to ending the human trafficking of children (Hoyle et al., 2011; Sobel, 2014). In the words of two survivors,

“Many people are drawn to the human trafficking topic because of empathy and desire to protect human rights...Sometimes the need to make a difference drives us.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

“We have [a] responsibility to be loud and bold about the solutions to ending trafficking and the encouragement of healing.”

– Survivor C [North America]



Many survivors say that most people believe many myths and misconceptions about what human trafficking of children looks like, which is almost always not the reality (Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2023). Indeed, research finds important knowledge gaps exist among the public regarding their understanding of human trafficking of children (Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2023). These misconceptions often perpetuate harmful **victim-blaming attitudes** against survivors. For example, two survivors discuss the consequences of the persistence of these myths:

“Also, I still hear of people who call it choice, why don’t they just leave, etc. People are so engrossed in movies and shows about trafficking, but don’t understand the psychological warfare that exists. I talk about trauma and trauma bonding when I do training because I want people to know that it’s more than just walking away. There are real emotional needs being met in the trafficker/victim relationship. We were all created to love and be loved [emphasis added], and that is one reason that people stay. They are in love and despite the horrors, have been told it is the best love they will ever have. I was told many times that no one would ever want me or love me after what I had done. I believed it for years. It caused me to stay in abusive relationships and trafficking because I was conditioned to think and believe it was what I was worth. I use my lived experience and my healing journey now to help people understand that it is more complex than what they think it is.”
– Faythe Kadona (North America)

Many studies show that survivors of human trafficking suffer complex harm. This creates what experts call trauma bonding, where survivors may feel connected to their trafficker even though the survivor was being exploited (Casassa et al., 2022; Reid, 2024; Sanchez et al., 2019). Trauma bonding is particularly pronounced in children whose ongoing cognitive development limits their capacity to distinguish appropriate from exploitative relationships (Reid, 2024). Because of this, traffickers deliberately position themselves as primary attachment figures to normalize exploitation, leading children to form emotional bonds with their abusers and employ self-blame as a psychological defense mechanism to process trauma (Reid, 2024).

“I didn’t know I had been trafficked. I was scared, confused, and completely alone. At that age [ten years old], I didn’t know what was right or wrong.”
– Survivor F [South Asia]

Consequently, it is crucial for awareness-raising efforts to work towards dispelling these misconceptions in the general public. Many survivors who shared their voices in this report have had experience with successful efforts to raise awareness about the issue of human trafficking of children. However, the Survivor Advisory Council critiques the continued sensationalism of human trafficking in such campaigns, leading to the persistence of misconceptions about the human trafficking of children. Take, for instance, two members of the Survivor Advisory Council’s experiences with education and awareness campaigns:

“[There] are still campaigns that depict a woman with a hand over her mouth and some type of writing about stopping trafficking. This is sensationalism. It happens a lot out of good intentions however, we need to move away from showing the horror and abuse. People can’t properly identify trafficking if all they see are bruises, handcuffs, guns, and duct tape.”
– Faythe Kadona [North America]

“...if you ask a common person, they would tell you that human trafficking is something hidden, extreme, where you are chained and deprived of everything, they think they are taking you to other countries, and often only associate it with sexual exploitation and have no knowledge of the different kinds of exploitation.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

These observations align with the research on how the general public may view victims of many forms of violence (Hoyle et al., 2011; Johnston et al., 2015; E. O’Brien, 2016; Pajnik, 2010). Not only are such problematic symbols and images (e.g., bruises, handcuffs, chains) not very aligned with reality, but when awareness campaigns perpetuate such misconceptions, they also create unrealistic expectations about what human trafficking looks like (Amponsah et al., 2024; Baird & Connolly, 2023; Benavente et al., 2022; De Vries & Goggin, 2020; Deitz, 2024; Franchino–Olsen, 2021a, 2021b; Franchino–Olsen et al., 2022; Gezinski & Gonzalez–Pons, 2024b; Martin et al., 2023; O’Brien et al., 2024; Proia–Lelouey & Desquesnes, 2025; Schroeder et al., 2024). This makes it more challenging for the general public to understand and recognize actual cases. Two survivors elaborate on this when discussing how those experiencing exploitation often do not realize it and so they do not seek help until much later:

“Sometimes people think it only affects certain people but that’s not true. You’d be surprised how many people you come across and don’t realize they are in a really bad situation. It’s not just walking outside on the track. Trafficking happens in hotel rooms, spas, massage parlors, and nail salons. It happens everywhere.”

– Survivor B [North America]

“Many people are trafficked and others are being trafficked but they don’t know. For example, people use young girls as maid servants and don’t know that it’s bad. I didn’t know about human trafficking until I was trafficked. People lack the true information about trafficking, its risks, its form, and consequences.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

The disconnect between what trafficking is and the misconceptions that people believe has severe impacts: when trafficking does not involve signs such as visible bruises, potential survivors may go unrecognized and unsupported in their communities.

“Many people around me are unaware of the high rates of trafficking that exist in this country. There’s a widespread belief that human trafficking only happens in movies or TV series—when in reality, what many of us live through is far worse than any action film. An effective awareness campaign should break these myths and make trafficking visible as a present, everyday crisis happening in our neighborhoods. It should also highlight the systemic failures and vulnerabilities that lead people—especially women—to fall into these situations. People need to know that trafficking isn’t always violent or obvious; it can happen through manipulation, false promises, and the silence of institutions.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

CASE STUDY

Impact of Culture and Media Messaging on Exploitation

"I was 11 when I first watched the Colombian TV series, 'Sin senos no hay paraíso'. The story, centered around a young schoolgirl, portrayed sexual exploitation not as violence, but as a path to success. Later came the British series 'Secret Diary of a Call Girl' showing a woman who appeared to enjoy being paid for sex. She lived freely, traveled, laughed—it all seemed thrilling. As a girl, I saw those images and believed them. I learned to associate beauty with opportunity and control through sexual power. But it was a lie. A trap beautifully disguised. From age 11 to 16, I carried this idea with me. I thought it was empowering, even normal. At 18, alone and emotionally unprotected, I was easy to manipulate. A trafficker took advantage of my vulnerability. He involved me in commercial sex, where I quickly learned that what was sold as glamorous was, in reality, painful, violent, and dehumanizing. Later, a man who paid for me held me under his control for nearly a year. I had become an object—something owned, not someone. For years I believed I had chosen it. But now I see I was groomed—not by one person, but by a culture that glamorizes exploitation and sells it as female power. I believed I was in control, when in fact I was being directed, shaped, and reduced. I survived that culture. I believe in sexual freedom, but that freedom does not mean being sold, objectified, or bought. Real freedom is chosen from desire not from survival [emphasis added]. No one should ever be paid to be touched. That is not empowerment—it is erasure. All of this began forming when I was still a child—when I was growing, learning, and shaping my identity. This could have been prevented. Maybe if someone had noticed me. Maybe if my school had taught the reality of sexual exploitation. Maybe if society had offered guidance instead of silence and glamorized lies. If a network of care had existed around me, I might never have been pulled into that world of horror. There is something profoundly broken in the system. And that's where we must begin to act. Today, I understand that what shaped me was not just my personal trauma, but an entire cultural structure. Music, television, and popular feminism told me that being hypersexualized was power. But that was never empowerment—it was a repackaged form of submission. Scholars and survivors alike are beginning to name this: a cultural grooming that sells sexual self-exploitation as female liberation. I now work to break that narrative—for myself, and for the girls who are still being taught that being bought is the same as being free [emphasis added]."

– Carolina Córdova [Europe]

4.1.1 Awareness in Vulnerable Communities

Human traffickers target children with the least protection, the fewest resources, and the most vulnerable (Amponsah et al., 2024; Baird & Connolly, 2023; Benavente et al., 2022; Franchino-Olsen, 2021b; Proia-Lelouey & Desquesnes, 2025). Even so, several survivors featured in this report voiced criticism of large, public anti-trafficking awareness campaigns that failed to reach those at highest risk of exploitation. As shared by one survivor who has been involved with awareness-raising campaigns:

“I have come to realize that despite all the efforts the survivor bodies, government non-governmental organizations and all the stakeholders have put into creating awareness and prevention, you go to vulnerable communities and you find that they know nothing about human trafficking.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

It is not shocking that most survivors whose voices appear in this report expressed not knowing their situation constituted human trafficking until much later in life.

“The night I was arrested, I was not identified as a victim of human trafficking. I was identified as a drug addict and I was arrested by DEA agents...I had officers screaming at me about where I got the drugs from and one put me in the back of the cop car and got nose to nose with me and told me that if I told him where the drugs came from and what apartment to find them in, he would let me go. So I told him everything. He handcuffed me and took me to jail with the pimp [trafficker]. I lost all trust for police after that. What they didn’t know was that the pimp with me was trafficking the girl I was put with and was keeping tabs on me. He was also former military and up to that point, knew how to stay hidden in the shadows.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

In line with these statements, research shows some of the communities most difficult to connect with are those at risk of exploitation from traffickers (Abneh Tadesse & Tafesse, 2025; Kaufman & Crawford, 2011). At times, this involves having people recognize that human trafficking of children can happen in their own communities. One survivor, for example, discusses the continued misconceptions people in Colombia have regarding human trafficking, in part, due to a disconnect that anyone is at risk:

“Despite its growing prevalence, human trafficking is still widely misunderstood in Colombia. Many do not realize that it can occur within their own communities, often disguised as legitimate employment or migration opportunities...”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

More recent research has demonstrated that those who experience human trafficking, especially children, rarely self-identify and, therefore, the ability for children to self-identify human trafficking is vital (Hornor et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2016).

“First, prevention must begin with early education in schools and communities about consent, exploitation, and personal boundaries. Many young people fall into trafficking because they are never taught what it looks like or how it begins.” – Survivor A [Europe]

“When you are a child, you are building your vision of the world, you are like a blank canvas, therefore, you will believe every word that your attachment figures tell you. For

example, my father, who was my trafficker, taught me since I was conscious about the ‘games’ that adults play, that it was my duty as a woman to do what he was teaching me. It was like living three different lives, in the morning I was in school, in the afternoon I was exploited and at night I went to church. Being such an early stage of development my mind was fragmented. So it took a few years before I was finally able to put into words what I had experienced, because I couldn't even physically speak when the abuse started. If you can't put it into words, you can't report it.”

– Survivor D [South America]

4.1.2 Education

As previously stated, for this report, education on human trafficking of children is about any targeted efforts towards specific professionals who may serve as crucial ‘intervention points’, or someone who can identify a child at-risk of trafficking and intervene, such as law enforcement, doctors, nurses, teachers, and so on (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2019; de Vries et al., 2020; Hodge, 2014; Kenny et al., 2019; Nichols & Heil, 2015; Reid, 2013). That said, there is evidence around the globe suggesting that these professionals often do not recognize the signs without sufficient training on the human trafficking of children (APRAMP et al., 2023; Barrick et al., 2021; Macy et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pfeffer et al., 2023; Reid, 2013; Valadez et al., 2022).

For example, two survivors discuss such limitations due to a lack of training despite their countries having robust, well-executed campaigns:

“I am constantly engaged in training and education related to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, particularly within the European context and with a focus on Spain. These trainings are often very informative and well-structured, with strong legal and theoretical content. However, I find them to be quite impractical when it comes to direct engagement with women affected by trafficking. While understanding the legal and conceptual framework is important, what’s often missing is practical training on how to interact with survivors, how to listen, how to build trust, and how to respond in real-life situations.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

“When I was finally able to file a complaint with the prosecutor’s office, they misclassified my crime as “violent carnal access with the participation of one or more persons” instead of classifying it as what it was: child sexual exploitation. This demonstrates the poor knowledge of the judicial entities at the municipal level...”

– Survivor D [South America]

There has been much research, globally, about how to train persons serving in these crucial intervention points to identify human trafficking risk in children effectively (Albright et al., 2020; Armstrong & Greenbaum, 2019; Garg et al., 2020; Harmon-Darrow et al., 2023; Lemke, 2019). The most common strategy is to develop a validated screening assessment tool in order to aid professionals in identifying warning signs (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2019; de Vries et al., 2020; Macy et al., 2023; Valadez et al., 2022).

Beyond this, the role of the primary caregivers (often parents) cannot be understated. In the words of one survivor:

“...I believe we must emphasize that parents are the primary educators and protectors of their children—not schools or institutions. Schools can and should provide

support—through tools, training, and resources—but the home must remain the first line of defense. When families fail or are absent, the state must step in to protect children. But true, long-term prevention starts by strengthening families, equipping them to guide, protect, and educate their children from an early age.”

– Carolina Córdova [Europe]

Research has shown that many parents and caregivers are unaware of how to recognize and report signs of sexual exploitation in the first place, in addition to struggling with providing the support needed to help their child through the healing process (Nichols et al., 2024, 2025). In another example, in a sample of households in Eastern and Southern Africa, more than 40% of children had never had a conversation with their caregivers about safe internet use, which was not shocking, given that only about 50% of caregivers use the internet on a regular basis (Twesigye & Kardefelt-Winther, 2023). Further, in a systematic review of interventions for children who had been sex trafficked, few programs were found to offer support to strengthen the family’s role (Moynihan et al., 2018), despite the importance of family therapy in preventing future trafficking victimization (Bounds et al., 2023; Browne-James et al., 2021). It is important that strategies aimed at preventing human trafficking do not forget the crucial role parents and caregivers play.

4.2 Improving Awareness & Education

To date, research has not reached a consensus on the most effective strategies for anti-trafficking education and awareness. This, reasonably, is because human trafficking of children is a complex crime and therefore requires efforts that are tailored to a particular geographic, cultural, and economic area.

“Based on my experience as a survivor and advocate, I firmly believe that an effective national campaign to prevent human trafficking in Colombia must be rooted in clear, relatable, and culturally relevant messaging. Such a campaign should address the harsh realities and persistent misconceptions surrounding trafficking—especially considering the country’s specific vulnerabilities and social dynamics...Efforts should be tailored to the realities of specific communities—Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, migrant, and rural youth. Messaging should be offered in relevant languages and formats that reflect their values and lived experiences.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

Building on this, it is essential for education and awareness efforts to be tailored to specific cultures, which often requires involving community leaders. For example, Survivor E shared how her non-profit organization led a successful awareness campaign in Uganda, involving community leaders to build trust and overcome residents' fear of law enforcement. The organization educated participants about various forms of trafficking, warning signs, and risks, while providing business literacy training to promote economic self-reliance. The initiative revealed that while the community lacked knowledge about human trafficking, residents were eager to learn and take action once properly informed.

“For the empowerment, we wanted them to be self-reliant, form groups to encourage each other, and work together. Yes, it was a success because by the time we closed the campaign, the number of participants had increased...[and] people had started reporting to him [the community leader] [about] their friends who were using young girls to work in the bars [and as] maids...and he was advising accordingly...”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

Furthermore, the survivors who shared their voices in this report had a lot to say about what the general public should know about human trafficking.

“I would like all people to be aware that many of the people involved in human trafficking are just broken, abused, trauma-affected individuals who need guidance and help finding a new way of life. That we are not lepers and we do not me[an] ill harm to anyone. We are just like them.”

– Survivor C [North America]

“I would like to see more efforts made to encourage the public to report it like through apps like Simply Report.”

– Survivor C [North America]

In line with their thinking, efforts to highlight the realities of trauma–bonding across various interpersonal relationships are important to reduce victim–blaming attitudes (Reid, 2024). Relatedly, survivors shared sentiments on how to make awareness messaging more effective for the general public.

“In order to reach people, they need to understand that each data point represents a real person, someone’s son or daughter, mother or father. I would make it personal. The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. When people understand in their heart that this is a real issue, then they can conceptualize it in their minds and be motivated to tackle the issue without fear.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

“What drives people to care about anti trafficking in my area is the loss of daughters, sons, sisters, or neighbors to trafficking. Some return and others never return. When people see girls disappearing, children returning home with trauma, they begin to care deeply. Also, parents are afraid when they see how easily their children can be lured with empty promises. Many people in [the] area think that trafficking is something that happens far away. Others think trafficking is not a crime. The myths about trafficking in my area is that people think traffickers are strangers and that only girls are trafficked.”

– Abura Joanita [Africa]

Perhaps most importantly, it is ensuring all education and awareness efforts are designed to reach the largest number of people, especially those who are most vulnerable. One survivor expressed this sentiment well in the following statement:

“Ensuring that education is accessible and safe for all can change my community’s system or structures to better protect people.”

– Abura Joanita [Africa]

Prevention

The Survivor Advisory Council members stress that prevention is key in any anti-trafficking agenda. Human trafficking, especially against children, has long-lasting and traumatic effects. Prevention efforts can improve the safety and well-being of at-risk groups before exploitation can occur. In agreement with the adage that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”, survivors agree **“prevention is better than [a] cure”** (Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]). Traffickers target those who are vulnerable. It is, therefore, crucial to address the causes of vulnerability in order to protect future generations from the same harm faced by those before them.

“If I had unlimited resources, I would invest in long-term, systemic prevention rooted in education, economic opportunity, and protection of rights, especially for women and migrants.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

Prevention strategies include policies, programs, and interventions designed to reduce vulnerability to trafficking before exploitation occurs. In this section, we highlight what vulnerability means, discuss the risk factors identified by survivors and researchers, and examine the types of prevention survivors consider necessary.

5.1 Understanding Vulnerability

Across research, policy, and practice, the word vulnerable is often used when describing those at risk of exploitation. While it is clear across research and lived experience testimony that there are contexts, situations, and experiences that increase the risk of exploitation, survivors of trafficking are very aware that being vulnerable to trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere. As stated best by one survivor:

“Anyone who is vulnerable is at risk.”

– Reverend Allysa McKenzie [North America]

“No one race, culture, gender, social status, or age of any human is at risk. All are susceptible to the darkness of the world.”

– Survivor C [North America]

The word “vulnerable” has different meanings depending on a person's location, family background, and resources. It is challenging to define vulnerability in a manner that accounts for diversity across international contexts and communities. Previous studies highlight the challenge of defining vulnerability, as many factors, including individual, community, economic, social, and cultural norms, often play a role (Arora et al., 2015; Shamsudeen, 2022). For simplicity, vulnerability is defined as “inherent, environmental or contextual factors that increase the susceptibility of an individual or group to being trafficked” (ICAT, 2022, p. 2). For survivors, while many common risk factors have been discussed in previous sections, there are a few important areas that are essential to consider: economic factors, national and global events, the role of intimate networks such as family and community, and the influence of cultural norms.

5.2 Risk Factors and Related Prevention Strategies

5.2.1 Economic Risk Factors

An undeniable economic risk factor related to exploitation and trafficking that is essential to discuss is the role of demand. In the context of human trafficking of children, demand is often discussed due to the willingness of individuals to buy others for commercial sex (Cyrus & Vogel, 2015). The fact that there are many people, particularly men, who are willing to purchase sex is noted by survivors as one of the core elements driving sexual exploitation and trafficking.

“Trafficking is not only driven by poverty—it exists because there is a market of men willing to pay. Naming this is uncomfortable, but essential for true awareness and prevention.”

– Carolina Córdova [Europe]

“I lost count of the number of buyers. But I still remember some of them. Buyers tell you all about themselves in a meager attempt to try to make a connection with you on some personal level knowing that they aren’t there for long and only came for one thing. They ranged in age, race, religion, size, shape, etc. They had different fetishes, demands, etc. No two were the same and some were abusive in some form. I knew the ones who were cops because I was trained by the traffickers to spot the difference. I knew the judges and lawyers because they would tell me who they were. I knew the deans of universities, the married men, the businessmen, members of our military, and more.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

The logic in addressing demand as an economic consideration is straightforward: if there is no market for exploited people to be purchased or to be profitable to traffickers, there is no motivation to do so. Any prevention strategy that looks to address trafficking risk holistically must include addressing one of the primary reasons it exists, which is the population of individuals who are the direct source of harm by being the financial motivator for it to occur (OSCE, 2021).

“That is why I am involved with the Demand Reduction Committee, it is time [to] hold those who buy accountable.”

– Reverend Allysa McKenzie [North America]

Additionally, when thinking about risk factors for victims, economic disadvantage is perhaps the most widely recognized and challenging root cause of vulnerability. It stands out as a key risk factor in research, policy, and practice worldwide (Broad et al., 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). Among survivors highlighted in this report, economic limitations played a central role in their experiences.

Research consistently shows that economic vulnerability increases trafficking recruitment (Kakar & Yousaf, 2022; Shamsudeen, 2022). Studies from various continents reveal that traffickers target communities with high unemployment, especially among youth who have few employment options (Rafferty, 2007). Traffickers are strategic and target communities with economic vulnerabilities and then recruit desperate families and individuals with promises of job opportunities (Barrick et al., 2024).

“Poverty and economic instability make people vulnerable to human trafficking. Because people want to change their income, and reduce the poverty levels, they end up being

manipulated by the cunning traffickers promising better paying jobs abroad...A lack of employment opportunities. Unemployment is on the increase and the limited job prospects especially among the youth which is the biggest population. Many youths have decided to travel to outside countries to look for better opportunities and end up falling prey to traffickers. Unemployment makes people vulnerable because it makes them poor and poor people in my community have no say and can not have a choice. They are easily manipulated by the traffickers.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

“In general, young women with limited economic, social, and educational resources are a primary target for traffickers. These criminals are highly skilled manipulators, trained to sell a false image of empowerment, economic success, and personal transformation. They know how to identify and exploit vulnerability—especially among those who feel invisible or unsupported by society.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

“I personally was a young divorced mother of multiple children, only a high school education, homeless, low-wage job, and no family support, who escaped a verbally volatile, narcissistic, and physically abusive marriage. Women and men who often bear the weight of survival of their families feel like they have to sacrifice to provide. Traffickers start with promises of income, opportunities, and security, only to be attached with strings. They will emotionally manipulate, control, isolate, and shame to make you do what they want.”

– Survivor C [North America]

The gendered nature of economic disadvantage is particularly pronounced, especially for this group of survivors. This sentiment is consistent with research indicating that young women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at high risk for exploitation, especially in the context of gender inequalities and lack of job opportunities (Chong & Clark, 2017). In short, traffickers’ recruitment exploits people’s aspirations for economic prosperity, often targeting those with the fewest economic opportunities.



5.2.2 Gendered Risks and Considerations

As stated above, gender is an important consideration for trafficking risk. For sex trafficking and exploitation, there is significant focus on risk factors for girls and women, as well as gender minority individuals. For labor trafficking and exploitation, the majority of attention is given to boys and men. Survivors of trafficking know that the reality is much more nuanced, and that both sex and labor trafficking can, and do, happen to those of all gender identities. Additionally, it is important to recognize that these risk factors are highly intertwined with specific cultural and social norms around gender, and what people are often expected to do based on their gender.

“In my area, certain groups face a much higher risk for example girls and young women (ages 4–25). Boys and young men (4–30) lured into cattle herding, construction, or street business...During drought and hunger, families become desperate for any opportunity to survive. Displaced people, especially women and children, become easy targets for traffickers who offer help, jobs, and transport...”

– Abura Joanita [Africa]

“Young girls and boys who do not go to school become prey to traffickers. Young girls are married off early, boys taken to work in shambas...It's not easy for people who have not been to school to access information and use it.”

– Survivor E [Africa]

An area that has routinely been discussed as a growing concern is the lack of available information on boys who are exploited, particularly in sex trafficking situations. Often deemed “invisible”, the exploitation of boys is often underreported due to social stigma and a belief that they will not be believed, or that they are not “true” victims (Barron & Frost, 2018; Hebert, 2016; Vijayarasa, 2013). All around the world, the evidence suggests there is less awareness that boys also face trafficking issues (both sex and labor) and therefore do not have proper training to identify them or as many resources available to support them (Chaffin et al., 2020; Greenbaum, 2020). While none of the survivors quoted in this report are men, they raised concerns about the gaps in information, identification, and resources for boys and men and the lack of understanding surrounding their particular vulnerabilities and experiences.

“I believe it is necessary to talk about men in these contexts. Many are used as military force by terrorist groups, and there is also a percentage of them that are also sexually exploited. I remember some male children being sexually assaulted in the same place where I was trafficked. Also, the trans community, some children who feel identified as girls from an early age as a result of gender dysphoria may suffer discrimination by the family. Leading them to be homeless and therefore, fall into sexual exploitation.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

5.2.3 National and Global Events

Major social and political unrest, natural disasters, and global events create sudden and immediate crises. Such crises create “vulnerability multipliers” by rapidly changing the stability of safety nets in communities (Bowersox, 2018; Murphy et al., 2023; Todres & Diaz, 2021). For example, the COVID–19 pandemic immediately devastated communities worldwide, cutting many off from social safety nets related to health and employment (Gashaw et al., 2021). Crisis–driven vulnerability often occurs faster than protective services or systems can respond, creating windows of opportunity that traffickers exploit.

“The recent breakout of COVID–19 made so many people vulnerable to human trafficking. Before COVID-19,–19 I had a shop in Kampala. It was operating well. After the lockdown of three months. We went back to work but we used to work half a day, sales were down, and the landlords for the shops wanted the rent of the months we spent in the lockdown. This [was] money I didn’t have...so my shop was confiscated so I became jobless immediately. So many people found themselves in this situation similar to mine. They hoped to travel to outside countries to get jobs, hence becoming vulnerable. During this period of lockdown and COVID-19 break out, schools closed for some time. Many parents gave out their children to marry to get money to improve the situation...”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

Displacement and migration due to conflict or instability present serious trafficking risks. Research shows that displaced populations face many vulnerabilities – traffickers take advantage of the loss of social networks and uncertain legal situations (Coşkun & Williams, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). For example, studies show that refugees face greater risks of trafficking right after they are displaced because of the loss of community support (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2019; Gezie et al., 2019).

“Political instability in the neighbouring countries ...[leads to]... refugees and asylum seekers are especially abused because most of the time they don’t know their rights and even they don’t know where to report in case they are abused. Very many people from such war torn areas like Sudan, when they come to Uganda looking for peace can easily be manipulated by the traffickers who promise a better life. Many children are turned into child soldiers.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

“Political and social instability often creates the perfect environment for traffickers to operate. When people are displaced, undocumented, or without access to basic rights—such as housing, healthcare, or legal protection—they become more desperate and more vulnerable to being exploited.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

These testimonies and studies demonstrate how crisis–driven contexts rapidly destabilize communities, leading to the loss of protective factors such as employment, housing, legal status, and social networks. For those already in desperate situations, crises cut any remaining safety nets, creating ideal conditions for trafficking. For at-risk populations, or those already facing extremely desperate circumstances, these events cut any remaining safety net, creating a perfect storm for vulnerability to trafficking. Many of these vulnerabilities are situational, created by systemic failures during moments of disruption rather than individual circumstances alone.

5.2.4 How Intimate Networks Both Enable and Prevent Exploitation

Members of the Survivor Advisory Council recognize the importance of strong community support in the prevention of human trafficking of children. Yet, familial trafficking is significantly underreported. Familial trafficking refers to when family members exploit children they are related to (Edwards et al., 2024). Familial trafficking challenges traditional assumptions about who traffickers are (i.e., strangers) and is more difficult to detect. That said, evidence suggests that family-perpetrated trafficking, or familial-facilitated trafficking, accounts for nearly half of all human trafficking of children cases globally (IOM, 2017).

“In the foundation, we had a recent case of a Venezuelan little girl who asked for help [from the foundation director], but we could not do anything, because according to the laws in Colombia, both parents must give authorization for the girl to leave the country, the worst of all is that her father is the trafficker.”

– Shared by a member of the Survivor Advisory Council

Studies reveal that familial traffickers often exploit power dynamics, economic desperation, and children’s trust in caregivers, making detection and intervention challenging for both victims and service providers (Duncan & DeHart, 2019; Edwards et al., 2024; Reid et al., 2015; White et al., 2024).

“Why, out of the three sisters in my family, was I the only one who became a victim of trafficking and abuse? The answer lies in support networks and emotional bonds. My sisters and I shared the same maternal environment, but they had a different father, which meant a different family structure. Their father was a loving and present figure. They also had a grandmother and an aunt who cared for them during school holidays...My case was drastically different. My father was my abuser and trafficker...He knew that my mother struggled with serious mental health issues and came from a history of extreme poverty and hardship. Abusers often target families like mine—those without a present father figure and with emotionally unstable or absent mothers. I grew up in a humble setting, with many economic limitations. This also influenced the quality of the institutions and services available to me....It wasn’t until I told someone outside of my family circle that I realized I had experienced a crime. You can’t break free from the chains of violence if you don’t even know they’re there in the first place. And this is key, because these patterns are repeated precisely due to the lack of tools to identify them. My mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother all went through the same thing I did, but they repeated the cycle because no one from the outside told them it was wrong. As crazy as it may sound, you can get used to those levels of violence, normalize them, and even see them as a part of life. This doesn’t only apply to human trafficking, but also to economic vulnerability. That’s why both education, state institutions and media play a crucial role in prevention—they are the ones who can make a difference between children who are able to recognize it and break free, and those who normalize it and repeat it in future generations.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

“When I was around 10 or 11 years old, my sister and brother-in-law told me about a better life in Kathmandu. They said I could find good opportunities there and support my family. I believed them. But everything changed when they handed me over to a stranger. I

thought we were going to Kathmandu, but instead, I was taken across the border into India. That was the moment my life turned upside down. I didn't know I had been trafficked. I was scared, confused, and completely alone. At that age, I didn't know what was right or wrong. I just followed what they told me. After a few days, I understood the truth. I had been sold. I was just a little girl. I didn't know what was happening or why. I had no voice, no freedom, and no one to protect me. I felt lost, afraid, and completely broken inside. I had no dream."

– Survivor F [South Asia]

The dynamics described above reflect broader research findings on familial trafficking risk factors. Studies consistently find that single-parent households, parental substance abuse or mental health issues, and poverty increase the likelihood of family members exploiting children for financial gain (Katende et al., 2025; Sprang & Cole, 2018). These accounts show how familial traffickers exploit their trusted relationship with a child. Survivors of familial trafficking often experience delayed recognition of their exploitation, complex trauma responses, and significant barriers to help-seeking due to caregivers being the primary facilitators of children's exposure to resources (Edwards et al., 2024).

"Myself personally, I grew in a household that allowed my parents to provide for us. We had a home, food, clothing. My mom worked a lot and was not home often and my dad was off doing his own thing. I felt alone a lot and was shy. I didn't have many friends. This was around the time internet became popular. I chatted online to older guys. I became a target. I was trying to find a friend. I was young and naive. That was the start of my journey in to human trafficking. I met someone older and well they kidnapped me and forced me to do things to survive."

– Survivor B [North America]

Given the nature of familial trafficking, peers and safe adults outside of the family are essential to preventing trafficking. This involves building community structures that provide children with safe outlets for connection and prevent them from being left isolated.



CASE STUDY

Role of Culture, Norms, and Exploitation in Colombia

“Now, my reality, although difficult, is far from what some children have to live in Colombia, in rural areas where the government does not reach...but the insurgent groups do, they are recruited from the age of 10 to join the ranks of soldiers who fight for them, girls are often subjected to rape to meet the needs of the leaders, denying the most basic rights such as food and security.”

“Additionally, Colombia recognizes the internal justice systems of Indigenous communities, which is important for cultural autonomy. However, exceptions must be made when these practices conflict with fundamental human rights. In several Indigenous communities, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and forced child marriage persist, often justified as cultural traditions. There is a fine line between respecting cultural heritage and permitting human rights violations. The protection of children’s rights must take precedence in all circumstances. This testimony is offered in the hope that international bodies will advocate for stronger protection systems, specialized shelters, education and training programs, and legal reforms that center the best interests and rights of the child above all.”

“Also, in certain indigenous communities, girls are forced into arranged marriages within the community, which makes it difficult to escape or make decisions for them, and they develop a total dependency, which makes it harder for them to escape. Just this year, Colombia has created a law prohibiting child marriage, something that should have been done many years ago.”

“Human trafficking in Colombia remains a deeply complex and multifaceted crime. It encompasses forced labor, sexual exploitation, and the recruitment of children—particularly in rural areas and zones affected by armed conflict. Vulnerable populations such as Indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, migrants (especially Venezuelans), and children are disproportionately affected and require tailored protection and support systems.”

– Estefania Gómez [South America]

5.3 Improving Prevention

Prevention of human trafficking of children involves addressing the root causes of vulnerability. One survivor frames this necessity well in their statement:

“Trafficking thrives in desperation.”
– Survivor A [Europe]

This means that prevention must start with strengthening the foundational structures that protect individuals and communities from exploitation. In other words, prevention means ensuring access to opportunities that promote educational attainment, skill development, sustainable economic opportunities, and legal protections. Though this involves significant investment, such efforts can reduce the conditions traffickers exploit, rather than responding after the trauma has occurred. This section discusses three levels of anti-trafficking prevention: (1) primary, (2) secondary, and (3) tertiary prevention.

5.3.1 Primary Prevention

Primary prevention aims to increase protective factors and decrease vulnerability. Increasing protective factors may involve, for example, making sure children have access to safe educational opportunities and safe adults. Relatedly, decreasing vulnerability, for example, may involve a nation investing in creating more job opportunities in rural communities. These prevention strategies aim to eliminate the conditions that traffickers often exploit. In this regard, survivors, advocates, and anti-trafficking stakeholders emphasize that sustainable prevention efforts require addressing structural vulnerabilities rather than only focusing on rescue and rehabilitation (Peters, 2025; Zadra & Elsen, 2024). Prevention needs to incorporate evidence-based strategies to demonstrate the impact of combining immediate support with long-term systemic change, and to examine what works best systematically (Bryant & Landman, 2020). Building individual resilience while also addressing the economic, social, and institutional conditions that create trafficking vulnerability is essential.

“Empowerment of survivors of human trafficking through giving them skills like catering, tailoring, salon work, business these speak directly to self sustainability, which bring everlasting freedom. With the prevention and awareness campaigns I carry out with my team, I have realized that we also need to empower communities where the survivors come from...Cause at the end of the day they are also vulnerable to human trafficking...”
– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]

“I would prioritize economic empowerment—especially for young women, single mothers, migrants, and those leaving abusive situations...Access to legal employment, vocational training, housing, and mental health support is essential to reduce vulnerability.”
– Survivor A

“It takes a community who is willing to face the issues of today's society and not turn a blind eye to what is right in front of them.” – Reverend Allysa McKenzie [North America]

“I would tell them to create jobs and opportunities because many of the victims are trafficked because of desperation. If families had decent livelihoods, if girls had access to education, if young people had hope, the traffickers would have no power.”
– Abura Joanita [Africa]

The emphasis on empowerment, both for survivors and communities, aligns with extensive research demonstrating that sustainable livelihoods are among the most effective strategies for preventing trafficking (Danailova-Trainor & Laczko, 2010; van der Laan et al., 2011). It is best to treat empowerment not as an isolated intervention, but as one component of a comprehensive strategy against vulnerability. Survivors highlighted these primary prevention strategies:

Medical and Health Services	• Offer free medical services to vulnerable communities • Make medical services more available in rural or hard-to-reach communities
Social Service Support	• Providing immediate and long-term needs of vulnerable communities, like mental health counseling • Improve housing accessibility and conditions, including making housing affordable
Economic Stability	• Create safe and stable employment opportunities specifically for at-risk populations • Develop free and accessible training programs that allow low-income individuals and families to develop job skills



5.3.2 Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention focuses on targeted interventions for individuals, families, and communities that are the most vulnerable to exploitation. For example, researchers, advocates, and survivors consistently report that certain groups, including disconnected youth, migrants seeking employment opportunities, individuals leaving systems like foster care and justice systems, those experiencing housing insecurity, and many more, have elevated vulnerability to trafficking. These vulnerabilities can be mitigated with specific, protective interventions, especially ones that are survivor-led.

Effective secondary prevention programs combine immediate support services like job training, safe housing, and legal assistance with longer-term strategies that address specific individual and community vulnerabilities that traffickers target. Interventions such as vocational training for at-risk youth, safe migration programs that provide legal pathways to employment, and family strengthening initiatives can help reduce trafficking risk before recruitment occurs.

“If I had unlimited resources, I would mandate human trafficking training in every city, county, state, and federal government entities. I would also launch a parent program aimed at helping them understand the nuances of trafficking and how they can help their families. This would include, but not be limited to, understanding identity, how to overcome trauma, understanding the neuroscience behind trauma bonding, how to keep up with ever-changing technology, etc.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

“[Prevention should include] strong partnerships between governments, NGOs, survivor leaders, and community organizations are essential. Survivors should be involved in designing programs, because we know how exploitation works and how it hides in plain sight [emphasis added]. Community leaders, schools, healthcare workers, and law enforcement must be trained not just to “detect” trafficking but to prevent the conditions that allow it to happen.”

– Survivor A [Europe]

“Safe, long-term housing options with built-in support services like mental health counseling, substance abuse recovery, and career development. Strengthen foster care oversight, invest in prevention programs for at-risk youth, and fund early-intervention outreach to reduce vulnerability to trafficking. Support legislation that requires tech platforms to actively monitor, report, and prevent trafficking content, especially in ads and chat platforms where exploitation begins.”

– Survivor C [North America]

While prevention programs require an upfront investment, they generate significant long-term benefits across multiple systems, including law enforcement, prosecution, victim services, healthcare, and broader social support networks. In fact, comprehensive prevention strategies tend to cost less over time compared to the complex, resource-intensive responses to human trafficking, such as criminal investigations and wraparound services for survivors (Akullo, 2020). This is due, in part, because prevention efforts reduce the broader social and economic impacts of trafficking, such as lost productivity, family disruption, community destabilization, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma and vulnerability that can set up future generations for more cycles of exploitation. Overall, survivors highlighted these secondary prevention strategies:

Conduct Inclusive Research	• Consider technology that can facilitate getting information quickly and respond to findings rapidly • Identify new trends
Community Empowerment	• Form community associations and groups where peer-to-peer sessions can be conducted • Share information among communities, be transparent about ongoing problems, and work together towards solutions • Engage community leaders to raise awareness and build capacity for prevention
Training	• Train professionals, including law enforcement, health workers, and social workers, on human trafficking prevention, identification, and response
Awareness and Prevention Campaigns	• Remove sensationalized and inaccurate images, portrayals, and myths about trafficking in awareness materials • Make resources available in all local languages and at appropriate reading levels, so they are accessible • Conduct awareness and prevention campaigns using survivor leaders' experiences and knowledge • Develop school-based programs that educate children and youth about trafficking risks and self-protection
Collaboration	• Collaborate with the government, other organizations, and stakeholders to promote resolutions for the root causes of exploitation

5.3.3 Tertiary Prevention

Tertiary prevention focuses on preventing revictimization. Research demonstrates that survivors who successfully exit exploitative situations often experience repeated exploitation because the underlying factors that initially rendered them vulnerable remain unaddressed (Jacobs, 2018). For example, traffickers can still target one's vulnerabilities and re-exploit them if those vulnerabilities still exist or return later in life. Comprehensive support for survivors seeks to address these vulnerabilities to prevent future exploitation. For example, most of the survivors featured in this report would describe their journey as having many ups and downs, and exiting exploitation is not always straightforward. Tertiary prevention recognizes that survivors often face ongoing challenges, including trauma recovery, economic instability, social stigma, legal barriers, and limited support networks that can increase re-exploitation. Therefore, effective support requires long-term, holistic services that prioritize independence and empowerment.

“We need people to stand with survivors—not just in words, but in action and legislation. We do [not] need rescue efforts only; we need respectful partnership. We do not need pity; we need policy reform. And we do not need to be tokenized—we need to be trusted contributors in shaping the solutions.”

– Faythe Kadona [North America]

“Taking survivor leaders back to school. I believe that once you empower survivor leaders for example, encouraging and enabling them to take on professional courses. Like counseling, law, community psychology, [and so on]...most of the time basing on their experience, they are the ones in best position to fight against trafficking, through awareness, and prevention campaigns, helping in advocating for others cause they will be using both experience, knowledge and also being able to empower the communities where they come from. Like forming community associations, groups where peer-to-peer sessions can be done, share information, do monitoring and evaluation, and learned people can easily move the government for a policy change.”

– Nakimuli Doreen [Africa]



Across contexts, survivors emphasized these tertiary prevention strategies:

Education	• Provide survivors opportunities for education and professional courses • Including survivor voices in educational material about trafficking, from development to dissemination
Services for Survivors	• Build and maintain shelters, safe houses, and community centers to support victims and survivors • Have survivor-mentorship models for those who want guidance from people who can relate to their experiences • Tear down legal barriers, like criminal records, for survivors so they can gain employment, housing, and other resources
Advocacy	• Advocate for policy changes that protect trafficking victims and hold traffickers accountable • Pay survivors for their expertise when asking them to contribute to awareness campaigns, or for other uses of their knowledge
Legal Support	• Help trafficked victims return home (when trafficked abroad/across borders) by covering travel fares, overstay payments, and legal tickets • Ensure victims have access to knowledgeable legal support services



Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future

Children are among the most vulnerable in any society to the horrors of human trafficking. Even though ending human trafficking of children has become a priority across nations worldwide, exploitation still occurs. The Survivor Advisory Council members, motivated to be voices of change, chose to focus this inaugural report on three key issues relevant to human trafficking of children: (1) government responses, (2) education and awareness, and (3) prevention.

The findings of this report are unequivocal: despite best efforts, systems still fail to protect those they aim to protect. From law enforcement responses that criminalize victims to awareness campaigns that perpetuate harmful myths, from prevention strategies that ignore root causes to legal frameworks that favor traffickers over survivors, the gaps identified throughout this report share a common thread. All have suffered from the exclusion of the survivor voice and leadership.

In this regard, this report represents more than an analysis of these issues—it is a call to action, rooted in insights only those with lived experience can illuminate, to support survivor leadership in all aspects of the anti-trafficking response. Unless systematic changes are implemented, human trafficking victims will continue to face ongoing harm, such as criminalization instead of protection, untreated trauma, and a lack of available resources to escape their exploitation.



6.1 Reformed Anti-Trafficking Responses

The Survivor Advisory Council members have all encountered organizations that diminish their contributions and leverage their participation for credibility, while failing to recognize survivors as the leading experts in this area. Consequently, survivor voices are an underrepresented resource in the anti-trafficking space despite the fact that they have much expertise to provide governments, educational facilities, and other anti-trafficking programs.

Based on this analysis and the voices of survivors shared in this report, the Survivor Advisory Council presents several recommendations for transforming anti-trafficking responses worldwide. These recommendations are a reflection of the survivor perspectives provided throughout this report, and both general and specific actions that can be taken to improve the lives of survivors of human trafficking.

1. Survivor Voices Must Take Center Stage

Every anti-trafficking initiative, from policy development to service provision, research design, and program evaluation, must include survivors in leadership roles. This is not about token consultation or advisory roles; it is about recognizing survivors as the foremost experts on trafficking and positioning them to lead the solutions.

Specific actions may include:

- Ensuring survivors are fairly **compensated** as professionals and experts
- Establishing survivor-led advisory boards for all anti-trafficking programs in which survivors consist of at least half, if not a majority of the board, and there is diversity in expertise (e.g., sex versus labor)
 - Before asking for survivor participation on an advisory board, it is crucial to ensure that involvement does not cause additional harm to the survivor, including ensuring that survivors are far enough in their recovery to participate safely
- Coauthoring policies, regulations, and laws with survivors and ensuring their voices are clearly represented and duly credited
- Requiring survivor leadership in the development and testing of screening tools, training curricula, and service protocols
 - This can be reinforced through mandatory compensated survivor inclusion in the beginning of the development phase, ensuring that survivors' voices lead the narratives, and by creating frameworks within organizations that ensure survivors are treated with the gold standard when it comes to utilizing their experiences and expertise.
- Direct funding to survivor-led organizations that are addressing human trafficking
- Creating pathways for survivors to assume paid leadership roles in government agencies, such as through task forces
- Invest in resources for communities before exploitation can occur, as well as services for those who have already experienced trafficking
- Engage with the private sector to ensure safe and equitable working conditions as well as opportunities to pull at-risk populations out of desperate financial situations.

2. Treat The Problem, Not Just The Wound: Address Causes Of Vulnerability In Addition To Intervention

Most research on human trafficking of children focuses on the individual (Benavente et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2024). This type of research tends to ask the following: *What are the risk and protective factors? What facilitates successful investigations and prosecutions? Who are traffickers, and how can they be held accountable for their actions?*

Less recognized are the macro-level factors that also facilitate human trafficking of children, such as poverty, political instability, government corruption, weak legal systems, and the demand for low-cost labor. Research shows these factors facilitate conditions that traffickers exploit (Barrick et al., 2024; Reid, 2016). However, anti-trafficking responses often do not tackle these larger-scale issues because, simply put, they are more challenging to address. We acknowledge that such efforts will also need to be highly tailored to the nation and even geographic region within a nation, which is outside the scope of this report. Nevertheless, this problem will never be eradicated unless government bodies worldwide dedicate meaningful effort to addressing the macro-level issues that create vulnerabilities in their population.

Specific actions may include:

- Create robust international cooperation mechanisms to facilitate collaboration
- Support the growth of economic opportunities, especially in areas known to be targeted by traffickers
 - Example: fair wage and fair trade practices for underserved communities that will allow growth and not foster a sense of mistrust for the community itself
- Reform legislation to hold individuals who create demand (i.e., buyers) accountable for their roles in perpetuating trafficking
- Humane immigration and refugee policies that provide protective factors to the vulnerable
- Reform legislation to ensure traffickers and sex buyers are held fully accountable for all forms of human trafficking of children
- Implementing transparency and accountability measures to address misconduct and corruption

3. Invest in Research to Examine What is an Effective Intervention and Treatment

Despite all the varied efforts to identify and prevent human trafficking, in addition to how to best support survivors' journeys to resiliency, there is a severe lack of research demonstrating that such efforts are effective (Davy, 2016; Kim et al., 2023; Van Der Laan et al., 2011). In short, much research on various anti-trafficking programs lacks the scientific rigor needed to determine their effectiveness in achieving their goals.

Specific actions may include:

- Support survivors being involved in the research process beyond 'participants'
- Fund rigorous empirical evaluation research alongside providing funds for anti-trafficking programs
- Screening tools supporting early identification should be routinely reviewed and retested for efficacy and accuracy
- Training curricula should be accompanied by pre-/post-testing in addition to follow-up surveys to ensure the material is internalized and retained
- Longitudinal investigation of demand reduction strategies

6.2 Policy and Practical Change

Governments at all levels must be part of proactive efforts to address the human trafficking of children. By creating policy and legislation, governments can allocate resources, appoint those responsible for coordinating responses, and ensure the enforcement of standards and safety.

Specific actions may include:

- Support legislation that requires digital platforms to actively monitor, report, and prevent trafficking content, especially in ads and chat platforms where exploitation begins.
 - Outline specific areas of concern, such as the use of AI and social media, in new legislative efforts that cover the online exploitation of children
- National legislation allowing survivors with criminal records, for all crimes directly related to their exploitation, to qualify for criminal expungement
 - In the words of one survivor, “No survivor should be punished for what was done to them.” – Survivor C [North America]
- Mandated trauma-informed training developed in conjunction with survivors
 - Require all first responders (e.g., police, judges, healthcare workers, educators) to receive routine training on recognizing human trafficking and how to respond with compassion.
 - Part and parcel with this is holding law enforcement accountable when they mistreat survivors, however unintentional, such as through additional mandatory training after receiving complaints.
- Long-term housing and recovery programs
 - Invest in safe, long-term housing options with built-in support services like mental health counseling, substance abuse recovery, and career development. It is especially taxing for a person to manage all these resources across multiple programs.
- Youth and foster care protections
 - Strengthen foster care oversight and support programs targeting at-risk youth to reduce vulnerability to trafficking
- Nonprofit capacity building and funding
 - Establish dedicated funding streams for anti-trafficking nonprofit organizations at the local, regional, and possibly international level
 - Provide startup grants and operational support for new anti-trafficking service providers in underserved areas
 - Create public-private partnerships to expand the network for specialized service operations
- Economic support and services
 - Develop and fund comprehensive survivor programs that include housing subsidies, job training, and transition financial support
 - Establish specialized survivor benefit programs (public and private) that address the unique economic challenges faced by trafficking survivors when exiting exploitation
 - Create dedicated funding for long-term survivor services that extend beyond immediate crisis intervention
- Prevention through educational efforts
 - Fund community-based prevention programs targeting at-risk populations, and accurately measure impact through research collaborations
 - Develop standardized, survivor-informed educational materials and training protocols for schools and youth-serving organizations

6.3 Conclusion

Human trafficking constitutes a global crisis requiring urgent intervention from the international community, and children are among the most vulnerable to exploitation. In October 2024, Atlas Free assembled the inaugural Survivor Advisory Council, consisting of five survivors with diverse lived experiences from five countries all around the world: Colombia, Nepal, Spain, Uganda, and the United States. This group was driven to share their expertise, based on their lived experiences, to help improve anti-trafficking responses worldwide. In this endeavor, the Survivor Advisory Council chose to develop a report addressing key issues related to the human trafficking of children.

For this inaugural report, the Survivor Advisory Council decided to lead the conversation on three crucial aspects of the anti-trafficking response: (1) government responses, (2) awareness and education, and (3) prevention. For them, these topics represented some of the very systems that either failed them or could have intervened sooner; hence, their perspectives on these issues are both profoundly personal and uniquely informed. In this task, all members of the Survivor Advisory Council, in addition to survivors from the broader network of Atlas Free members, were invited to provide case studies and testimonials. For this reason, this report is unique because it was created, developed, and published with survivor voices leading the charge.

In this concluding section, we briefly summarize their findings and recommendations for actionable change in each of these domains.

First,

Government responses have mainly addressed human trafficking through a criminal justice approach, focusing on law enforcement, prosecution, and legal solutions. While these responses have laid an important groundwork in anti-trafficking efforts, survivor testimonies in this report highlight how these initiatives are hampered by ongoing fragmentation, limited cooperation, and weak legal frameworks. In many cases, current legal strategies end up criminalizing victims while neglecting to hold those who drive demand for exploited sex and labor accountable. Additionally, survivors often express fear or distrust of law enforcement, which prevents many from seeking help; those who do often face re-traumatization by the system, creating major obstacles to safety. Furthermore, survivors point out that the inherently international aspect of human trafficking requires unprecedented levels of global cooperation, calling for countries to align legislation, share intelligence, coordinate investigations across borders, and establish protocols for mutually beneficial collaboration.

Second,

Survivors shared that **awareness and education** efforts worldwide are often created with good intentions, but sometimes fail to effectively reach the most vulnerable communities. Additionally, multiple survivors recounted being asked, “Why didn’t this person just leave?” which shows a continued lack of understanding about trauma-bonding and the manipulative tactics traffickers use against vulnerable individuals. Even more concerning, survivors revealed that awareness and education efforts sometimes still promote harmful misconceptions about what human trafficking of children may ‘look like’, such as depicting people in chains or bondage, which can reinforce misunderstandings, victim-blaming, and missed chances for early detection. Although there is no consensus on how to design effective awareness and education campaigns, survivors emphasized that these efforts should be tailored to the regional and cultural context where they are implemented and must be accessible to everyone.

Third,

The final area discussed in this report is **prevention**. This topic was clearly important to the survivors featured in this report, as many of them hold professional roles that enable them to advocate for others. There is consensus that we should strive to create a world where children are never exploited from the start. In this section, we covered three levels of prevention: primary (addressing root causes), secondary (targeted interventions), and tertiary (preventing re-victimization). The pathways to success for these initiatives are some of the most challenging to define, as they require broad national and international support and collaboration. For example, key factors driving child human trafficking include economic vulnerability and ongoing demand for commercial sex and exploited labor. These are macro-level issues that demand macro-level solutions through international cooperation.

Then, survivors shared their expertise on **actionable recommendations** to improve anti-trafficking efforts across these three areas. Overall, there is a vital need for anti-trafficking initiatives to address the specific root causes of exploitation in particular regions or among vulnerable populations. Ignoring this essential element will only lead to quick fixes that do not truly solve the problem. **Moving forward, anti-trafficking responses must prioritize the voices of survivors.** We do not mean for survivors to simply be consulted on these issues without having a leadership role in decision-making. Instead, survivor voices should be central, allowing survivors to lead and influence the future of anti-trafficking efforts. For example, survivor-led advisory boards should oversee the development, execution, and assessment of anti-trafficking initiatives. When possible, funding should be directly allocated to survivor-led organizations working to combat human trafficking. Most importantly, survivors' expertise should always be fairly compensated for their vital contributions as field experts.

In conclusion, the Survivor Advisory Council intends for this report to provide a survivor-led foundation for global leaders, partners, and organizations to improve their anti-trafficking responses and survivor support. This report is written by survivors to share their knowledge and speak for those who need to be heard. Therefore, it is no surprise that we conclude this report with one survivor's inspiring words for others as they progress through their healing journey to resiliency:

**“You are still valuable.
Your past does not define your future.
You are stronger than your pain,
and your story matters.”**

– Survivor F [South Asia]

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