

Breaking taboos on trafficking survivors in East Asia

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How can organisations engage with survivors if stigma prevents them from identifying as one?

The Asia Pacific region is thought to have the highest incidence of modern slavery in the world today. Between 2002 and 2019, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) [documented](#) 17,171 trafficked persons from the Asia Pacific region, or 35% of IOM's worldwide caseload during this period. The total number though is thought to be much higher: nearly [60% of the world's 50 million estimated 'modern-day slaves'](#) come from this area.

Given this assumed prevalence, one would think a lot of people in the region would be talking about it. Especially the millions of people affected by it. But 'survivor leaders' from this region are rarely heard speaking up to influence government policies.

Still a taboo

In China, modern slavery is an unfamiliar term which most people associate with 'traditional' slavery, a phenomenon they believe ended long ago. The more frequently used terms are 'child labour' (童工) and 'human trafficking' (人口贩卖), but they remain largely taboo in public discourse due to their political sensitivity.

For instance, [a video of a woman chained and caged](#) by her husband went viral on Chinese social media earlier this year, sparking widespread public outrage. The Chinese authorities responded not only by initiating a "strike hard" anti-trafficking campaign. It also censored the story, stopping journalists from reporting and deleting existing articles. Such intervention is always possible in China. Civil society organisations working on modern slavery there say that, no matter how closely aligned they are with governmental agendas and policies, they must choose their words carefully and remain low-key if they want to continue to operate.

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Under such circumstances, it is difficult for survivors to take to the stage. As one case manager for an international NGO said, "Neither survivors nor us as organisations would even think of having any impact on either national policies or international development policies." The deputy director of a Cambodian NGO helping bride trafficking victims return to their homes agreed. "Survivors or their families won't talk in China," they said. "They do not want to share their experiences, because even if they did no positive change would happen."

Barriers to being heard

China may be a particularly strict environment in which to work, but in this case it's not exceptional. In contexts like Thailand and Cambodia, where local authorities grant NGOs and international

organisations more room to manoeuvre, integrating survivors and their perspectives into policy making is also largely unheard of.

Many stakeholders still treat victims solely as beneficiaries of programmes, rather than as experts with lived experience who should be included in the conversation. Even worse, some use survivors merely as ‘rubber stamps’ for their programmes and policies. “It’s almost a token use of their advice and guidance,” said the CEO of the Mekong Club, a non-profit organisation working with the private sector to fight modern slavery. “It’s disrespectful to the survivor, for her or him to be in that situation, because [the NGO] is just kind of using them. [It’s] not really listening to what they’re saying.’

To make things worse, survivors face barriers to understanding, and those running programmes or developing policies are often unwilling to invest the time and resources required to enable meaningful engagement. “It is very easy if you want to tick the box,” a UN officer said. “You offer a nice lunch, and you invite people. [...] Two or three will comment, and most of the time those [are people] who speak English or already know their rights. [...] [But] then you [can show] a list of 100 people who participated to the event. [In such cases,] is the input that you’re getting the right one?”

Several people who considered themselves survivor leaders confirmed this. They said they are frequently called upon to share their stories with their community and the wider public. But they had nothing to add when asked about their involvement in programme design. They were uncertain about how their opinions would be used by NGOs, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Cultural issues are another factor that should not be neglected. The notion of ‘not wanting to lose face’ prevents many victims in Southeast and East Asia from sharing their exploitation experiences. In societies that remain largely patriarchal, this is particularly true for male survivors. As multiple experts confirmed, men are prone to inventing stories to cover up their tragic experiences to avoid being perceived as victims.

What can be done?

There are at least three measures that, if adopted, could facilitate engagement with survivors.

The first is to improve the flow of information between survivors and support agencies. It is vital that everything from the latest tricks used by traffickers to strategies for recovery is effectively shared. Yet prevailing norms often prevent this. Society often considers modern slavery victims as poor, ignorant, and sometimes stupid. These stereotypes make survivors feel shame to share their stories, while also making organisations underestimate survivors’ capacity to become leaders. Better information-sharing can challenge these misconceptions while allowing both sides to increase their mutual understanding.

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Information-sharing should extend to the inner workings of the organisations. They should openly explain to survivors all details of the project cycle and objectives, rather than just the general idea. This would make better use of the expertise of survivors for project planning and even evaluation. “They need to understand the evaluation process [...] and research,” the CEO of the Mekong Club explained. “Having that information makes them a lot more effective in being able to respond.”

One survivor leader emphasised how much she appreciated even being told the goals of the engagement beforehand. Simple preparation sessions – such as those mandated by standard informed consent processes – might reduce the power imbalance between survivors and the

supporting agencies, and feedback on how their experiences were used could help reestablish their sense of self and dignity.

A second measure is to create opportunities for family- and community-based interventions. In Thailand, Cambodia, and China, the importance of including family and community in survivor engagement was repeatedly mentioned. This not only ensures that policy recommendations remain grounded in the local culture and customs, but also increases survivors' chances at reintegration. This comes with potential risks. For instance, survivors may feel less free to speak if accompanied by unsupportive family and community members. But the survivors we engaged with were all overwhelmingly in favour of including family and community in these actions.

Take the child labour situation in China, for example. People, in China and abroad, often picture poverty and inadequate education as the main reasons why these situations arise. However, we were told that for those children who were left with elderly relatives by their migrant parents, one of the reasons why they decide to enter the factories is the "need for love".

In other words, they want to join their parents in the cities where they work. Insights like this suggest that a softer approach is needed, one that engages with individuals around the children and promotes alternative educational and childcare arrangements in the communities. It could also mean helping family members to become 'leaders with lived experience' with influence over other at-risk families.

The third and final measure is to push for effective cooperation at all levels. Cooperation frameworks among donors, governments, NGOs, and survivor leaders for survivor engagement scarcely exist in East and Southeast Asia. Moreover, there is a big cultural and knowledge gap among donors and international organisations who are far away from the field and talk to survivors through local intermediaries.

The 'Live our Lives' (LOL) programme implemented in Thailand by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) offers a possible alternative way of cooperation. JICA initiated a survivor-centred approach and provided relevant training to all implementing partners, shelter staff, and multidisciplinary team members to ensure that they understand how to adjust policies/provisions to meet survivors' needs.

At the same time, the programme supported survivor leaders and experienced NGO staff to help new survivors understand the system. After the groundwork was laid, JICA reduced its role to: ensuring a comfortable and secure gathering space; providing some practical suggestions for project activities; and guaranteeing that the communication channel between LOL members and government officials functioned well. Through this platform, survivors' voices can be heard at all levels, and their opinions directly shape the policies and projects.

Time to make progress

A culture of 'saving face', a lack of trust and poor information sharing, and low support from the government are all aspects of the unique ecosystem of modern slavery activism in southeast and east Asia. For these reasons and more, survivor engagement is still in its infancy in the region. But there are signs of change.

Particularly in Thailand, more and more survivor engagement activities have been designed and observed. The reasons behind this shift are sustained advocacy from NGOs to break down stigma and encourage survivors' voices to be heard, and governments' and donors' willingness to enter into dialogue with people with lived experience. Communication is key. Improving it at all levels is the

clearest recommendation we can give. We need to get better at listening to each other.

This article was produced as part of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre's (Modern Slavery PEC) study on [survivor engagement in international policy and programming](#), conducted by the University of Liverpool as a consortium partner of the Centre. To learn more, read the author's [full regional report](#). The research was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It took place between February-June 2022.

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