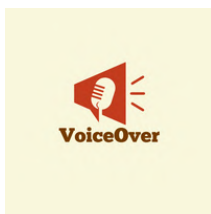




TOWARDS A SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT MODEL

**Challenges and lessons learnt
through VoiceOver Project**





VOICE OVER

Victims of trafficking in human beings support and empowerment
by means of a survivor leader engagement

Project: 101101049 – VoiceOver – AMIF-2022-TF1-AG-THB



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GLOSSARY

This glossary is not intended to be exhaustive on Trafficking of Human Beings terms; its aim is to ease the understanding and to explain how these terms were used during the VoiceOver project. As language is never neutral - it shapes meaning, reflects visions, and influences approaches- throughout the project, partners alongside participants engaged in ongoing reflection, on the significance of naming. To address this issue, dedicated time was set aside to explore and refine the terminology. In order to facilitate communication among each participant the terms "survivor" and "survivor leader" were conventionally used. It remains essential to continuously challenge and refine the language used to describe those with lived experience—ensuring that terminology reflects empowerment, leadership, and the capacity for transformation

Victim: a person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental, or emotional harm, or economic loss, directly caused by a criminal offense (EU Victims' Rights Directive)

Victim of human trafficking: a person who has been recruited, harbored, transported, provided, or obtained for labor, services, or a sexual act using force, fraud, or coercion.

Survivor: a person who escaped alive from a cataclysm, from a misfortune; person who survives another.

Survivor of human trafficking: a person who has survived an experience of human trafficking. Often used as a term of empowerment to note that an individual has overcome or is in the process of overcoming a trauma. Is generally the term used by advocacy groups.

Survivor leader: a person who escaped alive from a cataclysm, from a misfortune; person who survives another and becomes a guide for other people victims of trafficking and exploitation.

GLOSSARY

Engagement: refers to the process of actively involving people in a particular activity, fostering their interest, and supporting them in contributing meaningfully to its goals and outcomes.

Survivor engagement: the process by which survivors of traumatic experiences actively take part in activities that go beyond the receipt of individual care.

Peer-to-peer: specific engagement method, recruiting and training former beneficiaries to be peers in different areas of intervention, placing the victims and survivors at the heart of any activity. The action is built on exchange and implies a transfer of skills from the professional to the beneficiary (the action's recipient), as well as from the beneficiary to the professional. The peer has a well-defined professional role inside the organization, different from that of the operators with whom s/he works; this role is based on personal experience of sex work or labor exploitation; this definition is a summary attempt based on elaborate the interviews in the preparation of the [Toolkit On Good Practices](#) to help developing a common framework on experimental procedures.

Trauma: any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place, according to <https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma> .

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WHY A MODEL ON SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT?

OBJECTIVES BEHIND THE MODEL

When addressing a complex social phenomenon, stakeholders involved often feel the need to establish a practical reference framework—fixed points that facilitate replication, and sometimes even emulation of innovative approaches. This process enhances the ability to replicate and implement meaningful initiatives, practices, and policies. In a broader sense, the purpose of a model is to provide a reference framework for action grounded in solid analysis, study, understanding, quantification, and processing of experiences in the relevant field. It serves as a conceptual representation, often simplified, yet capable of explaining a given reality and providing a toolbox for action. By nature, a model is dynamic and adaptable, while simultaneously providing structured patterns and categories.

The primary objective in developing a survivor engagement model, as envisioned by the anti-trafficking organizations participating in the VoiceOver Project, was to identify effective, ethical, and meaningful ways to involve, support, and collaborate with survivors of human trafficking.

The model is rooted in two interconnected but distinct areas of focus: (i) a trauma-informed approach aimed to create safe spaces for inclusion, and (ii) establishing a structured and empowering process for survivor engagement.

i) The trauma-informed approach: A person is considered a victim of trafficking* because of the crime committed against them. Trafficking often involves serious violations such as violence, coercion, exploitation, and deprivation. As described in the literature, trafficking is a “multi-staged process of cumulative harm” (Zimmerman, Hossain & Watts, 2011), leading to a wide range of mental and physical health issues (Davy, 2015; Pascual-Leone et al., 2017). Survivors may experience PTSD, anxiety, depression, or chronic health problems as a result.

*According to the internationally accepted definition in the UN Palermo Protocol, trafficking in persons refers to “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of 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.”

Importantly, responses to trauma vary. As Papadopoulos (2007) emphasizes, survivors may experience not only traumatic and survival responses but also what he describes as adversity-activated development (AAD) -a form of personal growth emerging from the effort to overcome extreme adversity. This broader, more nuanced understanding of trauma avoids pathologizing survivors and instead recognizes their potential for resilience and transformation.

In some cases, survivors have also experienced developmental trauma—early emotional or relational trauma, often linked to attachment disruptions—which may impact their sense of safety and trust. Addressing such layered vulnerabilities requires trauma-informed approaches that prioritize physical and emotional safety and allow individuals to regain a sense of agency and stability.

ii) Survivor engagement refers to the process by which individuals with lived experience of trafficking take part in anti-trafficking efforts beyond receiving assistance. It involves creating opportunities for survivors to contribute to the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies in a way that centers their expertise, autonomy, and rights.

Meaningful survivor engagement can take many forms, including participation in peer support initiatives, employment in survivor-led services, contributions to policymaking, and advocacy work. Engagement may be part of a personal healing journey or a broader commitment to systemic change. In all cases, the objectives are defined by survivors themselves.

Examples may include - though are not limited to - participation in peer support groups; volunteering or working as paid staff to provide services to other survivors; offering insights from lived experience and expertise to service providers or governments to shape service provision and improve access to justice; advocating with politicians and other key decision makers.

The objectives of survivor engagement initiatives are defined by the survivors themselves. Some individuals choose to engage with their broader networks as part of their healing journey, while others seek to share their experiences to support and guide those in similar situations. Some survivors pursue justice through more direct means.

Organizations dedicated to combating trafficking in persons operate based on established principles and standards, ensuring that their approaches are both ethical and effective. Given the unique social, cultural, and legal contexts of different countries, each organization tailors its strategies, methodologies, and safety protocols to best meet the needs of victims. This includes ensuring not only their physical safety but also their emotional well-being.

Regardless of whether individuals are referred to as victims or survivors, the primary focus remains on their specific needs. Protection programs are designed around these needs, ensuring that survivors play an active role in shaping their support systems. As key partners in the development and adaptation of programs, survivors contribute to refining activities so that they feel adequately supported, protected, and empowered. This allows them to independently determine their level of involvement and how they choose to engage.

A victim-centred approach is crucial in this process, as it ensures that risk assessments are conducted to identify and address the individual needs of each victim. By employing a case management methodology, the focus is placed on the beneficiaries' strengths, their motivation for change, and their initiatives. Survivor engagement must also be considered as a strength-based framework that is responsive to the impact of trauma, emphasising physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors; creating an opportunity to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. A trauma-informed approach needs to take an intersectional approach to understanding the multiple disadvantages that individuals might face accessing services or participating in consultations.

This holistic approach ultimately enhances their ability to adapt to the demands of independent living, fostering resilience and self-sufficiency.

The objective of developing a Model is closely tied to the necessity of knowledge exchange and the establishment of a structured engagement framework for victims of trafficking in persons . With these foundational principles in mind, the process of designing a Model for Survivor Engagement was initiated, built upon the core concept central to the Voiceover project. Notably, as we will see, the very process of developing the Model evolved into an essential component of the Model itself, reinforcing its adaptability and responsiveness to the survivors' needs.

VOICEOVER - A PROJECT CONCEIVED TO ADVANCE SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

VoiceOver: Victims of trafficking in human beings' support and Empowerment by means of a survivor leaders Engagement model", is a project co-funded by the European Union. The lead partner is Equality, an NGO based in Padua (Italy), directly engaged in the protection of trafficked people. In addition, four other partners are NGOs working with or for trafficked people in their respective countries: Adpare in Romania, Fundación Cruz Blanca in Spain, Payoke in Belgium, and MIST in France). The SSIIM UNESCO Chair of the University Luav of Venice also participates, providing both observational and analytical support to the process and activities from within, aimed at fostering self-reflection.

VoiceOver's general objective is to build organizational capacity to collaborate with and support those who identify as survivor leaders, to better serve their beneficiaries, craft programs, identify challenges and opportunities, and achieve positive outcomes in anti-trafficking efforts and victim-support. The VoiceOver partners believe that collaborative approaches and increased inclusion of survivors as true partners, elevating their voices as primary stakeholders, mark a new and more effective direction to improve anti-trafficking efforts

The VoiceOver Survivor engagement plan was articulated in 4 main phases:

1. Onboarding phase;
2. Intensive trainings of survivors leaders, including ethno-psychological support, peer mentoring for survivor leaders, focus groups;
3. Workshops and peer coaching carried out by survivor;
4. Establishment of survivors' expert panels.

VoiceOver originates from a self-critical analysis that recognizes the anti-trafficking system as increasingly self-referential. This self-referential nature implies that existing measures do not necessarily align with or adequately reflect the lived experiences of trafficked persons. Often, these practices engage with survivors selectively, distilling and reproducing their experiences in ways that reinforce stereotypical trafficking narratives and labels. As a result, victim-support organizations risk making assumptions about what survivors need and expect from programs, policies, and interventions—or, in some cases, completely overlooking their perspectives. Much like in a dubbed film, survivors are not given the opportunity to speak in their own voice.

The overarching objective of the project is to strengthen organizational capacity to collaborate with and support individuals who identify as survivor leaders. By doing so, the initiative aims to enhance services for beneficiaries, develop more effective programs, identify challenges and opportunities, and ultimately achieve meaningful progress in anti-trafficking efforts and victim support.

PARTNER	DESCRIPTION
<p>EQUALITY (LEAD) Location and territory of action: Padova & Veneto Region (Italy)</p>	<p>Active since 2008, Equality was born on the experience of Mimosa Association founded in 1996; the same group of people decided, in fact, to channel their experience of active citizenship and professionalization of services to establish the NGO.</p> <p>The mission of the organization is to support victims of trafficking, any form of exploitation, sex work and minors, focusing on anything that can contribute to the prevention of distress and fragility, including strategic intervention with educating community and prevention with a constant look at the territorial needs.</p> <p>Equality aims to manage social-health and educational services and any type of training, dissemination, study, research, and awareness-raising activities, in a spirit of cooperation with other realities having their missions in line with its scope.</p> <p>Services are structured in three operational areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reception Area. Includes high-threshold services aimed at people who intend to develop processes of social and labor inclusion. The main area of interventions focuses on unaccompanied foreign minors, victims of trafficking and minors and young adults in specific vulnerable conditions; 2. Contact Area. Includes low-threshold services aimed at people who experienced the street context. The main area is prostitution in its various components: people who engage in prostitution (supply of paid sex) and people who access the prostitution market (demand for paid sex); 3. Communication and Awareness Area. <p>www.equalitycoop.org info@equalitycoop.org</p>

PARTNER	DESCRIPTION
<p style="text-align: center;">ADPARE</p> <p>Location and territory of action: Bucarest (Romania)</p>	<p>ADPARE has been active for 21 years; the founding team having previous experience in providing specialized services for human trafficking victims in Romania, repatriated by the IOM from the former Yugoslav countries.</p> <p>The purpose of the association is to develop social programs to reintegrate young people, young and old, in difficulty, by carrying out socio- educational activities.</p> <p>The organization's main activities are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing communities; 2. Training; 3. Research; 4. Protection and assistance; 5. Victims' support in criminal proceedings; 6. Prevention and empowerment of vulnerable people (e.g. refugees in camps from Ukraine); 7. The ACASA Programme. <p>https://adpare.eu/en adpare@adpare.eu</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">PAYOKE</p> <p>Location and territory of action: Antwerp (Belgium) and the reception centers for the entire Flemish area.</p>	<p>Payoke, a pioneer in tackling trafficking since 1987, is one of the three government-recognized specialized centers for victims of human trafficking in Belgium.</p> <p>The program the organization offers, lasting two to three years, is designed to support the victim from identification to the end of the judicial proceedings.</p> <p>Payoke runs awareness-raising initiatives and campaigns encouraging involvement from governments, civil society and individuals to inspire action and help prevent modern slavery.</p> <p>www.payoke.be info@payoke.be</p>

PARTNER	DESCRIPTION
<p>FUNDACIÓN CRUZ BLANCA</p> <p>Location and territory of action: All Spain, 10 out of 17 regions including islands.</p>	<p>The organization has been active from 2004 as the religious organization of the Franciscan order, it started working with people in need of protection, sex workers (in line with the definition enshrined in the Protocol of Palermo), and then it broadened its activities to Victims of Trafficking, humanitarian aid, homeless, and additions.</p> <p>The organization carries out diversified actions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Attention to migrant population: since 2017, it has been managing various accommodation resources of the Humanitarian Care programs for migrants in vulnerable situations; 2) Employment (Entabán): it prioritizes employment as a form of inclusion in society; 3) Trafficking of human beings: the National Program for Integral Intervention in Human Trafficking aims to contribute to the detection of existing trafficking situations to provide care and protection to victims through territories' resources, thus favoring integral recovery and adequate social, health and labor inclusion of beneficiaries. 4) Prevention and Health Promotion; 5) Intervention Program with families in vulnerable situations and at risk of social exclusion. <p>FCB promotes direct interventions in those areas where exploitation may occur to identify and detect it, providing information, and materials, and offering places in shelters to start a personal project according to the needs, including legal aid, psychological, social, and labor orientation.</p> <p>www.fundacioncruzblanca.org fundacion@cruzblanca.org</p>

PARTNER	DESCRIPTION
<p>MIST Paris (France). The organization is Paris based, but also acting in other cities in France and staff members are also based in different French cities.</p>	<p>Created in January 2020 by a multidisciplinary team of professionals already experienced in fighting human trafficking.</p> <p>MIST is a group of former victims of procuring or trafficking for sexual exploitation who mobilize to promote the identification of other victims, their protection, their inclusion, in a process allowing them to enhance their experience by helping other victims.</p> <p>MIST is pursuing several objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help: to help the victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation by advising, encouraging, mentoring, and supporting them; 2. Acceptance and empowerment: to raise awareness among the community of victims, so that we begin to respect and accept who we are and what we are fighting for. To empower one another so that we can all be more active in the fight against human trafficking for sexual exploitation. To create a space where we can learn from one another and teach each other; 3. Knowledge: To give the possibility to the victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation to share their experience, to prevent others from becoming victims. To make the world understand that there are still a lot of people in bondage and that human trafficking for sexual exploitation needs to be abolished; 4. Community: To create a solid community for the victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. To give an active role to all the members of the community to move the association forward. <p>http://mist-association.org/en/home/ contact@mist-association.org</p>

PARTNER	DESCRIPTION
UNIVERSITY IUAV OF VENICE	<p>The SSIIM UNESCO Chair on the “Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants – urban policies and practices” is a research center established in 2008 at the University IUAV of Venice, with the aim of investigating local policies and practices promoting or preventing the urban inclusion of foreign residents, in both the Global North and South.</p> <p>Urban governance and space are at the core of the research work carried out at the Chair. On the one hand the focus is on the daily interface between society and space in cities characterized by growing (ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, etc.) differences: spatial practices and representations, new forms of appropriation, re-appropriation and claim of urban spaces; diversification of the senses of place. On the other hand, the attention is turned to how policies and politics can have tangible effects on the right to the city for all.</p> <p>http://www.unescochair-iuav.it/en/</p>

The project was aimed to:

- build survivor-informed capacity by training 90 staff and empowering 20 survivors to participate in meaningful ways in anti-trafficking efforts;
- provide trauma-informed and gender-sensitive assistance and support to 90 trafficked persons through peer-mentoring;
- create measures facilitating the social and labor integration of 60 trafficked persons through peer- based programs;
- strengthen skills and knowledge of professionals working in TP support services offering a European training Webinar Series on survivor engagement
- increase awareness and understanding of survivor engagement in the anti-trafficking community through a replicable evidence-based model for NGOs, a set of recommendations for decision-makers, 5 podcasts, and 2 international events;
- stimulate a debate within the antitrafficking community about communicating with dignity and respect for the people who have been affected by THB, through an awareness-raising campaign and an online event, co-designed with survivor leaders.
- develop a common framework on experimental procedures for the engagement of survivors as a methodological reference basis for the evaluation of implementation plans that meet local characteristics
- define a survivor engagement model based on the evaluation of the experimentation in the various partner countries, to be presented and disseminated to the various stakeholders working in the anti-trafficking system.

Within the actions foreseen by the project about knowledge exchange and development of engagement, which included increased awareness and understanding of **survivor engagement in the anti-trafficking community**, at a first stage IUAV task was to elaborate a **Toolkit On Good Practices** to help develop a common framework on experimental procedures. To identify Good Practices (GP), at the first stages of this research, criteria for defining what to consider as a GP have been outlined among project partners following a proposal elaborated by IUAV. Two levels of criteria were determined. The criteria set several key elements to be considered in describing each practice: Mandatory and Preferential.

An interview according to qualitative research methods was elaborated to be submitted to potential stakeholders. The interview was structured focusing on three main areas: mission and activities, insight on peer-to-peer experience, and a focus on the organization structure.

After the Implementation phase of the project, the object was to work on the definition of A Survivor Engagement Model, which includes evaluation analysis, collected Good Practices, partners experience and project outcomes. The initial idea behind the development of the Model was to mutually learn from and apply the MIST approach to the national context and organizations' experiences. MIST is a survivor-founded and survivor-led organization, created by and for survivors of human trafficking. Survivor engagement is not a component to be "incorporated" into its structure—it is the very foundation and purpose of the organization. All members of MIST are survivors, and their lived experience shapes every aspect of the association's work, from strategy and governance to project design and implementation. The organization operates through a peer-to-peer model and a participatory approach, ensuring that activities are continuously informed by the needs, perspectives, and feedback of its members. Rather than requiring structural adaptations to include survivor voices, MIST evolves organically through their leadership, fostering mutual learning, shared expertise, and collective empowerment within the survivor community.

THE VOICEOVER PROJECT IMPACT ON MIST

Given their unique nature as a survivor-led organization, MIST played the dual role of both model and mentor to other partners in the VoiceOver Project. Their experience and approach served as a valuable reference point for organizations seeking to strengthen survivor engagement. However, MIST's role was not limited to providing guidance – they also drew significant benefits from the cooperation with the consortium partner and from their involvement in the project including the following:

- The Voice Over Project helped them expand their capacity and develop new skillsets. The MIST staff received the opportunity to meet new people, learn, and develop partnerships. The team felt that they had the opportunity to dare and grow because the partners allowed them to share their expertise and recognize the value of our work. MIST reported that the respectful and supportive environment fostered within the VoiceOver project encouraged their active engagement and allowed them to share their expertise confidently -including taking on leadership roles within the partnership. This experience contributed to both personal and collective growth, reinforcing their identities as social workers, activists, and a cohesive community of survivors. They highlighted that the recognition they received extended beyond their status as survivors, valuing their professional experience and contributions through their work at MIST

- Through their participation in the VoiceOver project, MIST developed meaningful training activities that not only enriched the organization's work but also enabled the discovery and deeper understanding of new members' individual strengths. The team emphasized the importance of co-developing such training initiatives with survivors, underlining that adequate funding must be allocated to ensure survivors are fairly compensated for their time and contributions.
- The project also contributed to the evolution of MIST's professional language. Terms such as "survivors" and "onboarding," initially new to some team members, have since gained significant relevance within their organizational vocabulary, reflecting a growing alignment with broader sectoral standards and practices.
- MIST also expressed a strong interest in fostering more direct exchanges with survivors of trafficking based in other countries. While one MIST staff member had the opportunity to meet onboarded survivors during a visit to Belgium—a moment described as particularly powerful—the organization hopes for future opportunities to engage in cross-border dialogues and build sustainable survivor-led networks
- However, MIST also voiced concerns that the outcomes of the VoiceOver project may remain limited to survivor empowerment, without translating into long-term engagement or structural change. While professionals may have gained awareness through the project's activities, MIST fears this may not lead to consistent survivor participation in future initiatives. The team expressed apprehension that, despite the inclusion of survivors in the project's final event, there may be insufficient follow-up to ensure meaningful, ongoing involvement.

HOW TO DEVELOP A MODEL ON SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT?

The VoiceOver Project envisioned the development and implementation of intensive training programs for survivor leaders, structured around a series of learning modules designed and delivered by each participating NGO. Using a blended learning approach, these "survivor engagement modules" were intended to address key aspects of survivor participation, including meaningful engagement, peer support, trauma-informed communication, and the role survivor leaders might take within the anti-trafficking system. Attention was to be given also to legal frameworks, safety and well-being, and the dynamics of care relationships.

The following framework is derived from a synthesis of these 'survivor engagement modules,' implemented by the NGOs participating in the project, drawing not only on successful experiences but also on the challenges and setbacks they encountered throughout the training paths.

HOW TO START (human resources, logistics): PRELIMINARY STEPS

Organizing survivor leadership training requires careful planning of both content and logistics. Staff roles and logistical needs must be clearly identified and managed before, during, and after the development of training modules and related activities. These foundational elements are crucial, as they directly support the survivor engagement process, which in turn informs and shapes the broader engagement model.

Human resources:

Partners employed different staff roles based on their organizational structure and the nature of activities planned. In most cases, human resources were selected from existing staff within the organizations, with only few exceptions.

However, most partners assembled teams that included the following roles:

Coordinators and project managers: responsible for the overall planning of the activities and overseeing the implementation of the training sessions. The Coordinator provides guidance and monitors progress.

Financial Manager: Handles budget planning and project-related expenses related to the engagement training paths.

Psychologists: responsible for the organization, development and structuring of the training. contribute to the planning of the supervision meetings. Psychologists with specialized experience in trafficking in persons can address the psychological impact of trauma and suggest resilience-building techniques, ensuring that participants develop skills with an emphasis on mental health and well-being.

Social workers/case managers: two or three professionals to support and monitor individual cases and contribute to the implementation of the training.

External experts: additional experts to be engaged for specific topics. For example, in one of the modules organized by a VoiceOver Partner, a human trafficking expert from Nigeria brought added value in multi-cultural understanding considering that some of the engaged survivors were Nigerian, connecting cross-cultural contexts, and enriched the training with authentic insights and global perspectives. In another, an urban planner led an exercise on mental mapping of urban spaces, designed to help migrants reflect and become aware of how they truly inhabit the city they live in.

MIST considerations: before starting the training sessions, key concerns regarding personnel and task feasibility included trainer capacity: the ability of trainers to design and conduct such training paths. In Mist, trainers are Survivors leaders themselves and already part of the staff, with personnel capacity developed through internal training and supervisions since 2020, prior to the VoiceOver training. While a "train of trainers" activity was included in the VoiceOver projects and delivered by MIST to professionals from other partner NGOs at the start of the project, capacity-building is an ongoing process requiring more time.

Logistics

When planning Survivor Leaders Engagement modules and activities, it was essential to consider the number and profile of participants, as well as the location, to ensure a safe and supportive environment.

As for logistics, activities have been organised both online and in presence.

ONLINE: Only one organization, FCB, conducted the recruitment of survivors entirely online. As a nationally operating organization with multiple offices across different cities, the team responsible for implementing the empowerment training was also geographically dispersed. Consequently, the survivors selected to participate in the training were based in various locations across the country.

Hence, activities involving all the survivors participating in the training sessions as a group were held online, while other individual training sessions took place in person. This experience by FCB proved that it is highly challenging conducting this kind of activity online. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to recruit participants from a single territorial area and its surroundings, ensuring limited travel time.

IN PRESENCE: All the other organizations succeeded in developing in-presence modules. The easiest and most affordable option for organizations with available space in their headquarters is to conduct activities there (e.g., using counseling center spaces for the supervision of individual or group sessions and rooms dedicated to group meetings). However, accessibility for participants must be carefully considered. If they don't live in the same city (or are spread across different parts of a large city, it becomes essential to rent a venue in a location that is easily accessible to everyone, ideally near major public transport hubs (e.g., train or bus stations). It is also suggested to provide food and childcare services to make participation easier for all.

HOW TO ENGAGE (recruitment of peers and background documents): PEER TO PEER AS ONE METHOD

The survivor's engagement process

The recruitment of survivors may differ based on each organization's experience with survivor engagement and the structure of the training.

As already analyzed in Toolkit On Good Practices, some of the VoiceOver partner organizations already had established onboarding processes , even though not structured.

Voiceover being a project funded by the EU AMIF Programme imposed some limitations concerning possible participants to the activities: only documented TCN could be admitted.

FBC. The recruitment process started with a review and presentation, to the beneficiaries, of the AMIF Programma conditions for the engagement training path. In addition, criteria for the recruitment were set.

FCB social workers and psychologists selected people who had been beneficiaries of their protection programs in the past, by applying the following internal criteria:

- Balanced presence of men and women
- Experience of different types of exploitation
- Assessment confirming the individual's stability in their recovery process
- The existence of a previous relationship or connection with FCB

Shortlisted people were thus invited to a presentation of the project and could decide whether they wanted to continue.

ADPARE. Because in Romania the number of identified victims of human trafficking, third-country nationals, is very small (0 in 2021, 0 in 2022, 7 in 2023), a selection process was not necessary, the only possibility being the direct involvement of four women, beneficiaries of the assistance and protection programme as victims, who had already carried out peer coaching activities in the migrant communities they come from.

EQUALITY. The recruitment process was based on the following selection criteria: Some of the participants had previously received assistance through the project (through NAVIGARe the anti-trafficking Project in the Veneto Region) and remained in contact. One of the participants was still receiving assistance. Since the anti-trafficking project assists more than 100 beneficiaries at a time, the Equality team requested the cooperation of colleagues from other NGOs to help select the candidates;

- During 3 meetings, the project was presented to the professionals who were in contact with assisted or previously assisted beneficiaries;
- The professionals were asked to present the VO project to the possible candidates and to convey to them the dates of the scheduled meetings with the candidates;
- Two group meetings were organized to present the VoiceOver project to the 8 people who felt more engaged in the proposal, they are of different nationalities and had undergone different form of exploitation;
- During the meetings, the participants made introductions to each other, shared personal episodes, and talked about their expectations to see if they were in line with the project objectives and expectations;
- During the group meetings, the organization also asked them to participate in a specific activity in which the people in the recruitment process were paired into couples. Each person introduced themselves to their partner, and then each member of the pair had to introduce the other person to the entire group;
- After the two group meetings, Equality staff had individual meetings with the participants to better explain the project activities and better understand if they felt comfortable with the process proposed.

PAYOKE. A first list of potential participants selected among people who received assistance and support from the organization in the past was created, and facilitators reached out to them by phone to arrange the initial meeting.

Due to delays and setbacks, the planned individual in-person meetings with potential participants could not take place, so the team decided to proceed with a group introductory meeting to avoid further delays.

During the meeting:

- The project, overall objectives, activities, subsequent activities, overall objectives and logistical information were presented
- Scheduling was discussed, to accommodate the needs of every participant
- Informed consent forms and volunteer agreements were shared
- Participants were given a few days to decide whether to continue in the program or not.

The final group included 5 participants.

MIST. Among the four trainers, one was designated as the Training Coordinator. This individual played a key role in ensuring participants' readiness and engagement before each training session.

Pre-Training Engagement: before the training begins, the Training Coordinator contacts and meets with participants individually. These one-on-one discussions help assess their willingness and capacity to engage while clarifying the framework of the training program. Topics covered include:

- The structure and objectives of the training
- Scheduling details (dates, times, locations)
- Personal goals and challenges

To ensure participants are well-informed, each receives a welcome booklet for MIST members, written by active members of the organization. This booklet includes internal rules and regulations, which all participants must acknowledge by signing the MIST Code of Conduct.

Training Methodology: the training approach is introduced through a collective discussion centered on seven key topics. To foster a productive group dynamic, training sessions are intentionally kept small, with a maximum of six participants. A common language is chosen collectively to ensure effective communication.

Each session begins with a reminder of the established rules, reinforcing a safe and structured learning environment. The primary training techniques used within MIST emphasize peer-led groups, facilitated by trained peers without external intervention from non-peer professionals.

Engagement and Leadership Development: a central activity within the training is the collaborative development of a training program titled "7 Days to Change Your Life" – a podcast produced by the trainees. One of the most effective strategies for sustaining engagement and supporting the transition into leadership roles is to offer regular training sessions with appropriate time intervals to maintain momentum. Additionally, participants are quickly provided with contract-based opportunities within the organization, encouraging long-term involvement and empowerment.

MIST note: initial meetings should be face-to-face and one-to-one to ensure a better selection and respect the needs of the participant.

Background Document

A key principle on which all partners agreed since the phase of project writing was that to truly empower the survivors to be involved in the project's activities, their time and contributions should be remunerated. Therefore, the project included a dedicated budget line for the payment of survivor leaders. The strategies adopted to regularize peers within organizations differed based on two key factors: on the one hand, compliance with national labor contract regulations or voluntary agreements, and on the other hand, the internal organizational structure (Survivors' lead organizations or other civil society organizations).

In some partner organizations, survivors' leaders were hired as employees or volunteers for a period coinciding with the completion of training foreseen in the core part of the project. For example.

Equality held individual meetings with the survivor leaders to present and sign a "Letter of Assignment." This document outlined the schedule, payments, and activities to be completed. , and corresponds to a occasional collaboration contract, used in Italy for short-term, non-continuous work relationships, usually for freelance or gig-type tasks

In some cases, volunteer contracts were used as they were the only viable option given the legal and administrative constraints. Specifically, in the context of Payoke and Belgian legislation, any form of paid engagement requires the individual to possess a VAT number—a requirement that many survivors do not meet. Consequently, volunteer agreements were implemented, accompanied by informed consent forms outlining the volunteer allowance that peer contributors would receive for their participation in each activity

For MIST no recruitment was necessary, as survivors were already part of the team. Contracts with the team members were established, and they were compensated through extra time . As a standard practice, all contracts include a confidentiality clause regarding the address, staff, and individuals receiving assistance. Recruitment was not required for supervisors. The supervising psychologist, one of the collaborators, has nine years of experience working with vulnerable migrants. The volunteer was selected by one of the victims (a survivor) and subsequently signed a volunteer contract.

The trainers are employed under long-term contracts within the organization. Following the training, the trainees contributed to the production of a podcast training program (comprising 7 episodes) and were compensated for this work. The director and financial officer were responsible for designing individual contracts based on the trainees' status and in accordance with French law.

PROGRAMMING, TIMELINE, AND EXPECTED RESULTS OF THE PROJECT AS GUIDING IDEAS TO THE CREATION OF THE MODULES

Programming and Timeline

The planning and scheduling of the modules to train the peers was not always consistent across the partner organizations; however, some recurring themes can be identified.

The project teams created a timeline for the training modules, including the content and activities. This timeline was flexible and could be adjusted to the needs of each participant.

Multiple meetings were organized with survivors to understand their needs and gather their input for the learning modules design. These sessions, which focused on the design and planning of the training, were instrumental in deepening the understanding of both the process and the project.

In some cases, the training consisted of 10 group meetings with 6 participants, while in others it included five sessions. These sessions varied in format, including 3 hours in person meetings, a 1.5 hour online session, and 6 hours in-person sessions. More generally, all training was developed from the ground up over a period of 5 to 6 months.

A number of suggestions were raised regarding programming considerations:

- It is important to ensure that the initial session plans are realistic, as overly ambitious schedules may be impractical in some cases.
- Sessions were scheduled during evenings and weekends to accommodate participants' work schedules; careful consideration of scheduling is necessary moving forward.
- Training should remain flexible, with shorter sessions considered to enhance participation rates.
- While longer sessions can foster better rapport, some participants, particularly those with childcare responsibilities, found the duration challenging.
- training programs should incorporate additional content on health, sexual health, and a broader module on the legal framework.

Expected Results

Expected outcomes:

- Active participation in meetings
- A positive group dynamics
- Increased awareness and motivation among participants
- Readiness to conduct workshops independently
- Development of sessions training program
- Formation of a peer group to design and deliver workshops
- Improved interpersonal and leadership skills
- Enhanced coordination and team involvement
- Exploring peer mentoring as a survivor engagement tool
- Confidence in leadership and advocacy roles
- Empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills
- A sense of empowerment and healing
- Development of leadership skills in migrant communities

To better achieve the expected results, it became clear that ongoing training and resources for survivor engagement were needed throughout the modules. Additionally, one-on-one and in-person intake sessions for better participant selection, strengthening group dynamics and survivor-led contributions, and encouraging self-expression, creativity, and leadership development were also important. The project focused on peer mentoring as a way for survivors to develop and practice leadership skills in a safe and supportive environment. By guiding and supporting beneficiaries, survivors step into roles that require empathy, communication, and problem-solving, helping them to build confidence in their abilities. This process allows them to grow as leaders while still benefiting from the structure and guidance of victim support services, thus minimizing risks of re-traumatization. As survivors practice leadership in this controlled setting, they not only empower others but also prepare themselves for broader roles in advocacy, community engagement, and professional growth, reinforcing their own healing and sense of purpose.

DEVELOPMENT AND MODULES

Modules description and activities description

The description of the planned activities, including those that facilitated the transition to the second phase of the project, focuses on the peer mentoring and survivor leadership training.

The modules and activities covered through the training are presented here, organized by theme and objective.

Modules overview:

- **Group creation** – Established a comfortable, open learning environment through cooperation activities.
- **Introduction to anti-trafficking legislation and policies** – Introduced concepts of human trafficking, types of exploitation, and anti-trafficking systems.
- **Self-esteem** - Appreciation or consideration of each individual about his or her own person. Development of self-esteem and forging a realistic but positive thinking style.
- **Engagement of trafficked persons/trauma** – Explored first impressions of anti-trafficking projects, trust-building, and support mechanisms. Many suggestions emerged on this module regarding what made the survivors leaders better understand the national anti-trafficking project: relationship of trust, time to understand, answers to important needs e.g. healthcare, IDs, documents such as residence permit and/or work permit. Some critical issues emerged: social workers often lacked direct experience with exploitation, which hindered their ability to fully understand certain experiences. As a result, they occasionally struggled with empathy, sometimes taking key steps for granted. This exchange proved fundamental in understanding the role of survivor leaders within the community and the potential for personal healing as a means to support others. Additionally, the concept of dissociation was explored, with an emphasis on identifying whether this defence mechanism was employed as a way to disconnect from reality. The focus was also placed on exploring more adaptive healing mechanisms.
- **Empowerment and resilience** - Identification and empowerment of the set of skills and psychological attitudes that allow to overcome crisis situations, adapt to new contexts and overcome challenges.

- **Communication techniques/Communication skills with victims** – The training also covered essential aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication, emphasizing the peers' role in effectively engaging with beneficiaries. Participants practiced role-playing exercises to simulate real-life conversations, helping them develop empathy, active listening, and appropriate responses in sensitive situations. A key focus was on building assertive communication skills, ensuring that trainees could express themselves confidently. Additionally, the training involved defining the profile of the individuals the organization aims to support, allowing participants to gain a deeper understanding of their specific needs and vulnerabilities. Special attention was given to strategies for approaching sensitive topics with care, ensuring that discussions remained survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and empowering.
- **Sexual Health and sexual transmitted infections** (External Expert) – Covered STIs, prevention methods, and sexual well-being.
- **Labor rights and exploitation** (External Expert) – Explained contracts, worker rights, and labour exploitation.
- **Final session/conclusions** Reflecting on the training experience and takeaways.

Activities implemented:

- **Group formation/Self-concept:** set of characteristics (aesthetic, physical and affective), which serve to build the image of the "I". Definition of my current self and my past self. Presentation of myself to the group. Participants quickly bonded, establishing rules (respect, equality, privacy, and safe space). Activity of presentation (name, origin, reason why they decided to participate to Voice Over - each person decides if they want to add something else about themselves):
 - importance of cooperating, being interconnected etc... and importance of learning to work in a group
 - group work (role play with some ethical dilemmas)
 - Dixit cards table game: how did you feel during this activity? What would you like to explore during the training sessions?

- **Mental Maps workshop:** participants mapped their cities, reflecting on personal and emotional connections to places. The workshop was conducted by an external expert who accompanied participants to draw the map of the city where they live, including their own house, the places that are important for them, the routes they usually go through, the places they try to avoid and feel as dangerous. This activity could arise very interesting conversations not only about the way they see the places and they live in the city, but also about the way they see their life.
- **Role-playing:** helped participants understand their role in peer support but also revealed challenges in providing the right level of information. The activity aimed at creating a simulation/role play of a conversation with a person in a condition of exploitation, who asks them for advice on what to do. Three different positions: who is going to act, who is going to give advice, who is going to observe and what. Role-play script: 1) Instructions given to Person 1: "while you go shopping, you pass by the square of your city, and you see an acquaintance who is crying...". 2) Instructions to give to Person 2 (in secret): "you are a person who has been working in a restaurant as a dishwasher for 2 months without a contract, you have not yet received payment for the work done and you are desperate...You would like to ask for help because you asked your employer for money, and he threatened to fire you from work". 3) Instructions to give to the observers (in secret): What questions were asked/to be asked? How did the relationship with the person asking for help go? How was a relationship of trust created, or can it be created? signs of communication (verbal, non-verbal, cultural differences, physical contact...), active listening etc.
- **Sexual health and labour rights:** These sessions, supported by technical expertise and multilingual materials, were highly informative. The content was intentionally detailed and specialized, aiming to equip participants with precise knowledge on sexual health and labour rights. While some of the more complex topics were challenging to fully grasp, participants expressed interest and engagement. The sessions reinforced their existing knowledge and introduced new, practical information that was considered valuable.
- **Confidence building/life after:** Some peers expressed uncertainty about their ability to lead workshops, particularly in providing information on documents, laws, employment, and health-related matters. The team offered reassurance, emphasizing that they were not expected to have all the answers.

- **A trauma-informed approach:** designed to enhance safety, trustworthiness and transparency, while promoting peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice with attention to cultural, historical, and gender considerations. Concept: 'It takes a Village' (the idea behind these sessions is to empower and support, hence this theme was chosen because it reflects the core concept of these workshops). Introductory meeting: create a safe space – ideally setting of meetings to be held in a circular group; create a warm, hospitable, and inviting ambience through comfortable and cozy textile, maybe light background music to set the tone – participants need to feel physically safe and emotionally secure during these meetings. Facilitators introduce themselves through a non-formal and friendly manner (such introductions and interaction are founded on the social worker-client relationship and will allow a platform for empathy to be transmitted, experiences to be shared, where care is offered, a sense of belonging is founded, and meaning making occurs.). Invite participants to introduce themselves and encourage them to share what they expect from these meetings and what the program is about. Explore whether participants prefer to hear about the program before their introductions, as it allows for a respectful and egalitarian approach. Explain the program in detail, particularly the aim and meaning of survival participation: providing a voice, autonomy and agency, the opportunity to change the narrative (whilst recognizing and respecting the reality and impact of trauma and without diminishing/obscuring the truth) through these meetings our aim is to assist the participants to shift trauma to empowerment uncover any hidden skills and potential (innovation, creativity, activism, leadership, other), creating opportunities for peer support, leadership, and mentoring expert role. Invite an open conversation to transpire whilst allowing space for questions; clarify any concerns/interests – this will pave the way for the creation of trust and mutual respect between facilitators and participants, resulting in a healthy and strong connection.
- **Active participation- survivor engagement:** Participants engaged in a discussion on the common portrayals of trafficking victims and critically examined how these narratives influence public perception and policy. These conversations also explored the concept of meaningful survivor engagement, emphasizing the role of survivor-led groups in creating spaces for survivors to actively participate in policy discussions, become advocates and public speakers, contributing their lived experience to drive systemic change.

- **Focus group activities** for feedback on the whole process – see below
- **Ideas for Future Cycles:** 1) Artistic Well-being Activities such as theatre, creative recycling, and self-expression. 2) Service-Oriented support on health, labor rights, and exploitation awareness meetings.

Focus group activities for feedback on the whole process

At the end of the training path, it is recommended to organize focus groups with participants to evaluate the effectiveness of the training.

The focus group should be led by 2/3 persons: 1 moderator, 1 person to manage a balanced debate (could be one person), 1 person observing and taking notes.

The proposed guiding questions are mainly suggestions, divided in two blocks; it is up to each organization to decide whether to concentrate the activity on the first or the second one, depending on the specific interests related to the project.

The first block refers to the preparation and engagement phase, the second one on the expectations of the training and foreseen outcomes.

First Block

- 1.1. When you were first contacted to become a peer, what did you understand the role would involve?
- 1.2. Who contacted you first to become a peer?
- 1.3. How would you describe your relationship with her/him? (Only if the question is not clear: was it a relationship of trust?)
- 1.4. How would you describe the first steps of the engagement process so far?
- 1.5. Has the training met your initial expectations so far?
- 1.4. How, in your opinion, your entry engagement point (e.g. shelters, safe spaces and hubs, work environment, ...) did impact the process?
- 1.5. Did it make it feel safer?
- 1.6. Did it make it feel more in danger?
- 1.7. Did it make it feel protected and motivated?

Second Block

- 2.1. How would you describe the impact of the training from a personal/professional perspective?
- 2.2. Was it useful in terms of learning new skills and competences?
- 2.3. Did you feel ready to be a peer at the end of the training? If not, what do you think you would still need to do before starting to operate as a peer?
- 2.4. About the role of peer, do you feel like the training prepared you for the role?
- 2.5. Do you have any recommendations for future training? Would you suggest any change? If so, which one?
- 2.6. Was any part of the training particularly useful? If so, why?
- 2.7. After this training, do you think you will be ready to perform this role? What are your main concerns for the upcoming phases (e.g. training new beneficiaries)?
- 2.8. After having completed the training, do you think the role of peer is useful in the empowerment process of survivors? Have you changed your opinion about this role? If so, please specify
- 2.9. How would you describe your knowledge/skills on peer-to-peer and empowerment after the training? What have you learned? Do you think the trainers have also learned from you? If so, please specify.

AND THEN...?

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Regarding the implementation of the activities, an evaluation was conducted at various phases to assess which activities were most successful/appreciated and to identify the challenges that emerged throughout the different phases of engagement and peer training. This evaluation aimed to inform the replicability and sustainability of future training and projects focused on involving survivors as key protagonists in anti-trafficking systems.

Successful practices

In the different phases of the training it is extremely relevant to evaluate which activities worked better. Starting with a shared space among the entire multidisciplinary professional team allows for collaborative brainstorming regarding the potential survivor leaders who may participate. Also, involving all the participants in designing the training program proved to be beneficial.

Key Successful Practices:

- Flexible Scheduling: adjusted session timings, including evenings and weekends, to accommodate participants' needs.
- Individualized Sessions: tailored approaches ensure personal engagement and readiness.
- Trust-Based Approach: each participant should have a dedicated reference figure, ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment.
- Integration of Social Workers: social workers play a crucial role as reference guides, complementing psychologists and maintaining continuity beyond training. Trust-building between team members and participants before training are essential.
- Encouraging peer support: activities and discussions should be designed to promote mutual support among participants, creating a sense of community of peers who could share experiences, challenges, and encouragement.
- Incorporating trauma-informed approaches: facilitators have to be mindful of participants' potential trauma, ensuring that the training is sensitive to their needs and avoiding triggering content

Empowering Survivor Leaders:

- Survivor leaders should be involved in planning, decision-making, and material development; Provide knowledge on health, labor rights, and immigration laws to boost Survivor leaders' confidence in supporting others.
- Survivors' experiences should be valued as expertise, reinforcing their importance in shaping future projects.

Training and engagement strategies:

- Every training should start with a reminder of the rules.
- Horizontal learning: facilitators positioning [1] themselves as listeners rather than sole knowledge providers.
- Circular questions: encouraging open discussions rather than limiting conversations.
- Safe sharing environment: no pressure to share personal stories, but voluntary contributions to enrich discussions.
- Celebrating progress: using certificates, appreciation gifts, and bonding activities (e.g., group meals) to acknowledge and celebrate participation and reinforce motivation
- Attendance issues: keeping flexible scheduling to help participants participate and catch up when they miss sessions
- Time management issues: providing gentle reminders and structured schedules.
- Avoiding long interruptions that risk losing engagement, and using remote or alternative ways to connect to restore focus.
- Providing childcare to ensure equal participation of individual with parental responsibilities
- Respecting boundaries around personal stories: participants not encouraged or required to share their trafficking experiences, allowing them to engage with the training in ways that feels safe and comfortable. However, some of them may choose to share their stories voluntarily, which enrich discussions and foster deeper connections within the group. Facilitators should ensure these moments are handled with sensitivity and respect.

Training execution and sustainability:

- Pre-training one-on-one conversations with a coordinator to ensure clarity on expectations, goals, and logistics.
- Keeping a structured format with small groups (max six participants) and a common language.
- Peer-led training: sessions facilitated by trained peers encourage organic discussions without external intervention.
- Post-training engagement: regular follow-up training sessions and contract-based assignments help participants to transit into leadership roles.

Additional successful initiatives:

- Engaged trainees in content creation, reinforcing their learning and leadership potential
- Meeting role models: Exposure to survivor leader provided inspiration and practical insights into leadership pathways.

Challenges

It is crucial to evaluate the issues that may emerge in each phase of the training to address challenges effectively and adapt the process as needed.

Challenges in survivors recruitment and engagement

- Difficulty in coordinating training dates due to participants' varied work schedules.
- Ensuring the consistent participation of survivors' leaders.
- Survivors may face additional challenges balancing work, family, and other life commitments.
- Language barriers, nationality differences, and gender balance considerations.
- Survivors may struggle to build trust with other exploited migrants due to fears of police involvement and lack of trust in authorities.

Training Participation Issues

- Work obligations may lead some participants to miss sessions.
- Trainers must adjust schedules to evenings/weekends: while this flexibility allows more participants to attend, it also places additional strain on the trainers and support staff, who must work unconventional hours, increasing their workload.

- Some participants struggle with time-management or miss sessions without notice, which not only affect their individual progress but also disrupts group activities that depend on collective participation.
- A long break (e.g. summer/winter holidays) risks disrupting momentum.
- Childcare is a challenge, with young children needing babysitters for women to attend activities.

Logistical & Regulatory Challenges

- Selecting and recruiting participants is a lengthy process, requiring motivation, availability, and mental stability.
- Ensuring a minimum attendance of 3-4 participants to sustain group dynamics is essential.
- Trainees might face precarious life conditions (childcare, health issues, long commutes) which impact engagement.

Training Format & Group Dynamics

- The peer support format requires careful facilitation to ensure balanced participation, active listening, and open expression while maintaining engagement.
- The recruitment of beneficiaries that fit the established criteria of the project may take time and is not always successful.

Training Participation Issues

- Work obligations may lead some participants to miss sessions.
- Trainers must adjust schedules to evenings/weekends: while this flexibility allows more participants to attend, it also places additional strain on the trainers and support staff, who must work unconventional hours, increasing their workload.

EVALUATION BY THE ORGANIZATION AND BY PARTICIPANTS

In developing a model for survivor engagement, it was essential to include the voices of survivors. However, due to legal and safety considerations, their identities were kept anonymous. Focus groups served as a key tool for capturing survivors' perspectives, expectations, and feedback. Input from project staff was also integrated to ensure a comprehensive and balanced approach.

Participants expectations on the process and the training

The participants appeared to have understood the overarching goal of the project, even though they were initially uncertain about what to expect from the training. They were eager not only to learn new skills but also to contribute to helping others. In each session, they anticipated having time to express themselves and share their perspectives. They demonstrated a strong interest in hearing the viewpoints of others. They expected to gain something new and valuable, both for the project and for their personal lives. Additionally, they welcomed the opportunity to articulate their ideas and be actively involved in organizing the workshops as valuable experts in the field.

Summarizing, they expected to:

- Elevating their voice
- Build autonomy and agency
- Have the opportunity to share and create a new narrative about human trafficking
- Bringing wisdom to the table
- Uncovering hidden skills (leadership, mentoring, activism, etc...)
- Exploring new potential (creativity, peer support, etc...)
- Providing peer support and building an expert role (survivor engagement)

On this last point, peer mentoring was perceived as an effective way to start survivor engagement in an anti-trafficking organization because it provides survivors with a safe and supportive environment to develop and practice leadership skills. By guiding and supporting peers, survivors step into roles that require empathy, communication, and problem-solving, helping them to build confidence in their abilities.

This process allows them to grow as leaders while still benefiting from the structure and guidance of the program, minimizing risks and creating opportunities for constructive feedback. As survivors practice leadership in this controlled setting, they not only empower others but also prepare themselves for broader roles in advocacy, community engagement, and professional growth, reinforcing their own healing and sense of purpose.

One more step towards an engagement model: evaluation and feedback on the process and trainings by Survivors' leaders collected through the focus group activity

General impressions of the program: Initially, psychologists played a supplementary role within the program framework. However, as the training sessions progressed, their presence and expertise were increasingly integrated, transforming the initiative into a more comprehensive approach that combined emotional support with leadership training. Participants found their involvement meaningful, particularly in sharing their experiences and being recognized as protagonists, as their voices as survivors were deemed important. The program facilitated personal and professional growth, helping individuals understand social structures and professional roles in new environments. Many expressed appreciation for the inclusive and participatory approach of the project.

“*The VoiceOver project was significant from the very name because it meant giving a voice to those who don't have one. It allowed me to express myself and free myself from my traumatic experiences, to use my voice. I hope this will also happen in the future; thanks to this project I will be able to give voice to other people who need it and are otherwise not heard*” – J. in Focus group

Understanding the role of a 'peer': there was an initial sense of confusion and nervousness regarding the role of a 'peer' that participants to the training were expected to take upon in the following phase, further compounded by scheduling difficulties. However, the opportunity was ultimately viewed as a confidence booster. The presence of professional contacts and peer support networks provided reassurance, in those organizations already adopting the method. As the training progressed, participants gained a clearer understanding of their responsibilities, particularly during the preparation of workshops for the final part of the project, which helped solidify their roles in supporting others in the recovery process.



“The project builds bridges between people and helps both beneficiaries and workers. Even if they have had bad experiences, people can be helped and not suffer” – K. in Focus group

Training evaluation: while the training was deemed essential, it was also described as excessively long and difficult to coordinate. Strengths included the flexibility of trainers, individualized support, and autonomy in workshop development. Participants felt that the training was helpful in equipping them with the necessary tools for their roles and in fostering a deeper understanding of the recovery process.



“The sessions focusing on communication, control dynamics, and trauma were particularly challenging and heavy topics for the group, especially given that this training took place shortly after a traumatic event for the Nigerian community in France over the summer. Additionally, these are taboo topics, which made them complex to work through. Fortunately, our group was already well-formed, cohesive, and supportive, which allowed us to go in-depth on these high-stakes topics” – A. in Focus group.

Experience of the process: the consensus among participants was that the process felt safe, protected, and motivating. Rather than as a burden, it was perceived as an enriching learning experience. Many found it empowering, realising their ability to help others despite initial doubts. The project was considered a valuable starting point for further development in survivor empowerment and advocacy.



“I like the word openness. When I started, I saw that everyone was open, without judgement, I could express myself and say everything without problems or feeling uncomfortable. I really felt an atmosphere of trust and security where one's story was not judged and could be told” – J. in Focus group



“It changed my being. I can't change my past and what I went through and the exploitation I suffered, but being with 10 people who despite their problems and difficult stories always had a smile on their face helped me a lot.” – K. in Focus group

Challenges and Initial Difficulties: participants and staff faced challenges in explaining the project to beneficiaries, particularly for those organizations that approached potential participants over the phone. Language barriers also posed obstacles for non-native speakers, as beneficiaries arrived from different non-EU countries. However, over time, participants overcome these hurdles through openness, curiosity, and a sense of inclusion. The group dynamic was described as democratic, fostering trust, safety, and mutual respect.



“The group's main concerns revolve around the understanding that without trust, there can be no meaningful action. The group is also convinced that the role of peer support is crucial, even indispensable, and that the actions carried out by the organization are a living proof of this. Survivors know much more and have much more to say and do for themselves than they might think. I was given the opportunity to realize this and take my responsible part in the workshops. Today, I know I have things to say and ideas that empower me. Social workers can help and support victims with their knowledge, but also with their limits; they cannot do it for them, and that's why empowerment is essential!” – A. in Focus group

Usefulness of the training: the training was beneficial both for acquiring practical skills and for emotional recovery. It fostered self-esteem, assertiveness, and provided opportunities for deep reflection. Participants recognized that trainers also learned from them, particularly in terms of cultural insights and lived experiences. The reciprocal learning environment enriched both trainers and trainees.



“The group shares that everyone has learned from one another for sure. Each person has her own story and personal experience, and our histories and journeys provide us with different perspectives. During the training, even the trainers discovered things through exchanges with the participants. This is the strength of this methodology: offering a dedicated space where everyone can express themselves. In this environment, the roles of trainer and trainee fade away, and we are in a peer-to-peer exchange, equal to equal” – A. in Focus group

Recommendations for future training: suggestions for improvement included incorporating alternative training formats to maintain engagement, integrating external experts for technical insights, and allowing more time for reflection, particularly for non-native speakers. Participants emphasized the importance of patience and self-compassion during training.

“*Maybe also a training on budget aspects in order to make sure I am able to ensure good conditions for the group/victims I am to help (food & drinks, transportations fees etc...)*” – A. in Focus group

The role of 'peer' in survivor empowerment: When social workers explained the empowerment process and the possibility to adopt inside the organization to participants to the training the peer-to-peer method, there was a strong consensus on the value of the 'peer' role. Participants saw it as a source of hope and a crucial reference point for those in recovery. The role fosters an external support network beyond institutional assistance. While emotionally demanding, it was considered a powerful position.

“*I felt and discovered that it was possible for me to step into this dynamic. I experienced a kind of relief in realizing I could convey powerful messages and advice to others, based on my personal story. Not just recounting it (my story), but being able to share and draw skills and abilities from my life that I didn't believe I possessed*” – A. in Focus group

Preparedness and future concerns: most participants felt prepared for their roles as 'peers,' recognizing it as a step toward broader engagement in survivor support. Concerns included workshop effectiveness, audience engagement, and public speaking skills. Many expressed an increased sense of security and self-confidence. Cross-cultural interactions were viewed as enriching, and positivity was seen as key to success. The training also provided practical knowledge applicable to their personal lives, such as legal and health-related information.

“*I think I would appreciate further training to build even greater self-confidence and help me feel a stronger sense of legitimacy in this role. I think that training on communication and different cultures would also be very useful for us!*” – A in Focus group

The program was widely perceived as transformative, both in professional skill-building and personal empowerment. It created an inclusive and collaborative environment, fostering mutual learning and support. Participants advocated for the project's continued expansion and integration into broader community outreach efforts.

Inputs by organizations' social workers

The Voice Over project aimed to integrate Survivors into anti-trafficking systems, "an approach that was new to most social workers who participated. Initially uncertain about beneficiaries' interest in becoming "survivor leaders," they were positively surprised by the recruited participants' deep engagement and willingness to share personal experiences. At the outset, there were concerns among social workers regarding the potential for re-traumatization, and it was unclear whether survivors would be interested in participating or in assuming leadership roles. However, the response from survivors exceeded the expectations. They engaged with the initiative in a deeply positive manner, demonstrating a strong willingness to contribute and share their expertise, which ultimately helped shape the project's direction and impact. The evaluation of the training was overwhelmingly positive. Social workers were satisfied with the sessions, participants' reactions, and the relationships built with survivor leaders. Although decision-making processes were sometimes lengthy, these challenges ultimately strengthened trust, teamwork, and the effectiveness of the initiative.

As the project progressed, its complexity and scale became more evident, demanding a more intensive role from psychologists who, besides conducting leadership training, were also providing emotional support. Group sessions proved essential in shaping individual interventions allowing for a more tailored approach to participants' needs. The trainers initially faced challenges, including unclear guidelines and concerns about how differing personalities might affect collaboration. They adapted flexibly to participants' needs, emphasizing real-time responsiveness over rigid lesson plans. Building trust required personal vulnerability from trainers, fostering a deep and open group dynamic. Overall, the experience was seen as highly rewarding, offering both personal and collective growth.

A trainer shared that she learned a lot from the experience, and these training sessions also helped her change her perspective and broaden her understanding. She reflected on how she initially viewed the participants as beneficiaries, but through the interactions, she saw them as peers.

“

"I saw new figures of survivors emerging as helpers, and potential leaders. I was surprised and so happy to realize that I am not alone, and we must make space for these extraordinary women!"

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TERMINOLOGY: A MUTUAL LEARNING PROCESS

General Considerations

VoiceOver originates from a self-critical analysis of the anti-trafficking system as self-referential. In the effort to propose a replicable model that integrates the diverse experiences represented during the project, several challenges emerged that made it difficult to develop a structured model. This led to a shift towards an ever-evolving, flexible learning process, grounded in continuous knowledge exchange.

Among other factors, the organizational structures of the partners played a significant role in shaping reflections on the feasibility/appropriateness of developing a single, replicable model for survivor engagement, as well as on the real possibility of harmonizing and structuring different practices.

Some partners, which operate on a community-based approach (e.g. MIST; ADPARE) have integrated survivor engagement from the outset, making it an integral part of their working method. As a result, no structural changes were needed to incorporate it and the process of updating methods and adapting activities on the basis of feedback received from survivors is more natural and responsive to the needs.

Regarding the involvement in training paths of vulnerable migrants' victims of trafficking or severe exploitation, promoting awareness on their rights is a central aspect of the process. This is especially important because many vulnerable migrants find it very difficult to trust institutions or structured systems, given numerous cases where institutions have failed to really support them. Emotional support, counseling are crucial for migrants to recognize themselves as victims of trafficking or of labor exploitation.

Key barriers and fears faced by people with a migrant background include:

- communication barriers and lack of trust, as migrants often struggle with language and cultural differences, making it harder to seek help or assert their rights;
- fear of deportation and uncertain legal status, as many workers fear repatriation, loss of legal residence permit, or employer retaliation, often due to misinformation;

- mistrust of authorities, as there are concerns about mistreatment or legal repercussions discourage workers from reporting abuses;
- power imbalance and fear, as they feel vulnerable as they are not in their home country, fearing that asserting their rights could lead to job loss, experiencing violence or worse consequences.
- exploitation and falsely claiming authority over their legal status;
- lack of awareness and misinformation, as they are often unaware of their rights, visa regulations, or available resources, leading to increased vulnerability.

Terminology

Another key element to take into consideration is the **common target group definition**.

The implementation of the project has involved a reflection on the issue of the language to be used in the field of human trafficking.

Since the beginning of the project, the partners struggled to agree on an appropriate term to define the individuals to be engaged through VoiceOver. Whereas terminology such as "victims," "ex-victims," "members," "active members," "peer educators," or "peer mediators" were more commonly used by participating organizations before the project, 'Survivor leaders' emerged as the most agreed-upon and acceptable term, as it aligned with VoiceOver empowerment objectives and is also widely understood by stakeholders working in the anti-trafficking sector. In some cases, participants were primarily addressed as 'individuals with lived experiences' of trafficking and/or exploitation, to reject labels, acknowledging that all definitions can be labels, including survivor. In other cases, they were referred to as "peers" or "leaders" throughout the process, recognizing both their past experiences—which enable them to understand the dynamics of trafficking—and their evolving role as community leaders with valuable resources.

Following the training, members of the participating organizations have increasingly adopted the terms "survivors" and "survivor leaders." Some participants even reported feeling more confident in using these terms to describe themselves, highlighting VoiceOver's role in fostering awareness and shaping discourse around survivor identity.

There were internal discussion sessions on these topics to ensure trainers fully understood the use, context, and implications of these labels before presenting, proposing, or using them with participants. During the training sessions, the concepts "survivors" and "survivors' leaders" were used and participants began moving toward self-identification both as survivors and leaders.

This self-identification was embraced because of the training content which encouraged reflection and provided time and space to recognize that the individuals involved are more than victims; this shift represented a significant step in the empowerment journey.

Finally, in some cases, the terminology used referred to individuals accessing the services offered by the organizations as beneficiaries; while some of the organizations themselves often referred to those they assisted as 'victims of human trafficking'. The debate around terminology highlighted different perspectives. Those who preferred the term "victim" tended to focus on the trauma resulting from human trafficking, emphasizing the harm experienced. In contrast, using "survivor" was seen to highlight resilience and strength that can emerge from overcoming such trauma.

Additionally, discussions considered the implications of referring to individuals as "trafficked persons", framing trafficking as a temporary and external circumstance rather than a defining characteristic of a person's identity.

In practice, trainers observed that terminology received relatively little focus during sessions, allowing participants to express themselves freely. People used various terms, such as "people who experienced human trafficking," "clients," and "victims," interchangeably, without showing a clear preference or discomfort with any specific language.

Before the VoiceOver project began, much emphasis was placed on finding the most appropriate terminology—debating whether "victims," "survivors," or "individuals with lived experience" was the best choice. However, no definitive conclusion was reached. Ultimately, there is no absolute distinction between a "correct" and "incorrect" way of speaking. The choice of terminology remains a matter of perspective, recognizing that a trafficking experience does not have to define an individual at all times or in all phases of life.

ADVISORY BOARD CONSIDERATIONS ON THE PROCESS

According to Voiceover project foreseen activities, an Advisory Board of three external experts has been established to ensure the quality, effectiveness, and consistency of project activities and results within a single operational framework and to monitor the quality and consistency of scientific outputs and outcomes in accordance with the approach.

At the end of the project an evaluation on the process and on occurred changes in attitudes and more inclusive programming and policies have been discussed among the Advisory Boards members and with partners.

The partners shared a collective sense of having undertaken a journey that was not only meaningful and enriching but also challenging and, at times, marked by critical points and difficulties. It was a transformative experience, both individually and as a group.

At the end of the project and in the making of the model, there was a recognized need for time and space to reflect on what had been seen, felt, and lived. This wasn't just a professional experience—it was a lived one. As partners reconnected with their teams and survivors' leaders, it became clear that they had to share more than just outcomes; it was needed to pass on a new vocabulary, a new language, and a new way of thinking—about social workers, about their roles, and the evolving challenges in the fight against trafficking. This experience has not only shifted partners' perspectives but also deepened their commitment, urging everyone involved to rethink how to engage with survivors, colleagues, and the broader anti-trafficking movement.

The discussion explored deeply into power dynamics and the discourse of victimhood, exploring how this discourse has been shaped, reinforced, and, in some ways, constrained by various fields—including human rights movements, psychology, and criminology. What emerged was a critical reflection on how these sectors, often with good intentions, have contributed to framing victimhood in specific ways—ways that carry implicit assumptions and unspoken narratives. These narratives are rarely unpacked or clarified, yet they exert significant influence over how individuals are labelled, supported, or excluded.

These narratives affect how organizations operate, how categories of victims are defined and treated, and how broader political discourses respond to or manipulate the concept of victimhood—especially in contexts where victim status can be instrumentalized or politicized. Ultimately, conversations revealed an urgent need for a reflexive approach to acknowledge the complexity of lived experiences and to resist reducing individuals to static or strategic identities shaped solely by institutional narratives.

In the process, participation has been taken seriously: it's not about determining, recognizing and respecting the complexity and density of different lived realities, institutional cultures, and ways of working. It has been acknowledged that genuine participation requires time, humility, and openness—to sit with discomfort, to listen deeply, and to build bridges across differences that aren't easily reconciled. It's about co-creating something that reflects the diversity of experience, not simplifying it for the sake of coherence.

While formal outputs are important, the process itself is the real result. The process reveals the incredible complexity of the work. It is this very process that forces the partners to sit down and create something formal, like the model: formalizing the work is a very valuable activity. It's an exercise in clarity and structure, helping to frame the complexities of the process in a way that can be shared and built upon.

It is clear that power dynamics remain at the core of this process. Working collaboratively as professionals and survivor leaders requires ongoing effort and reflection. It introduces a new paradigm—a different way of working with individuals who have lived through these experiences. This democratic approach is both powerful and challenging as it involves rethinking traditional hierarchies and learning to share power in meaningful ways.

This shift in perspective and practice is not easily shared with others who may not have participated in the process. Yet, it is essential for fostering genuine inclusivity and collaboration: sharing power—truly sharing it—with those who have lived through exploitation and now return as leaders, colleagues, and equals complicates the status quo. It can be uncomfortable. It can even be resisted. But it's also the heart of what makes this work meaningful. It is about recognizing the stories and voices of survivors as central to the work while also acknowledging the difficulties of navigating these new paradigms in group settings.

In this frame, some critical issues have been raised about the self-representation of survivor leaders within the anti-trafficking field. While survivor leadership is often celebrated—and rightfully so—it is also necessary to recognize that many of those who come to represent the “survivor voice” often do not form a homogenous group. As a result, other identities and experiences—those that don't neatly fit the dominant narrative—are frequently left out. This points to one of the persistent challenges in the trafficking arena: it has become a catch-all category for anyone who can be described as having been exploited, with states and institutions simultaneously broadening and narrowing the definition in ways that suit policy or political agendas.

Therefore, national institutions and anti-trafficking organizations must go beyond simply addressing survivors' trauma or offering platforms for empowerment through speech. It is about building structures of genuine inclusion, shared decision-making, and long-term support and appreciating the complexity, uniqueness and totality of each one of the lived experiences of all survivors. It is about asking what happens after the speech, after the testimony—how it is possible to create spaces of co-leadership, not just symbolic representation. It is also about developing a framework that allows us not to focus exclusively on the survivors' trauma but also to appreciate the survivors' retained strengths despite their abominable ordeals as well as their new strengths that they were able to derive from their ordeals.

In essence, the work started by VoiceOver partners aims to transform the systems themselves, not simply integrate survivors into existing structures that may still carry the same imbalances of power, to create truly participatory, ethical, and inclusive anti-trafficking frameworks.

Finally, going back to the process and the research behind it, it must be recollected that any research and any process of participation is always unsaturated. So it brings up new questions, and it's a kind of endless project and process: this is not a closing point, but a turning point. What has come out of the process needs to be carried forward—into future projects, into organizational practices, and into how people working in the anti-trafficking field think about participation, power, and survivor leadership in their work.



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