

Briefing Paper

Seeking Feedback from Trafficked Persons on Assistance Services: Principles and ethics

Introduction

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

Collateral Damage, a multi-country research report on the impact of anti-trafficking initiatives on the human rights of trafficked persons and migrating people, has documented how some anti-trafficking initiatives fail, or even harm, trafficked persons.² Subsequently, in *Feeling Good about Feeling Bad*, GAATW analysed several evaluation reports on anti-trafficking projects and identified a gap in practice: effectively and ethically sourcing knowledge from trafficked persons.³ This in spite of the call of the UN to recognize “the important contribution” trafficked persons can make to the monitoring and evaluation of anti-trafficking initiatives.⁴ During the research this process of ensuring accountability however, made the practitioner researchers grapple with ethical dilemmas. Most researchers felt torn between recognising the importance of receiving feedback

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

² GAATW, *Collateral Damage: The impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights around the world*, GAATW, 2007, retrieved 24 June 2015, http://www.gaatw.org/Collateral%20Damage_Final/singlefile_CollateralDamagefinal.pdf.

³ GAATW, *Feeling Good about Feeling Bad...: A global review of evaluation in anti-trafficking initiatives*, GAATW, 2010, retrieved 24 June 2015, http://www.gaatw.org/publications/GAATW_Global_Review.FeelingGood.AboutFeelingBad.pdf

⁴ UN OHCHR, *Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking*, UN OHCHR, 2002, p. 8.

regarding services that they had offered, and the worry that they may inadvertently retraumatise the person by asking her/him to revisit a dark period of his/her life. Researchers also worried whether the interviewees would somehow feel obliged to say only good things, or somehow feel ‘used’ for research.

This briefing paper is one of three in which we set out the main findings of what people who have been trafficked say about certain themes.⁵ This paper describes the ethical issues faced by the researchers and what measures they took to address these. This paper is not meant to provide a final word or guideline on this theme. Rather, we are sharing it in the spirit that we would like to improve our own practice; with the intention to include the voices of trafficked persons into our work.

Ethical principles

‘Do no harm’ was the overarching guiding principle for GAATW Member Organisations.⁶ Researchers were very conscious of the fact that the women and men they were interviewing had experienced serious human rights violations. Therefore, they did not want the interviews to inadvertently open up old wounds or bring harm to the interviewees in any other way. These issues were discussed at length in the preparatory meetings and the research team agreed upon principles and ethical guidelines. For example, the researchers developed an informed consent form, a witnessed verbal informed consent form, and a working document on ethics. Throughout the research process, researchers took care to create a mutually respectful relationship between researchers (the assistance providers) and the interviewees (the persons who had been trafficked), although that was far from easy.

The sections below outline and analyse five major challenges faced by the researchers while trying to ensure participation of trafficked persons in the research project: protecting privacy and ensuring safety; dealing with the desire to share experiences and opinions publicly; psychological and emotional wellbeing; equal participation; and benefits of participation. While describing the challenges, the paper also shares how those were addressed by the researchers. It is important to note at the outset that not all ethical dilemmas were resolved. The paper ends with comments on taking the research forward.

Protecting privacy and ensuring safety

“I have confidence in [the organisation]; I know [my story] won’t be put out in any newspaper or TV station”.
Peruvian interviewee in Peru

Although all the interviewees had moved on with their lives, very few of them were in a socially comfortable or economically stable situation. Many interviewees had not talked to anyone about their trafficking experience and wanted it to remain that way. They trusted the organisation and confided in the researchers because they saw them as representatives of the service providing organisations. However, throughout the interview process, researchers were aware of the fears and sense of insecurity in the interviewees. For example, researchers complied with their request that interviews should not be held in the communities where they lived and the. Clearly, the

⁵ The titles of the briefing papers are: *Unmet Needs: Emotional support and care after trafficking*; *Seeking feedback from trafficked persons on assistance services: Principles and Ethics*; and *Rebuilding Lives: The need for sustainable livelihoods after trafficking*.

⁶ See also these ethics guides: WHO, *Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women*, WHO, 2003; UNICEF, *Guidelines on the Protection of Child Victims of Trafficking*, UNICEF, 2006; UNIAP, *Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Counter-Trafficking: Ethical standards for counter-trafficking research and programming*, UNIAP, 2008

interviewees did not want people in their communities, and in some cases even their families, to know about their past.

Interviewed trafficked persons spoke about the importance of protecting their privacy, and of their negative experiences with other researchers. Some interviewees were very vocal about the problems which they had previously faced in their communities, because certain researchers in the past had not respected their privacy. Some interviewees confided that they have not talked about their trafficking experiences to people outside the service providing organisation because of fear of stigmatization. A person trafficked into the sex sector in Western Europe reported that *'my family will kill me'* if they come to know the truth.

In addition to stigma, the interviewed trafficked persons also feared reprisal from traffickers, as in many cases, these lived in the same community. Interviewees did not want to be seen talking to anyone from an NGO or for that matter anyone who was an outsider. Some interviewees, living in destination countries without required documentation, did not want to draw attention to themselves in any way, out of concern that this would leave them at risk of deportation by immigration authorities.

Researchers from GAATW Member Organisations took steps to try and ensure the safety and privacy of the interviewees through their choice of interview location, and through the chosen means of registering, storing, and publishing the research data. Interview sites were selected in consultation with participants and interviews were mostly conducted at the Member Organisation's office. At times, Skype calls were initiated from the organisation's office to interviewees in a location of their choosing. In more public locations, researchers took care to ensure that others were not be able to overhear the conversations, and in some cases had to postpone the interview when this could not be guaranteed. Researchers removed the names of interviewees and their family members, and of the traffickers. Those were replaced by codes or nicknames in research documents. Moreover, in public documents researchers took steps to avoid 'deductive disclosure' by not using the unique or contextual traits of the person which combined could identify people.⁷

Dealing with the desire to share experiences and opinions publicly

“Let everything come out in the open!”
Mexican interviewee in Mexico

Although many ethical guidelines and principles stress the importance of protecting the identities of participants, our researchers also faced situations where the interviewees were keen to share their experiences publicly. Indeed, such situations have also been acknowledged in some research guidelines.⁸ Some of our researchers noted that a few interviewees wanted to expose their traffickers, talked about violence from law enforcement during anti-trafficking operations and raise their voices against corruption within the government systems. When asked if they wanted anything to be excluded from the publication of the research, some interviewees requested that their names and those of their traffickers be used.⁹

How then did our researchers handle this situation? Whilst they wanted to respect people's wishes, they were also mindful of the unforeseen risks of going public. They were unsure if the

⁷ Further guidance on protecting the identity and responses of trafficked persons can be found in the ethics guides from WHO; UNICEF; and UNIAP.

⁸ UNIAP; LR Taylor & M Sullivan, 'Raising the standard of ethics and human rights among anti-human trafficking responders in the Mekong Region', *Human Rights Education in Asia-Pacific*, 2012, pp. 55-69.

⁹ We decided to present interviewed persons anonymously here, because of possible unforeseen risks. Further, without adequate contextual details, we felt that this is a decision best left to our Member Organisations.

desire to go public was well thought out, or an expression of well-founded anger. They were nervous that the same person might express a need for anonymity in the future for all the reasons that have been outlined in the previous section. Following discussions within their teams, GAATW Member Organisations took different decisions on this issue. Some chose to publish identifiable details while others ensured complete anonymity. One Member Organisation came to a mutual agreement with the persons interviewed, based on their long-established relationship, and published names of individuals. It needs to be noted that those interviewees had already taken part in awareness raising activities and consultations prior to the project.

GAATW-IS thinks that it is ultimately up to the trafficked persons to decide whether or not to publicly disclose their personal data. Service providers may support individuals in the decision making process, by providing information on the pros and cons (short/long term, emotional, physical, personal and for others) of disclosing the information, so that informed consent is obtained prior to publishing the data.¹⁰

Taking care of psychological and emotional wellbeing

“To remember that time of what you have been through is horrible; it’s ugly... That life is just too ugly to be back there.”

Ecuadorian interviewee in Ecuador

Participation in research may be (re)traumatizing for trafficked persons in that it may bring back memories of trafficking, and of a part of their life that they wish to put behind them. Being asked to talk about experiences that were frightening, humiliating and painful can cause extreme distress. An interview may also be traumatizing if it is not conducted in a positive and empowering manner.¹¹

This issue came up as an important one, and researchers in this project realised that potential interviewees may decline to participate in the research, simply because of their unwillingness to revisit the past. Although this project was not focussing on the experiences of trafficking itself, in real terms it is not possible to keep the trafficking and post-trafficking experiences in two different boxes. Recalling the post-trafficking situation would invariably remind the person of her/his trafficking experiences.

Many trafficked persons do experience some level of stress or discomfort when discussing certain issues.¹² Researchers in this project observed that the following topics caused discomfort or sadness in the interviewees: lack of economic opportunities; restrictive shelter practices; not being able to return and reconcile with family; dissatisfaction with the legal process or outcome of the criminal trial; difficult family relations; and memories of abuse and exploitation while trafficked. The majority of the interviewees had a distance of one to three years from their trafficking experience, still the degree to which the above topics affected them varied from person to person. Researchers noted that the interviewees’ level of satisfaction with their current situation impacted on the way they looked upon their past. For example, several women with a number of years’ distance from the experience reported that they felt very sad, because they had hoped for family reunion, which had not yet happened. Many interviewees still felt frustrated because finding adequate livelihood opportunities still remained a distant dream.

Researchers took steps to ensure the emotional wellbeing of the trafficked persons they were interviewing through thorough preparation, and ensuring care after the interview and during the

¹⁰ Further guidance on informed consent can be found in the ethics guide from UNIAP.

¹¹ WHO; R Surtees, *Re/integration of Trafficked Persons: Developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms*, KBF & NEXUS Institute, 2009.

¹² WHO

interview itself.

Ahead of the interviews, researchers spoke with the interviewees' counsellors to learn about their current psychological state, how they might react to different topics and how they have learnt to cope. In some isolated communities, where post-research follow-up would be difficult, researchers consulted with interviewees to identify who could provide emotional support after the interview.

Many researchers offered a rest break during the interview when they noticed that the situation was distressing for the interviewee. Some researchers with many years of counselling experience felt that it was important to respond to some questions or even comments of the interviewees. In doing so however, they did not encourage people to delve deeper into the details of the painful situation but rather made thoughtful suggestions to allow persons to close the subject on their own.

It is important to set clear boundaries between research and service provision.¹³ Questions that are unnecessary and irrelevant to the research should be avoided. For example, questions regarding traumatic details should be left to qualified counsellors or psychologists.¹⁴ In this project, researchers prioritized providing comfort and support to interviewees. They also noted that it was beneficial to end the interview on a positive and lighter note to achieve some level of comfort.

The research underscored important issues which could be explored in future studies, particularly on balancing the need for input from trafficked persons with their emotional and psychological wellbeing. While GAATW members think that the insights of trafficked persons are critical to analyses of anti-trafficking initiatives, they also recognise that the immediate and long-term needs of the persons providing feedback should be taken into account.¹⁵

Enabling equal participation

“Before we meet survivors we should remind ourselves that we are not smarter than the survivors.”

Trainer, Researcher Training Workshop, Jakarta, Indonesia. November 2013

One of the aims of this project was to reflect on, and shift the power dynamic that usually exists between service providers and trafficked persons. The project recognised and valued the opinion of trafficked persons about the assistance services they received. While unequal power relationships may be a fact of life, when people are in an extremely vulnerable situation such as trafficking, their ability to negotiate with power dynamics is severely affected. Unfortunately, this mental state often does not improve during the time that they are receiving assistance from state or non-state actors. For example, many trafficked persons are forced into high-security shelters, or coerced into cooperating with police in an investigation.¹⁶ Ethical participation of trafficked persons includes treating them as equals, that is, as agents with power, rather than helpless victims.¹⁷

¹³ For more on this subject, see chapter 5 in R Surtees & S Craggs, *Beneath the Surface: Some methodological issues in trafficking research and data collection*, IOM & NEXUS Institute, 2010, retrieved 10 August 2015, http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/beneath_the_surface.pdf

¹⁴ UNIAP

¹⁵ More on how to take care of the psychological and emotional wellbeing of participants can be found in the ethics guides from WHO; UNICEF; and UNIAP.

¹⁶ GAATW, *Collateral Damage*

¹⁷ GAATW, *Feeling Good about Feeling Bad*

Many interviewees communicated the ways in which they had used their own resources and personal capacities to bring about change in their situation prior to any contact with assistance organisations. For example, they had taken creative and often risky steps to extract themselves from the trafficking situation or high-security shelters, and accessed assistance services only when it suited their needs.

Aiming to achieve equal participation of persons, the researchers sought to give interviewees control over the process in different ways. They followed standard ethical practices of interview-based research by getting informed consent from persons before the research. Potential participants were provided with full information of the project, the risk and benefits of participating, so that they could make their own decisions.¹⁸ Their right to ask questions, to stop being interviewed at any point, or to withdraw from this research were respected.

Further, researchers found small but significant ways to acknowledge the power and agency of the interviewees by making sure that they:

- selected interview sites where they felt most comfortable;
- decided the time of day for the interview to minimize disruption to work, study and/or family responsibilities;
- checked the interview content prior to the interview;
- and (where feasible), gave feedback on the interview transcript.

Researchers also checked if interview and focus group questions were appropriate for the ages, nationalities, educational and social backgrounds of their interviewees.

“I felt comfortable and enjoyed the process. Whenever interviews are conducted in-formally, I would definitely feel comfort...”

Indonesian interviewee in Indonesia

A shared language and cultural background is important to understand the perceptions and experiences of interviewees. When the researcher is from a similar socio-cultural background, non-verbal communication is also less confusing. This can get challenging in some contexts, depending on the migration dynamics and the location of the interviewee. In this project, some service providers were working with individuals from a wide range of origin countries and languages, which meant that some of the more complex research questions did cause difficulties.

“In some interviews the power dynamics seemed to shift towards less equality now and then, when questions were not comprehensible enough for the participant.”

Researcher, the Netherlands

People from some cultures do not feel comfortable expressing negative opinions or criticising the programme or organisation that had assisted them.¹⁹ That would simply be ‘inappropriate’ behaviour in their own cultural contexts, so even if the service providing organisation would appreciate critical feedback, the interviewees may not give it. From the start of the project, GAATW member researchers had suspected that this would be the case. Predictably, a number of interviewees were anxious to please and even asked ‘how well they did’ in the interview. Indeed, requests for criticism caused visible discomfort in some of the interviewees. At moments like this, our practitioner researchers felt that as service providers they were at a disadvantage.

¹⁸ R Surtees & S Craggs

¹⁹ R Surtees

Benefits of participation for the interviewees

"I'd love to help others because the person who lives the experience knows more than the one who studies it... You can talk and talk, but living the reality is something else."

Ecuadorian interviewee in Ecuador

While participating in anti-trafficking research could be burdensome for some, for others, it can also be empowering and help in their recovery process.²⁰ GAATW researchers wanted to know if the interviews and focus group discussions were of use to the trafficked persons who had agreed to participate. Many appreciated the fact that their opinions were sought, while some expressed a desire to engage in anti-trafficking work. Several other interviewees pointed out that this research provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their life's journey since trafficking.

"I find this very positive. Because I mean, at this moment, I feel like an activist kind of person. If I could, you know... (...) To help other people. Turn well what is wrong."

Portuguese interviewee in the Netherlands

A number of interviewees expressed satisfaction in being asked for their opinion, and several seemed most engaged when their specific recommendations and suggestions to improve services were sought. Many interviewees reported that they felt a sense of purpose in taking part and hoped that their reflections and experiences would be helpful for others who were trafficked and receiving assistance. Many stated that they wanted greater recognition of the crime of trafficking. Some hoped to encourage others to seek help by sharing their positive experiences of the organisation's services.

"Yeah, the interview situation was nice, because once in the lifetime you have to recall your past and compare the past and the future. So I believe now I'm living the future. The past is the past. I don't remember it."

Nigerian interviewee in Austria

Interviewees also appreciated the opportunity to reflect on how 'far' they had come and that they had left behind the painful and horrific events of their lives. Researchers noted that interviewees responded most positively when questions were about their current achievements such as studying, finding work and their experiences of assisting others. One reflection coming out of this project is that questions that recognise the strength and resilience of the interviewees, and highlight their skills to deal with difficult circumstances, are beneficial to the interviewee.

"I feel more relieved... When you have more communication with someone about what's happened, you start forgetting those things, what happened. Talking helps me."

Ecuadorian interviewee in Ecuador

Researchers reported that a large number of participants felt a sense of release in being able to talk about events and experiences that they previously had not shared with others. This is not to suggest that research interviews were therapeutic; feeling better after talking about certain

²⁰ R Surtees & S Craggs

things is merely a common human trait. When a trafficked person is able to do this, it could be seen as regaining self-confidence and ability to trust another person. In some instances the interviews provided an opportunity for the practitioner researchers to identify individual needs and arrange the necessary services. For example, when interviewees identified a need for psychotherapy or counselling, service providers were able to organise referrals either within or outside the organisation.

Taking the research forward

“Ensure that this is not just all talk.”

Mexican interviewee in Mexico

This project aimed to listen to people assisted by GAATW’s Member Organisations and learn from their knowledge, experience and opinions of the interventions and services intended to benefit them. In almost all cases, researchers were from the service providing organisations. They have shared and discussed the findings with their colleagues within the organisations. The findings of the research have also been shared with participants at GAATW’s 20th Anniversary Members Congress. Subsequently, several participating organisations have also organised national level meetings on the outcomes of the research.

Even before the research began, the researchers were very aware that service providers doubling as researchers will have its own advantages and disadvantages. They knew that they, and indeed their ‘former clients’, would bring in some biases. The researchers and their organisations hoped that the passage of time would act as a positive factor, and the interviewee’s trust and goodwill towards the service providing organisation would encourage her/him to provide honest input. Most importantly, they felt that as service providers, they would be able to act on the input and comments, and bring in some changes in their practices.

It is noteworthy that following the research, some organisations have stepped up their outreach work and started sharing more information on legal proceedings. Several have also started reviewing their skills programmes, and are thinking of incorporating aptitude tests and bringing in entrepreneurs who may help set up models for ethical businesses. Most significantly, many participating organisations have emphasised that the process of consultation has not finished, and that they are exploring mechanisms to ensure that the views of persons who have been trafficked *“are heard and taken into account when making decisions that affect or benefit them.”*

As this paper makes clear, while it is important to involve trafficked persons in assessments of anti-trafficking services, there are many ethical issues that should be recognised and considered. Each researcher or research group must try to deal with these challenges, as the last thing we would want is to silence the voice of trafficked persons. Although no one can come up with a set of guidelines that would fit all situations, ethical guidelines that various researchers have followed in their projects can be of help to future researchers.