

Forced to scam: pitfalls and challenges of survivor engagement in Southeast Asia's new fraud economy

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Executive summary

This research highlights the structural barriers hindering civil society organisations (CSO) from engaging with human trafficking survivors in the online scam industry.

As survivors' stories have gained increasing visibility in English-language media, pressure has increased for certain governments to acknowledge modern slavery in their countries. Authorities in both countries where scam compounds are located and the home countries of those trafficked face calls to protect those trapped in scam compounds and recognise them as victims of modern slavery. This requires law enforcement agencies to establish a functioning victim identification system, which is a crucial prerequisite for effective survivor engagement in this field.

As this study suggests, it is important to accept that individuals, regardless of their source country, can fall victim to trafficking. Within the online scam industry, victims are coerced into engaging in criminal activities as a direct consequence of their victimisation. The study further points out that in order to prevent re-traumatisation, CSOs should prioritise the survivors' settlement and recovery process before fully involving them in anti-human trafficking activities. CSOs should consider this aspect when screening survivor leaders for participation in their activities. Training programs are necessary to help survivor leaders gain expertise in anti-human trafficking and rebuild their confidence. Survivor engagement is more successful when:

1. CSOs are well equipped with the methodological and theoretical tools needed to incentivise active survivor participation; and
2. Survivors exhibit strong leadership qualities and have a comprehensive understanding of the organisation's mission and work.

Our research shows that the relationship between authorities, CSOs, and survivors should be collaborative and symbiotic, enabling a holistic and multidimensional approach to address modern slavery. Authorities should establish channels for the proper identification, repatriation, and social reinsertion of survivors. Additionally, extended engagement with survivors can improve their long-term well-being and empowerment. CSOs and their donors should invest more effort and resources to engage with survivors during their recovery and reintegration. CSOs and donors should also support grassroots-level initiatives and pay attention to survivor-led groups and suggestions from survivors while not losing sight of their possible weaknesses, such as lack of training on documentation and advocacy.

This study highlights the need to overcome structural obstacles and foster effective survivor engagement to combat modern slavery in the online scam industry. It provides an example of successful survivor engagement, demonstrating that comprehensive support, empowerment, and lasting change require trauma-informed, needs-focused, cooperation-led, and survivor-centred approaches. To achieve these outcomes, this study indicates that CSOs should employ continuous capacity-building for survivors.

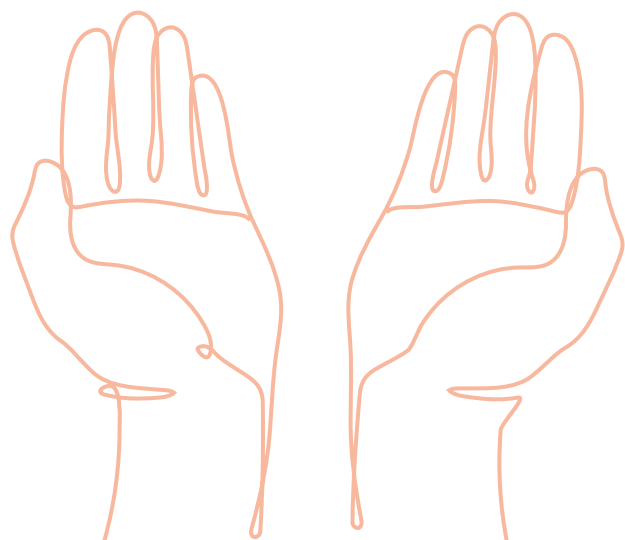
Acknowledgement

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The author extends her deepest appreciation to the survivors who shared their experiences and insights, enriching her understanding of the complexities surrounding survivor engagement in the online scam industry. Ouyang Zhiwei, Wang Hongwei, and Abdus Salam, your courage and resilience inspired this work.

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Introduction

The author of this paper has conducted a previous research project on survivor engagement in East and Southeast Asia ([Li, 2022](#)), identifying an effective way of engaging survivor leaders. The report discussed various obstacles that prevent survivors' voices from being heard by policymakers in the region. Following the conclusion of the initial project, this author spent six months engaging with survivors in the online scam industry, exploring their experiences to gain insights into possible forms of equitable engagement in an emerging sector where modern slavery is widespread. As an independent researcher, the author closely followed more than 40 cases of people trapped in scam compounds, monitoring the challenges they faced in getting support, cooperating with civil society organisations (CSOs), and participating in several counter modern slavery activities via the CSOs.

On 7 June 2023 Interpol issued a global warning on online scam centres, describing them as 'human trafficking-fuelled fraud'. This significant development highlights the urgent need for attention and actions to combat criminal networks. This warning emphasises the gravity of the issue and underscores the connection between online scams and human trafficking ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023](#)). The choice to focus on this particular issue in Southeast Asia in this paper as a case study stems from the stark disparity between the extensive media coverage of the problem – journalists even went as far as to coin the new phrase 'cyber slavery' as a catch-all term to describe these situations and the relative lack of academic research addressing it.

For this follow-up study supported by the University of Liverpool, this author focuses on a very specific aspect: the role of survivor leaders, local CSOs, and international agencies in helping and engaging the victims of this burgeoning industry. This paper draws from a new set of semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2023 to highlight the strengths and limitations of these actors, offering novel insights into the challenges and good practices of survivor engagement in this new form of exploitation.

This study has three main objectives.

- a. To 'map' the civil society actors involved in aiding victims of the scamming compounds, from informal rescue groups to local nongovernmental organisations and survivor-led groups.
- b. To examine the working methods of these organisations and the context-specific and structural challenges they face.
- c. To understand how these actors engage with survivors of the scamming compound, whether these survivors are actively participating in their activities, and whether there is space for survivor leaders to emerge in this new illicit 'industry'.

Research methods

In May 2023, the author conducted eight semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with those involved in activities aimed at countering human trafficking in the online scam industry in East and Southeast Asia. In selecting eligible respondents and in line with the objectives of this study, priority was given to speaking with individual survivor leaders engaged in assisting victims, as well as CSOs involved in victim rescue, aftercare support, and advocacy programmes. These organisations include self-led volunteer groups and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that have been active in the anti-modern slavery field for years. However, they recently had to adjust their activities to deal with the new challenges arising in the online scam industry and new NGOs established specifically in response to this latest humanitarian crisis.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the informants with basic information.

Table 1

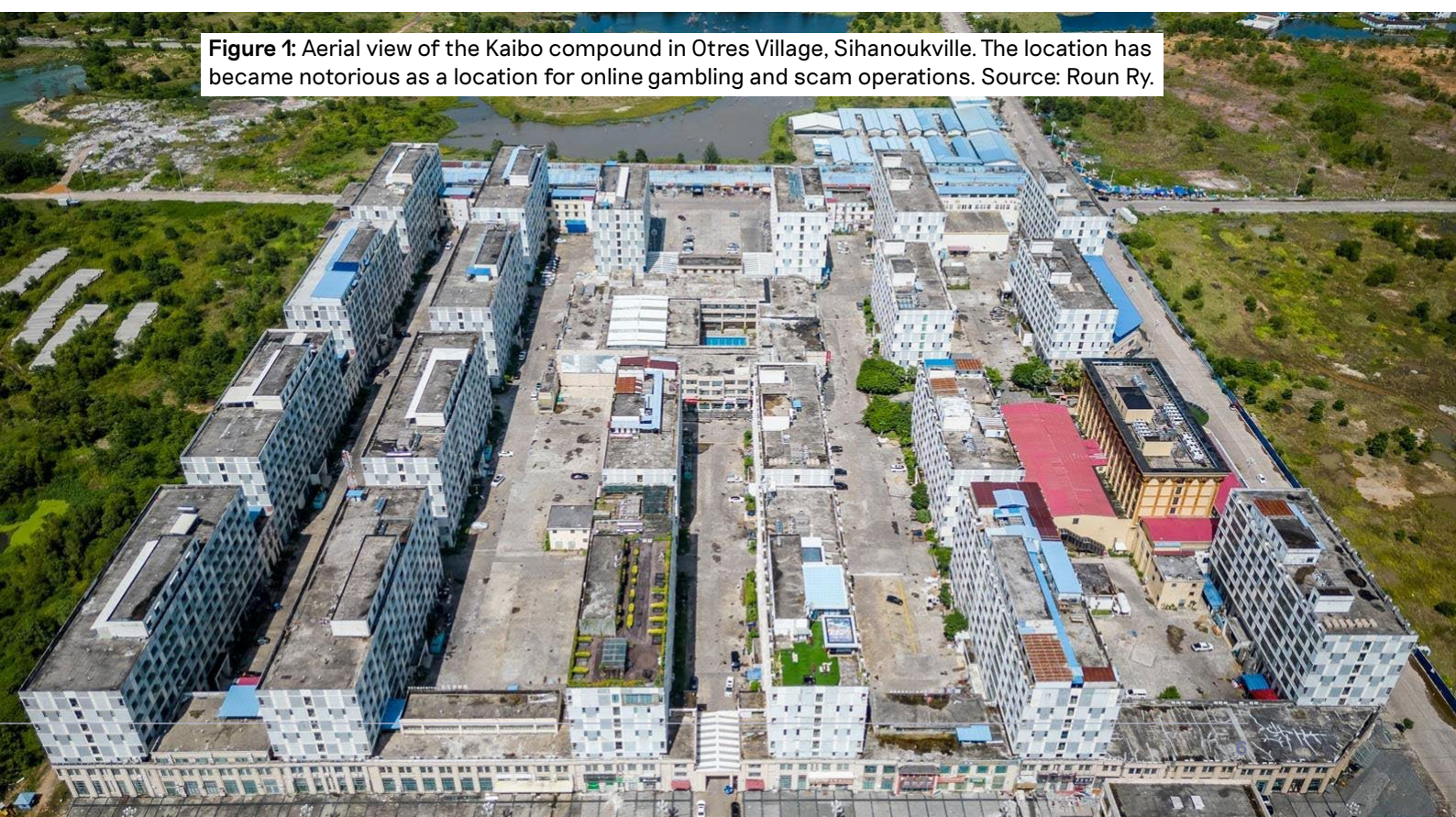
No.	Title	Country	Sector	Description
1	Survivor leader	China		They were sold to a scam compound in Myanmar, escaped by jumping from a window. Their job entails posting content on TikTok to raise awareness about human trafficking in the sector.
2	Survivor leader	China		They were sold to a scam compound in Myanmar, escaped by paying ransom. They post content to raise awareness of the issue on TikTok and provide advice to the families of the victims.
3	Survivor leader	Bangladesh		He was sold to a scam compound in Cambodia and was rescued by a volunteer team. He now works for the Humanity Research Consultancy as a survivor engagement officer.
4	Director of Humanity Research Consultancy	Southeast and East Asia	Consulting company	The organisation runs programs for advocacy, rescue, and survivor engagement.
5	Leader of International Anti-Scam & Trafficking Alliance	China	Volunteer group	After falling victim to a scam, they established and now lead a group to fight online fraud and human trafficking in the industry.
6	Country Director	Cambodia	Non-profit organisation	Winrock is a US-based NGO in charge of implementing USAID's Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons programme.
7	Country Director	Southeast Asia	NGO	This unnamed NGO provides rescue and aftercare services to victims of scam compounds.
8	Rescue Team leader of the Global Anti Scam Organisation (GASO)	Southeast and East Asia	Non-profit organisation	GASO is an NGO established to provide rescue services to victims of scam compounds.

Background: scam compounds and modern slavery

The online scam industry has experienced massive growth since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the point that journalists are now talking about a 'scamdemic' originating from Southeast Asia ([Faulder, 2022](#)). As their businesses thrived, the criminal groups who ran these operations increasingly resorted to violent methods to recruit people. Around 2018, stories of people getting smuggled or lured into working in Cambodian scam companies, where they were forcibly confined to scam jobs, began appearing on social media. Since then, there has been mounting evidence that there are hundreds of thousands of people working under duress in scamming compounds, not only in Cambodia, but also in Myanmar and Laos (see, for instance, [Al Jazeera 2022](#); [BBC, 2023](#); [Kelly, 2023](#); [Ngamkham and Pupattanapong 2023](#); and [Smith and Wallen 2023](#); [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023](#)).

The term 'scam compound', in this study refers to a specific location—often a walled residential compound subject or an ordinary casino with capacious premises—where online scam operations are carried out on an industrial scale. These compounds typically include multiple scam companies run by organised crime syndicates and characterised by high walls and strict security measures to control the movement of people. Once victims are trafficked into these operations, they are coerced to participate in scam operations targeting people all over the world. Their passports are confiscated, and they are not allowed to leave the premises. This practice aligns with the [definition](#) (UNHRC, 2000) of human trafficking, as it involves the recruitment, transportation, and harbouring of individuals for exploitation.

Figure 1: Aerial view of the Kaibo compound in Otres Village, Sihanoukville. The location has become notorious as a location for online gambling and scam operations. Source: Roun Ry.



The extent of this trafficking problem is far beyond that in Chinese-speaking countries. In early 2023, activists in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia formally lodged a complaint with the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the primary human rights institution in the region. They reported that thousands of victims originated from every individual Asean country (Nguyen, 2023). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) went as far as to state to Malaysian media that the scale of the issue is unparalleled, stating that '[t]he numbers we are currently witnessing, and the diverse range of nationalities among the victims is completely unprecedented. In fact, we believe this kind of trafficking network has never been seen before' (New Straits Time, 2023).

Structural problems in providing assistance to victims

Before delving into the roles of different stakeholders and the practices of survivor engagement in the online scam sector, it is crucial to address the structural challenges that significantly complicate the provision of engaging survivors. Even though there is extensive evidence of torture and abuse within online scam operations, rescues and support for victims from law enforcement or civil groups remain sporadic. All three survivor leaders interviewed (interviewees 1, 2, and 3) escaped by themselves, either by paying the ransom or resorting to desperate measures, such as jumping from the windows of the scam company. None of them went through an established victim identification process in either the source or destination country, although they kept evidence proving that they had been tortured and forced to work. Understanding the complexities of this situation is essential.

a. Legal ground for victim identification

When individuals are trafficked to a scam company, they are forced to commit scam crimes by their exploiters, who permit them to leave only when they pay off their 'debts' and/or are ransomed by their families. There is overwhelming evidence to support the classification of these individuals as victims of human trafficking or modern slavery, as many of them have been subjected to smuggling, unlawful detention, torture, and sexual abuse.

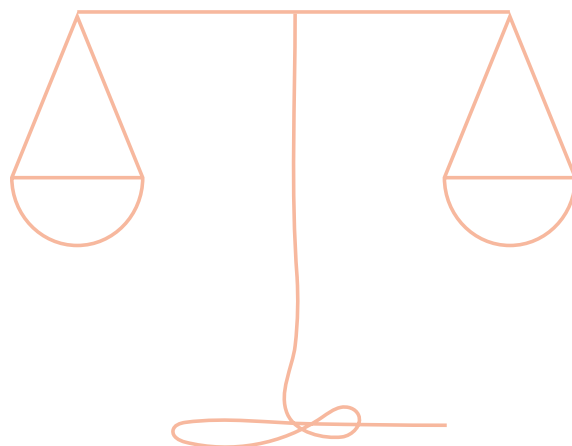
Even in cases where individuals are indebted to their employers, often under coercive circumstances, their loss of freedom of movement, confiscation of passports, and surveillance practices align with the definition of bonded labour. After all, according to the ILO Forced Labour Convention (1930, No. 29), bonded labour, as a form of forced labour, is designed to exploit workers and should be considered a form of enslavement (ILO 1930). The Cambodian director of an international non-profit organisation (interviewee 7) explained the following:

'[whether this should be seen as modern slavery] is quite simple for me. It's the force. [...] on the three elements that are required to define trafficking, force is the main one [...] it's blatant and really obvious in these cases.'

Furthermore, in 2002, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued the Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking, and its principle 7 provides that victims of trafficking should not be held liable for their involvement in illegal activities that are a direct consequence of their victimisation. Similar text can be found in United Nations resolutions, other regional instruments, international intergovernmental bodies' recommendations, and international organisations' policy briefs (see [United Nations 2009](#), [OSCE, 2013](#), [ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons 2015](#)). However, all interviewees remarked that when victims approach authorities in countries where they are trafficked (or even their communities back home), they are often viewed as criminals rather than victims.

The testimonies collected showed that survivors of scam compounds are most often detained or prosecuted by state or local officials for illegal cross-border activities. Consequently, they cannot apply for repatriation fees, receive after-care support, or pursue compensation. This puts them into an even more vulnerable situation and increases their chances of re-trafficking. For instance, Salam, a survivor leader from Bangladesh who was interviewed (Interviewee 3), admitted that he wanted to go abroad to look for work again after being rescued because he needed money for his family.

Chinese nationals, who constitute the bulk of the victims of scam compounds, face an additional hurdle to be identified as human trafficking victims. Unlike in other countries, where both genders were trafficked into this industry, almost 90% of the cases handled by Chinese rescue teams were male. The reason is not entirely clear, but according to the leader of a Chinese volunteer rescue team (Interviewee 5), one possible reason is that, according to [Chinese law](#), only females and children can be considered victims of human trafficking ([Kennedy, 2018](#)). This legal loophole makes it impossible for men to be identified as victims of human trafficking before and after they return to China.



b. The limitation of CSOs

The lack of political will to identify the victims also brought operational problems to NGOs working on the issue. As stated by the country director of an NGO operating in Southeast Asia (interviewee 7): 'UN agencies were very slow to respond because they are sort of beholden to their relationships with the government [...] NGOs too, there's just fear both in terms of physical risk but also program continuity.' In cases where *local* authorities fail to acknowledge the problem— which is most often the scenario— NGOs have a limited ability to help despite possessing the resources and capacity to do so. The director further explained that: 'It is also because the anti-modern slavery field does not have a systematic response when there is a new phenomenon comes up'.

As the situation garners more public attention, and governments have begun recognising the human trafficking crimes that occur in scam compounds, opportunities are developing for NGOs to provide victim support services in this area. However, many new challenges arise in cooperation among organisations and authorities. Interviews with two NGO leaders (interviewees 6 and 7) indicated that organisations risk complicating situations or endangering victims if they hastily enter areas that lack sufficient expertise. This highlights the urgent need to establish an information-sharing platform and proper referral mechanism.

Simultaneously, new volunteer groups led by people who were previously victims of online scams have emerged to fill this gap. However, these groups often lack adequate training in key areas that are important when assisting survivors, such as anti-trafficking interventions and engaging with survivors who have frequently experienced traumatic experiences. This lack of experience occasionally leads to rudimentary mistakes that can re-traumatise or even physically endanger the victims. As stated by the leader of the Chinese volunteer group, IASA (Interviewee 5),

I do not think we are mentally prepared nor have enough knowledge to help victims of human trafficking. Many victims are traumatised and might insult us because they are scared. However, even knowing that they are not doing it on purpose, we feel hurt and upset. It is hard to help [without professional social workers].

She then added: 'We also do not have resources; everyone is working as volunteers. There is no proper social program from the government, so the financial support burden falls on the volunteers.'

Case study: good practice in survivor engagement

Despite all these challenges, meaningful engagement with those who have experienced exploitation in the online scam industry is still possible. Salam's case is an example of an effective approach to survivor engagement in relation to this new form of exploitation.

Salam, an engineer in the textile industry, was deceived to migrate from Bangladesh to Cambodia. Upon arrival, he was coerced into conducting 'pig-butcher' scams for five months. This fraudulent scheme involved using romances or financial incentives to entice targets on social media or dating platforms. Once rapport was built, Salam would suddenly sever contact, enabling accomplices to defraud their money targets. To gain the trust of his victims, Salam used fake profiles to build relationships ranging from love to friendship. Eventually, Salam resisted participation, prompting severe retaliation from his manager. Following this abuse, he decided to contact NGOs for assistance.

After he was rescued, immigration enforcement officials fined Salam for illegal stay despite his assertions that he had overstayed his visa because of his imprisonment in a scam compound. Despite all that he endured, he was still treated as an illegal alien and fined. Once he returned to Bangladesh, the situation was the same. Existing procedures made it impossible for Salam to be identified as a victim of a crime, and records indicated exceedingly few successful cases in which the victims were awarded compensation.

Facing financial hardship, Salam had little choice but to go abroad to find a job. Worrying about his chances of being re-trafficked, the Humanity Research Consultancy hired him as consultant to work with other survivors. His tasks included supporting survivors' rescue and reintegration processes, ensuring they feel empowered in their work fighting against human trafficking and slavery. However, the director of the organisation, Mina Chiang, also emphasised the mutual benefits of engagement:

Salam showed leadership from the very beginning and a kind of mental strength, even though he had just gone through this terrible time. He is keen to contribute to ending these trafficking issues. He appreciated our work and kept saying that if the rescue had taken a bit longer, just a few more months, he might have just died in the compound because his health was bad [...] He's learning quickly. Thus, in the end, it has become a good collaboration and relationship, and we continue to work together. Salam keeps saying [...] how lucky he is. He feels very happy to meet us, and we are giving this opportunity. However, at the same time, we feel the same: it's us who are very lucky because of all the survivors; we do not know how many would have been able and have the heart to work together with us.

When Salam requested to learn English, the organisation provided language training and helped him find opportunities to share his experiences at numerous events and conferences, contributing vital knowledge to the counter-trafficking sector to enact change. In his words:

Fortunately, we have a lovely support team. I love my team so much. They're very helpful. I am not a professional, but they're helping me in every single way to become one ... they gave me a course to learn what is modern slavery to enhance my knowledge, and I realised I needed to improve my English, so I bought some books. Then, the director heard about it and arranged a tutor for me, and she said, okay, we were giving you all the support you needed. Just learn more and trust yourself. You will become a professional.

Currently, Salam is not only working to help victims of human trafficking in the online scam industry, but also furthering his expertise on modern slavery. Early in his advocacy journey, Salam champions victim-centred practices and equitable survivor engagement.



Figure 2: Salam was invited as panellist to share his opinion about trauma-informed practice in anti-human trafficking sector in a USAID CTIP Programming workshop.



Panel Discussion

Promoting Trauma-Informed and Survivor-Centered Approaches in CTIP Programming

Panelists:

- James Gilman, General Development Coordinator, USAID Vietnam Mission
- Andrew Wasuwongse, Field Office Director, International Justice Mission (IJM), Thailand
- Dipta Rakshit, Team Leader Ashahsh Project, Winrock International, Bangladesh
- Michelle Tauson, MEL Advisor, USAID Asia CTIP
- Md. Abdul Salam, Research Assistant, Humanity

Moderator: Kelly Cronin, USAID/DRG Center

Salam's case echoes the stories told by other victims in this study and beyond. It is representative of larger trends and offers potential lessons useful for achieving efficient survivor engagement in the online scam industry.

- 1. Trauma-informed:** This study indicates that organisations should allow adequate time for survivors to recover from traumatic experiences. Even when survivors feel prepared to undertake certain tasks, it is important to provide support and enable gradual development of their engagement.
- 2. Need-focused:** Salam's experience highlights the importance of addressing the specific needs of survivors. For example, Salam needed more money from his family. He appreciated the work because it provided him with a decent wage while staying with his family. Additionally, when he expressed a desire to learn English, the organisation promptly responded, fulfilling his educational needs and motivating him to engage further.
- 3. Continuous capacity building:** Salam exhibited strong leadership skills and demonstrated his ability to learn quickly from the very beginning of his collaboration with the organisation. Recognising his potential, the organisation provided him with a learning course to enhance his capacity. Salam's enthusiasm for learning further reinforces the effectiveness of this capacity-building approach.
- 4. Cooperation-led approach:** Collaboration and partnership between the survivor and the organisation are crucial for successful engagement. In this case, the organisation actively valued Salam's input and treated him as an equal partner, which boosted his self-confidence. Consequently, he felt empowered to communicate his needs and demonstrated unwavering determination throughout the engagement process. By recognising the survivor as a valuable contributor and involving them in decision making, the organisation creates an environment that encourages active participation and fosters a sense of ownership and commitment from the survivor's perspective.
- 5. Survivor-centred approach:** Salam's case shows that an organisation's capacity to facilitate supportive and inclusive engagement opportunities can ultimately shape the outcome of a survivor's experience. Recognising the unique experiences and needs of survivors is crucial in developing an environment that fosters their participation and empowers them to play an active role in their own healing and advocacy.

Obstacles in survivor engagement

Salam's case highlights the significance of organisations facilitating environments that actively respect and amplify the voices of survivors. However, it also highlights the practical challenges encountered in this pursuit. Analysing the insights shared by other interviewees identified the key difficulties faced by both survivors and NGOs in implementing survivor engagement.

a. Difficulties on the survivors' side

Like Salam, numerous victims are left without assistance and frequently encounter further difficulties upon returning home. However, unlike Salam, who was fortunate to have the support of his family, many victims are compelled to move forward without fully recovering from their traumatic experiences. The leader of a rescue team (interviewee 8) mentioned: 'After the rescue operation, we don't maintain contact with many of them because they are preoccupied with rebuilding their lives, finding employment to recoup their losses, and therefore lack the energy to engage.'

Recovering from the ordeal of trafficking necessitates mental health support and navigating legal procedures, and access to these services often requires a certain level of financial resources. As a result, many victims find themselves struggling to receive the necessary assistance, exacerbating the challenges they face, and inhibiting their ability to recover or further participate in helping other survivors.

Interviews conducted with survivor leaders revealed uncertainties among two respondents (interviewees 1 and 2). These reservations were regarding active engagement in anti-trafficking initiatives with law enforcement or volunteer groups that focused on raising awareness, despite their desire to contribute. They faced multiple barriers, including language limitations, a lack of relevant knowledge, and the prevailing perception of criminalising those involved in the industry, rather than viewing them as victims. These factors discouraged them from sharing their experiences on social media platforms. As interviewee two stated,

I did not even want to do TikTok at the beginning because many online sites insulted me and questioned the authenticity of my story. I was traumatised. But then I heard a friend got lured to Myanmar the same way I felt I should use my own experience to dissuade other people from going [...], but of course, I do not have other abilities. I can advise the victims' family members, but I do not know what I can do more and how.

Even though some survivors would like to engage by sharing their experiences or coordinating with other survivors, the authorities or NGOs may not appreciate such efforts. For example, Salam wanted to help other survivors. He stated that:

I went to a famous NGO working on this issue in Bangladesh; I decided to accompany some survivors there because I am also a victim and a survivor. I thought I could use my experience and knowledge to help them explain their situations. However, the NGO did not write down its name or any other information. They did not care.

He further explained that survivor engagement had become a hot topic in the sector, but there currently are only a few organisations that take real steps to provide training, let victims participate in programs, and support them to become survivor leaders (Li 2023)—He also knew of a survivor-led volunteer group that was using an ad-hoc approach to engage survivors but received no funding for their activities. He stated that:

One of the reasons [they could not obtain funding] is that their activities are not well documented. The group is composed of survivors, most of whom are not educated. [...] They cannot write nice reports and advocacy pieces like other big NGOs and publish their activities on a bigger platform than Facebook.

For Chinese victims, there is an additional 'cultural' challenge. It has been well documented in existing literature how Chinese citizens tend to trust state actors, such as the police and the embassy, far more than non-state actors (Pierre, 2009¹). Both Chinese survivor leader interviewees in this study claimed that they would not trust foreign NGOs due to language barriers and fear of being sold again. This lack of trust, compounded by a more general loss of trust in others derived from their personal experiences, makes any attempt to provide assistance to them more difficult.

1. Landry, Pierre. 2009. "The diffusion of legal institutions in China." In Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds.), *Socialist China, Capitalist China*. London: Routledge, 138-168.

b. NGOs dilemmas

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, requiring long-standing anti-trafficking NGOs in the region to readjust their missions and activities to address the needs of those exploited through online scams. This often entailed an imbalance between assisting foreign victims of the industry and local victims of more 'traditional' forms of human trafficking. As explained by Chief of Party of Winrock Cambodia (interviewee 6)

Even though I agree that international victims in the scamming compound are at high risk because they cannot be identified and there is no way to get help... but the government or other CSOs would say, why are not you helping Cambodians as well as non-Cambodians?... that is the narrative we need to address while we go about trying to help non-Cambodian victims with shelters and get home.

NGOs, both local and international, face significant challenges in involving survivors in their work. Organisations operating in destination countries may encounter limitations in officially recruiting survivor leaders because local authorities occasionally deny the existence of trafficking crimes or collude with scam operations. For example, in Cambodia, the government insists that there is no such thing as 'slavery' in scam compounds and portrays these situations as ordinary labour disputes ([Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023](#)).

Even for CSOs that openly engage survivors, the process remains arduous. The director of the consulting company that engaged in Salam (Interviewee 3) acknowledged the difficulties encountered in survivor engagement. She explained:

Some organisations do not want to engage because some hold the idea that for an organisation's reputation, it is easier to do nothing instead of engaging vulnerable people [...] everyone deals with trauma differently. Some people use a way of dealing with traumas, but repeatedly talking about it [...] warn people and then try to make sure that things do not happen again. Therefore, we will deal with trauma differently, and we need people who naturally deal with trauma in a way that uses their energies to counter modern slavery.

Though her organisation actively engaged survivors, the interviewee asserted that not all survivors possess an innate desire to take a leadership role. It is important for NGOs to initially screen possible candidates rather than force survivors into a predetermined mould that might not suit their predisposition. Furthermore, she highlighted that training survivors to work as professionals requires significant financial resources that may not always be readily available.

Other NGO informants (interviewees 4, 5, and 8) highlighted further challenges. They shared instances where survivors approached their organisations, expressing a desire to participate in counter-modern slavery activities, even though they were still suffering from trauma. This issue underscores the lack of established protocols for identifying victims of human trafficking. The absence of a well-established victim identification system hinders the allocation of the necessary resources and support for survivors. This, in turn, is linked to a lack of proper funding, making it exceedingly difficult to provide comprehensive care and assistance crucial for survivors' physical and emotional recovery. Engaging survivors who have not recovered from their harm in counter-modern slavery initiatives risks re-traumatisation and compromises their long-term healing, which can be detrimental for both the survivors themselves and the NGOs involved. However, there is no existing systematic way or clear indicators to determine whether a survivor is 'ready' to participate in anti-modern slavery activities.

Another issue in selecting survivors with whom to engage stems from the industry's criminal nature. A rescue team leader (interviewee 8) described this point as follows:

We would love to have them join us, but the problem is that our frontline rescue workers have so much confidential information, including confidential information from national criminal units and from within the scamming compound, that we have to be very careful in screening people to avoid infiltration by scamming companies.

The fear of letting 'spies' from scamming companies join their groups is a common concern shared by frontline rescue teams.

Finally, it is worth noting that the frontline rescue groups, whose members participated in this research, were founded by former scam victims. The two interviewees acknowledged the challenges of creating a safe space for collaboration between scam victims and compound operatives (those previously involved in exploiting scam victims). Although they can both be considered as 'victims', their experiences put them at odds with one another. In the words of a rescue team leader (interviewee 8), 'sometimes people might work with personal emotions.' That is, those scammed online could harbour resentment towards compound survivors, which might hinder their engagement and collaboration.



Conclusion: towards a better engagement

The US State Department's latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report highlighted that Chinese crime syndicates increasingly use social media for recruitment. These groups pose as labour brokers enticing people from East Africa and Asia with lucrative job opportunities supposedly in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. ([US State Department, 2023](#)). The report retained Cambodia's Tier 3 ranking, citing its failure to respond to human trafficking operations related to online scamming. Although NGOs have conducted valuable work in both support and advocacy, their efforts have been strengthened by additional research. Survivors are left behind.

This research highlights the existence of structural problems that prevent CSOs and volunteer groups from engaging with online scam industry survivors. Establishing an effective victim identification system should be a precondition for law enforcement agencies to seek meaningful survivor engagement. Unfortunately, no such efforts have been made in the online scam industry. In the absence of official action, these survivors continued to be classified as criminals. As a result, they were excluded from accessing various forms of assistance, including financial aid, mental health support, legal assistance, and reintegration programmes.

Significantly, as survivors' narratives gain visibility in English-language media, governments face mounting pressure to recognise that individuals trapped in scam compounds should be shielded from prosecution and recognised as victims of modern slavery. The subsequent crucial step entails adapting the victim identification system to account for this emerging phenomenon. This adaptation should involve accepting that individuals, even those from non-traditional source countries, can fall prey to trafficking and acknowledging that, within this industry, victims are coerced into engaging in criminal activities as a direct consequence of their victimisation.

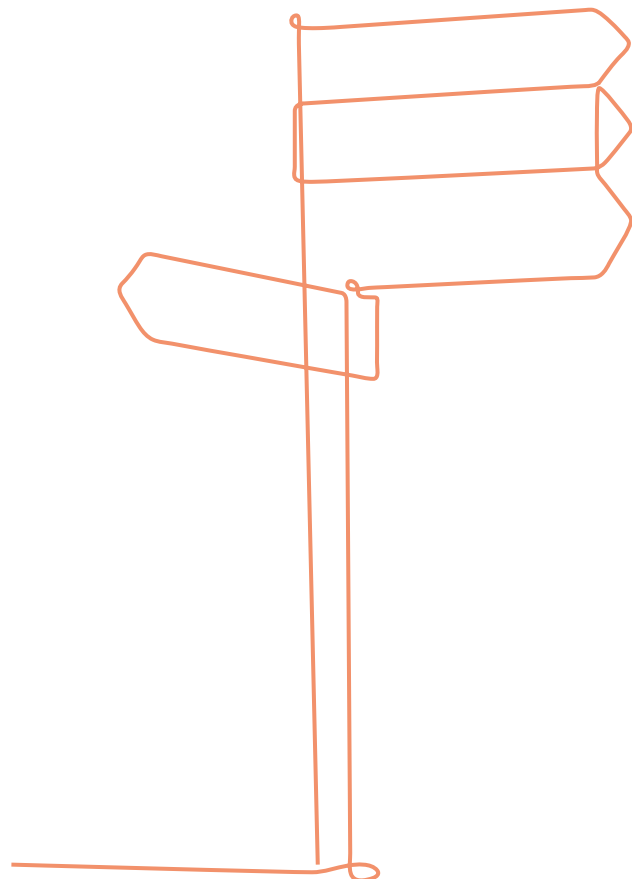
Anti-trafficking initiatives should prioritise the rehabilitation and well-being of survivors before engaging them in their activities. Moreover, further research is needed to build a more solid understanding of who participates and how engagement occurs. Specifically, investigation could examine how organisations select survivors, which survivors can participate in, best practices for CSOs to engage trauma victims, and approaches for survivors interested in engaging with CSO activities.

Once survivor leaders are properly identified, training programs are necessary to educate and prepare them to assist in anti-human trafficking efforts. The success rate of survivor engagement is likely to be higher if the survivors display strong leadership qualities and understand the significance of the work carried out by the organisation. Capacity training is crucial for survivors to enhance their

knowledge of the field, and career development should be prioritised. CSOs should be knowledgeable about providing incentives to survivors to encourage active participation and rebuild their confidence.

In addition, professionals working in this field must critically examine their limited encounters with newly rescued survivors and reflect on the underlying dynamics that influence survivor engagement. It is important to explore and question whether engagement should only occur within the context of home or return or if there are alternative opportunities for sustained support and involvement. Investing in continuous engagement throughout the survivor's recovery and reintegration process is vital for long-term well-being and empowerment. Simultaneously, CSOs should seriously consider the suggestions put forth by survivors and pay more attention to survivor-led groups. Donors and CSOs need to acknowledge survivors' weaknesses (lack of training on documentation and advocacy), and support should lean towards those who work at the grassroots level.

Rather than being antagonistic, the relationship between authorities, CSOs, and survivors should become symbiotic, allowing all actors involved in building a holistic and multidimensional approach to address modern slavery. This is possible through the pooling of resources, expertise, and perspectives, leading to better survivor engagement strategies. This has the potential to aid survivor recovery and self-building as well as contribute to the broader anti-modern slavery movement.



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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-creates high quality research with a focus on policy impact, and brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society, survivors and the public on a scale not seen before in the UK to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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