

Pay Survivors for Our Lived Experiences

Tamara MC

Abstract

This short paper argues that to address the exploitation of survivors' labour in anti-trafficking work, it is essential to allocate funds towards compensating survivors for their contributions. This funding should prioritise paying survivors for sharing their expertise and lived experiences, which are invaluable for effective anti-trafficking efforts. Establishing a standard pay rate, commensurate with other expert consultants, would validate survivors' roles and contributions, promoting sustainable engagement and preventing further exploitation within the anti-trafficking movement.

Suggested citation: T MC, 'Pay Survivors for Our Lived Experiences', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 23, 2024, pp. 132-135, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201224239>

The call for papers invited authors to reflect on the question: What would be the best use of twenty million US dollars for anti-trafficking work? To answer the question bluntly: pay human trafficking survivors for our contributions to anti-trafficking work.

I am a victim of trafficking for labour exploitation and sexual exploitation and grew up in a Sufi cult in Texas from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. I was married at 12 to a community member and chosen as the 'special girl' to work for the leader and his three wives, caring for their multiple children. I worked seven days a week, often more than 20 hours a day. I was denied sleep, food, and even water. I was locked up in a house, in a room, from which I could not escape. Eventually, my traffickers fled the United States because of issues with the government, and I lived with them abroad. Finally, when I was 20, after my husband married another woman and I was now in a polygamist marriage, I was able to flee.

I enrolled at university and graduated with a Bachelor's degree. My curiosity was insatiable, and I went on for a Master's degree and then a Ph.D. I learnt to think critically, which was a skill in which I was highly deficient. Now, as a social

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY). Under the CC-BY license, the public is free to share, adapt, and make commercial use of the work. Users must always give proper attribution to the authors and the Anti-Trafficking Review.

scientist, I research how language is used to manipulate vulnerable populations. I pull apart structures and systems, looking at how words are exploited to take advantage of those who do not have the same power. Recently, I have been studying power differentials in the anti-trafficking field, especially when it comes to survivors' work.

As a survivor, I am continuously asked to 'volunteer' my time to share my story, to educate, to write, research, speak... The list goes on. The very word volunteer seems like an oxymoron when it comes to survivors' work. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, the meaning of a volunteer is 'a person who freely offers to take part in an enterprise or undertake a task'. Ever since I left my trafficking situation, I have struggled with finances. I live off a very limited budget because of my disabilities that are a consequence of my trafficking and because I have dedicated my life to fighting against gender-based violence and coercive control. I struggle daily to pay my rent, bills, etc., so that I may create lasting change in this world for survivors like me.

There are many people who offer to do something they are not paid for, such as retirees, people with partners, or those with disposable income, time, and resources; but is this the case for most survivors? I would argue many of us cannot give freely of ourselves because we are struggling to provide for our basic needs. Yet, when anti-trafficking and survivor organisations ask us to volunteer our time and labour for their cause, they are perpetuating the very thing they stand against—labour exploitation. While they may not be doing this intentionally, they are ignoring a whole set of circumstances, which are gravely missing for survivors.

Due to my trafficking experience, it is hard for me to stand up for myself and demand that I be paid. Unlike others in society who have been taught to be compensated for their work, I was given the exact opposite message: I should be of service and should give to the point of pain because if I do not, I will be considered greedy, selfish, and self-absorbed. This is what the cult taught me to ensure I was their unpaid labourer. If I did not do as I was told, I would be beaten, raped, or shunned.

My body was taught to work for free. This was my survival mechanism and likely why I am still alive today. Now that I am free from my cult—I am using the word 'free' lightly because I will never be fully free; my cult is always there, even if subconsciously—my old traumas kick in and I naturally give. It is what I know most and do best. Anti-trafficking organisations should be aware of this and ensure survivors are paid for our labour. Organisations must bring up the conversation of money immediately, letting us know we will most certainly be paid and how much, instead of putting us in the position of asking. Despite how vocal I am in the anti-trafficking movement, I am still timid when it comes to speaking about money.

It is not happenstance that after fleeing, I joined careers, such as academia, writing, teaching, and nonprofit work, that typically expect exorbitant amounts of labour without adequate and fair pay. Most of these professions are typically seen as ‘women’s work’. While academia has many male professors, the majority of ‘service’ work often falls on women. A paper in *Research and Higher Education* found that women participate in more internal versus external service, perpetuating the myth that women are not only expected to do free labour in the home but also in the academic sphere.¹ If we bring this to anti-trafficking work, who are the volunteers? Do you usually see women or men? Survivors’ free labour is intrinsically linked to gender, race, disability, and so much more. It is a deeply rooted problem that needs to be analysed further.

Survivors will likely do whatever it takes to survive in our post-trafficking world—our survival is consciously and unconsciously linked to helping others—meaning we will work for free to be of service to others who still have not left their exploitative circumstances. We never want anyone to go through what we went through. So, we will spend our lives creating lasting change for future generations—at any cost. But the question remains, if we provide our services without pay, have we really re-entered a post-trafficking world, or is it just more of the same?

Anti-trafficking and survivor organisations should be the first to step up and pay survivors involved in anti-trafficking work for our invaluable service. We are not only being asked to revisit our trauma, but also to provide our expertise, which has been acquired through a lifetime of lived experiences and knowledge of the field that those who have not been trafficked lack.

Anti-trafficking organisations cannot function without survivor leaders. We are the core of change and *must* be compensated for all our labour—physical, emotional, and mental. Value is linked to money, and if survivors are not offered monetary compensation for our services, our value diminishes. What message does this carry? People who work in anti-trafficking organisations do not work for free. They receive pay checks for the hours they work, and so too should lived experience experts. Rather than being the ones whose labour is overlooked, survivors should be held at the highest regard. Without us, there would be no research, studies, policies, etc.

Prioritise dollars in budgets to support the engagement of people with lived experiences, and ensure the compensation reflects and is commensurate with rates paid to other types of experts. The US federal contractor rate, which currently

¹ C M Guarino and V M H Borden, ‘Faculty Service Loads and Gender: Are Women Taking Care of the Academic Family?’, *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 58, 2017, pp. 672–694, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9454-2>.

stands at USD 81.25/hour or USD 650/day is a good benchmark for survivors hired as contractors. However, I advocate that this should be the minimum rate. It is important to remember that some individuals may charge significantly more for their services based on professional qualifications. In addition, organisations should pay survivors a ‘trauma tax’ that goes towards our wellness before and after speaking engagements, training, advocacy, group facilitation, etc. Importantly, it should never be mandated that we share personal or intimate details of our trauma as a precondition for our work.

Survivors constantly balance the feeling of being helpful with the feeling of being exploited. We do not owe the world our goodwill, generosity, or stories. We have far exceeded our do-good quota.

I am afraid that by bringing up this topic, anti-trafficking organisations will stop using survivors altogether since they will not be able to ‘afford’ us. This is the excuse we are often given. When organisations write grants, they need to add a line item for paying survivors. This should be standard protocol. Much of the dollars they ask for should go directly to lived experience experts’ consulting hours.

I do not want to distract from anti-trafficking organisations’ very important work because they are doing essential labour, for which I am grateful. Rather, I am hoping organisations will rethink future collaborations with survivor labourers. Paying survivors is a matter of priority. Each of us is capable of creating lasting change.

Dr Tamara MC is a cult, child marriage, and human trafficking lived experience expert, who advocates for humans to live free from gender-based violence and coercive control. She obtained her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and researches how language exploits vulnerable populations. She attended Columbia University for an M.F.A. and has been honoured with fellowships at Bread Loaf, Sewanee, Ragdale, Cave Canem, and VCCA. She has published in media outlets including *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Salon*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is currently working on her debut memoir, *Child Bride: Escaping an American Sufi Cult*. She can be reached via her website: <https://tamaramc.com>.