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Child sex trafficking: A model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice

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ABSTRACT

Survivor inclusion is a fundamental component to the success of efforts to combat child sex trafficking. Recognizing, honoring, and leveraging the wisdom that comes from lived experience with adversity, and centering the voices of survivors of sex trafficking, can help to balance power relations and inform more effective interventions. This critical discussion article responds to appeals for meaningful and ethical engagement of survivor leaders in program development, implementation, and evaluation. We propose a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, empowerment-based model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice grounded in guiding principles and practice strategies derived from lived experience. This work emerged from a unique collaboration between a diverse group of survivor advisors and pediatric health care program specializing in child sex trafficking. It serves as a survivor-led resource for anti-trafficking and child maltreatment organizations across sectors as they move toward building survivor-centered approaches to care for children exposed to sex trafficking.

1. Introduction

Child sex trafficking (CST) is a form of human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. It involves the use of a child under the age of 18 years in a sexual act in exchange for something of perceived value, such as money, drugs, or shelter. Sex trafficking of children is a human rights violation, crime against children, and child protection concern. It constitutes child maltreatment and negatively affects child development, health, dignity, and safety (Greenbaum, 2018). Identifying and responding to CST victims and survivors requires a comprehensive continuum of trauma-informed care across multiple disciplines, systems, and sectors. The voices of those with lived experience with sex trafficking are fundamental to informing the development, implementation, and evaluation of anti-trafficking and child maltreatment practices and policies. Despite increasing recognition of the integral role that survivors play in combatting the problem, they have been largely excluded or engaged only superficially in program planning, service delivery, scholarly literature, and government policy. This has resulted in intervention and prevention efforts that reinforce power imbalances and do not fully reflect the best interests, needs, and wishes of those most directly impacted.

The objectives of this critical discussion article are to draw attention to the urgent need for more meaningful and ethical survivor inclusion in shaping responses to CST, to share insights as lived experience experts, and to provide recommendations for guiding principles and practice strategies for survivor-informed care in anti-trafficking and child maltreatment sectors. These reflections are grounded in our personal and professional experiences and social locations. We (authors RB, AA, AM, anonymous x 2) collectively share lived experiences as survivors of sex trafficking and currently work in the anti-trafficking field. We bring a range of intersecting identities encompassing diversity across race, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, ability,

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education, and profession. This work stems from a unique collaboration between our group of survivor advisors and a pediatric hospital team specializing in CST but with no lived experience with sex trafficking (author CA) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Our goal is to improve the quality, consistency, and authenticity of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice in anti-trafficking and child maltreatment work in a way that is trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, and empowerment-based. This will serve as a valuable survivor-derived resource, aiding organizations and providers in shaping survivor-centered policies and programs that respond to the needs of children exposed to sex trafficking in a manner that safely and effectively incorporates survivor voices.

1.1. Background

In affiliation with the University of Toronto, The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) is Canada's largest and most research-intensive pediatric hospital dedicated to improving child health. The Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Program at SickKids endeavored to improve the health care system's and broader community's responses to children affected by sex trafficking and their families. Aligned with national, provincial, and municipal government strategies to combat human trafficking and gender-based violence, we developed a specialized pediatric health care program and multisector community response protocol for Toronto region (Azzopardi et al., 2023). In 2019, we launched Lotus Health, Canada's first pediatric hospital-based specialty program for children who have experienced sex trafficking and those at risk. Lotus Health provides interdisciplinary, trauma-informed health care services and works closely with community partners to ensure an integrated systems of care approach. Care is guided by community response protocol principles and practices for CST identification, assessment, intervention, and prevention.

Survivor engagement was intentionally prioritized and systematically executed from the inception of program and protocol development. We established a partnership with a survivor-led organization, formed a community advisory committee (including representation from multisector community organizations and survivors), held a series of individual and group consultations with lived experience experts, conducted interviews with child victims and survivors and their caregivers, formed a survivor advisory council (including representation from former clients of our program who aged out of pediatric care), and created employment opportunities for survivors in peer support, research, education, and consultation capacities. Diverse survivor voices informed the direction of all aspects of program and protocol development, implementation, and evaluation in meaningful and ethical ways. Throughout this process, a model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice was developed, grounded in our perspectives and experiences as both service users and service providers.

1.2. Why survivor inclusion matters

Individual and collective survivor voices are a critical component to the success of anti-trafficking and child maltreatment interventions. A survivor-informed approach recognizes and honors the wisdom derived from first-hand experience with adversity and leverages this to create services that are more attuned and responsive to other victims and survivors with similar experiences. Being survivor-informed entails intentionally and systematically seeking and integrating meaningful input from a diverse community of human trafficking survivors to inform program or project development, implementation, and evaluation so that it accurately reflects the views, needs, and interests of the population served (National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2023). There is a growing demand for survivor-led and survivor-informed spaces in the anti-trafficking movement (Bowman & Dunn, 2023; Countryman-Roswurm, 2015; Dang, 2018; Lockyer, 2022; Richardson, 2023).

Survivor inclusion is an act of social justice. A survivor-informed framework represents a departure from traditional paternalistic approaches to policy and program development that exclude those most directly impacted by the problem. CST disproportionately affects vulnerable populations whose voices have historically been silenced. Those most at risk are children from marginalized groups, including young girls who are racialized, particularly Black and Indigenous, identify as 2SLGBTQI+, have developmental disabilities, and experience poverty and housing insecurity (Barnert et al., 2017; Greenbaum, 2020). They are significantly more likely to have histories of child abuse and neglect, child welfare system involvement, and placement in care (Baird et al., 2020), circumstances that can strip children of their power and expose them to being recruited by traffickers who prey on those with unmet needs. Compounding the trauma of being trafficked, many of these children experience identity-based and system-induced traumas and social injustices. They often feel unseen, unheard, and invalidated.

Anti-trafficking work has historically operated from a saviorism mindset, which reinforces a sense of superiority and need to save victims, while disregarding outside critique of practices (Countryman-Roswurm, 2015). For children, this tends to come in the form of rescue and removal by child welfare and law enforcement authorities (sometimes against their will and best interests), with subsequent services being contingent on meeting unrealistic criteria, such as abstinence from substance use, compliance with treatment, or enrollment in school. Relying on these well-intentioned but misguided interventions runs the risk of setting children up for failure and driving them back into the hands of their traffickers. Survivor-informed approaches abandon the saviorism mentality and empower survivors as individuals capable of making decisions in their own best interests with the right guidance and support. This is not to suggest that children have agency in their trafficking situation. Rather, it acknowledges that many victims and survivors of CST have been failed by systems of care operating from definitions of safety and protection that are detached from their reality. When more firmly grounded in lived experience, survivor-informed responses pragmatically consider the barriers and facilitators to safely and successfully exiting from trafficking, recovering from trauma, and reintegrating into life outside of trafficking. Engaging people with lived experience in policy-making processes can help to identify system and service gaps, learn from and correct past mistakes, and provide opportunities to advocate for change (Taylor & Otiende, 2024). Survivor input serves as a necessary reality check and helps to hold organizations and providers accountable to survivor-centered, trauma-informed, culturally-appropriate standards (Lockyer, 2022).

A survivor-informed practice model de-centers privileged voices and restructures power, authority, and control. Creating survivor-inclusive spaces requires a shift in workplace values and culture, investment of human and fiscal resources, sustained support from leadership, and willingness to take risks. It is fundamentally centered in engaging authentically with sex trafficking survivors, elevating their voices, and following their lead. Survivor-informed practice taps into the experiential knowledge, skills, and other strengths of people with lived experience as leaders, advisors, consultants, educators, researchers, and service providers. Employing survivors in a variety of professional roles removes reliance on lived experience as the only metric for qualification and evaluation (Bowman & Dunn, 2023). Embracing this paradigm resists the propensity to underestimate survivors' abilities and overestimate their vulnerabilities. Survivors are uniquely equipped to offer critical perspectives, co-create policies and programs, deliver frontline services, inform prevention and research directions, engage with the public in awareness-raising and advocacy, and collaborate with governments and stakeholders to improve legislation and service models. Research shows that high-quality and meaningful engagement of people with lived experience improves policies and programs and benefits affected individuals, communities, and ally-colleagues (Asquith et al., 2022).

Moving away from the paternalistic and saviorism approaches that have historically been applied to survivor inclusion in anti-trafficking

efforts, actions to include survivors should not be re-victimizing, re-traumatizing, re-exploitative, sensationalistic, or tokenistic. There is a tendency for organizations to performatively or superficially engage survivors to meet administrative or funding requirements. Involving survivors simply as a check-box exercise, or limiting their involvement to telling their stories without recognizing and compensating them as experts, can perpetuate exploitation and cause harm (Countryman-Roswurm & Brackin, 2017). Instead, survivor inclusion should be authentically-motivated, trauma-sensitive, empowerment-focused, ethically-grounded, and fairly compensated. Based on their review of survivor-authored and survivor-informed literature, Lockyer (2020) proposed four strategies to inform more equitable, ethical, and meaningful inclusion of survivors: planning for tensions and paradoxes when working with survivors, valuing the expertise of survivors, engaging survivors in trauma-informed ways, and designing processes and mechanisms for meaningful survivor input.

Transitioning "from victim to survivor, from survivor to leader" requires opportunities for growth and learning in spaces that are supportive and nonjudgmental (Lloyd, 2011). Survivor leadership programming can be a pathway to gaining confidence and skills for success (Project iRISE, 2022). In addition to advisory and consultation positions, a notable direct service role for survivors of sex trafficking is that of peer support worker. Peer support is a unique form of social support where survivors in a positive state of recovery use the knowledge and insights gained through lived experience to provide emotional and practical help to others who share a common experience. Examples of frontline, non-clinical peer support roles include individual and group psychoeducation and mentorship, life skills coaching, recreation-based support, case management, system navigation, outreach, and advocacy. Lived experience enables deeper understanding, authentic connection, and nonjudgmental acceptance. The peer relationship helps to counter shame, stigma, distrust, and invisibility of experience. Mentorship from survivors creates relatability, balances power, and models a hopeful future (Deer & Baumgartner, 2019). This work has the potential to benefit the peer supporter and peer supported, providing both with a sense of pride, purpose, and connection that facilitates healing. There is emerging evidence of effectiveness of survivor-mentor services for child survivors of sex trafficking (Rothman et al., 2020). Despite being a cost-effective and powerful means of support, many organizations lack the structure and training required for successful implementation and operation of peer support programming (Voice Found).

2. Survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice model

Our proposed model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice is trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, and empowerment-based. It is grounded in 11 guiding principles and 14 practice strategies, which together provide a strong foundation for survivor-centered responses to CST (refer to Fig. 1). Our social justice framework advances authentic and equitable survivor engagement and fosters an inclusive culture where survivors are not just present but genuinely valued, heard, and respected. It operates from the premise that meaningful engagement of survivors exists along a spectrum of participation. We prioritize efforts to actively minimize the risk of re-victimization, re-exploitation, and re-traumatization of survivors at all levels of engagement. The model can be feasibly implemented in anti-trafficking and child maltreatment organizations committed to improving or expanding their survivor-informed programs or projects. It focuses on direct practice in CST, though implications for policy and research are also considered. While the voices of survivors of all ages are critical, the model focuses on adult survivor engagement. There are special considerations and safeguards for children's participation (Crowley et al., 2020).

Our model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice emerged from lived experiences with sex trafficking, personal and professional encounters as service users and service providers, lessons learned from the field, consultations with other survivors, and review of survivor-informed literature, guidelines, toolkits, and promising practices (e.g., Asquith et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2020; Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center; National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Center, 2023; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014; Taylor & Otiende, 2024). We acknowledge the important contributions of other survivor leaders and scholars whose work has influenced our own (e.g., Bowman & Dunn, 2023; Countryman-Roswurm, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Brackin, 2017; Dang, 2018; Lloyd, 2011; Lockyer, 2022; Richardson, 2023).

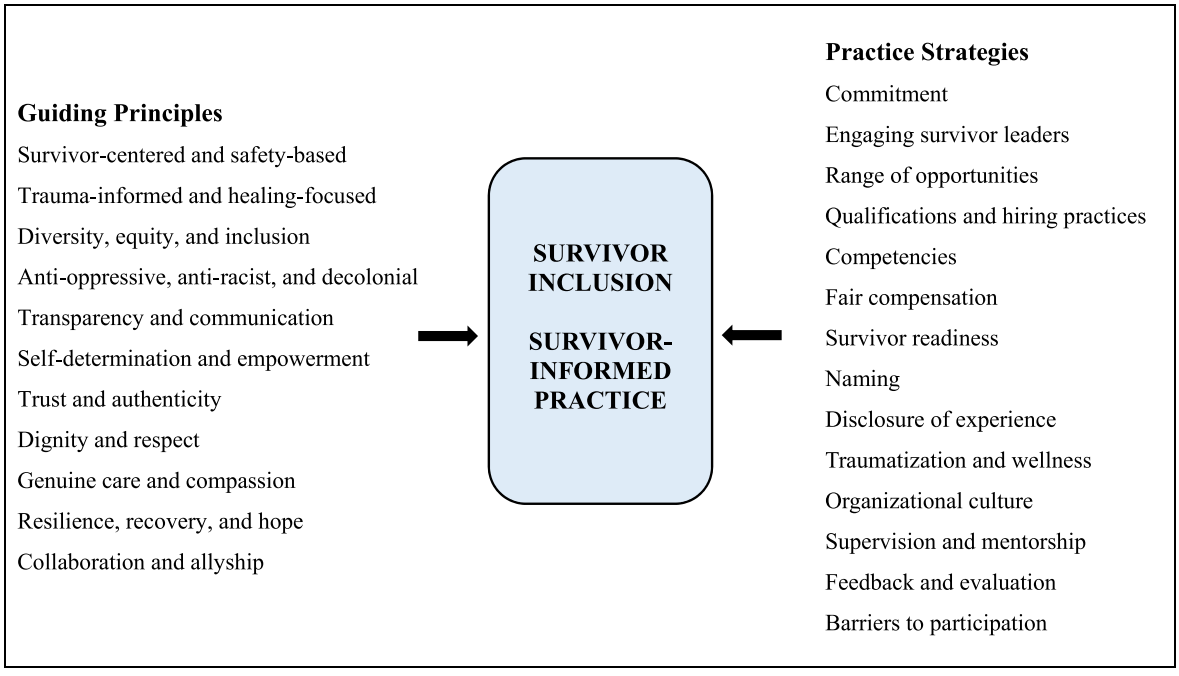

Fig. 1. A model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice.

2.1. Readiness assessment

Before engaging survivors of sex trafficking in anti-trafficking efforts, it is crucial for organizations and providers to critically reflect on their readiness to responsibly plan and implement a survivor-informed approach. Proceeding without adequate preparation has the potential to cause unintentional harm to survivors. This can be prevented by anticipating and proactively addressing common institutional and attitudinal barriers to survivor participation. The following questions can guide the readiness assessment process and help to identify challenges that require further consideration before moving forward, as well as opportunities for growth and development.

- Are we open to critically examining our social locations and biases?
- Do we have a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy?
- Are we competent in trauma-informed care?
- What value do we place on lived experience?
- Are we genuinely interested in the perspectives of survivors?
- What do we hope to achieve by engaging survivors?
- Are we prepared to include survivors in meaningful and ethical ways?
- Will we prioritize survivor well-being over organizational agendas?
- Are we willing to share power and support equitable participation of survivors?
- Are we committed to incorporating survivor input in decision-making?
- Is there sustainable funding to fairly compensate survivors for their time and expertise?
- Can we create opportunities for survivor mentorship and professional development?
- Do we have adequate resources to support survivor mental health and wellness?
- How will we work through conflicts and tensions as they arise?

2.2. Guiding principles

The following principles reflect the fundamental values, beliefs, and attitudes that should guide the process of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice in CST interventions. They provide an aspirational framework for professionals, organizations, and systems concerned with engaging survivors of sex trafficking ethically and equitably. These overlapping principles should be upheld through their integration in policies, procedures, and practices.

Survivor-centered and safety-based. Survivors of sex trafficking present with unique identities, experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Diverse survivor voices should be welcomed, valued, heard, respected, and amplified in anti-trafficking efforts. A survivor-centered framework seeks to honor and empower survivors by recognizing their right to participate, realizing their full potential, and prioritizing their safety, dignity, autonomy, and privacy. A safety-based approach to survivor inclusion resists re-victimization, re-exploitation, and re-traumatization. It rejects paternalism, saviorism, and tokenism as survivors are meaningfully and ethically engaged as lived experience experts with knowledge and skills that can be leveraged to improve responses to CST. This restores survivors' sense of safety, worth, and power.

Trauma-informed and healing-focused. Exposure to sex trafficking can have profound and enduring traumatic effects, impacting physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being across the lifespan. Healing from trauma is a lifelong journey. Work with survivors, as service users and service providers, should be trauma-informed and healing-focused. A universal trauma-informed and healing-focused approach recognizes the presence and impact of trauma, and aims to prevent re-traumatization and promote healing, by prioritizing physical and psychological safety, fostering trust and empowerment, encouraging choice and collaboration, and supporting recovery and resilience. It is nonjudgmental, respectful, transparent, relational, and strengths-based. Professionals, policies, procedures, protocols, programs, and projects across all levels of an organization should be trauma-informed.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion. A diversity, equity, and inclusion framework recognizes how people differ from one another in social location and intersectional identity; promotes fair and equitable treatment, participation, and access across diverse identities; and creates inclusive spaces where differences are embraced and diverse perspectives are intentionally sought, heard, and integrated. Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be a priority across all aspects of anti-trafficking work, reflected in organizational vision and mission statements, considered in strategic plans, integrated in policies and practices, and centered in staff orientation and training. Organizations should strive to have a diverse workforce that mirrors the demographics and lived experiences of the population served, including those in leadership and decision-making positions. This adds credibility, relatability, and confidence in care. While there may be commonalities in experience, survivors are not a monolith. To be truly inclusive and equitable, survivor representation should span diverse cultures, ages, and viewpoints, and barriers to participation should be removed.

Anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and decolonial. Historical and contemporary systems of oppression and inequality are among the root causes of sex trafficking. Systemic disparities place young people with racialized and marginalized identities, particularly Black and Indigenous girls, at greatest risk. An anti-oppression, anti-racism, decolonial lens in anti-trafficking efforts requires awareness of the interplay among colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, trans/homophobia, ableism, and other intersecting sources of power, privilege, and oppression in pursuit of social justice. Survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice demand a commitment to dismantling the structures that sustain inequalities, creating equitable systems and services, and providing culturally-safe practices and policies. This requires continual critical self-reflection, cultural humility, lifelong learning, and vow to uphold the principles of equity, inclusion, impartiality, fairness, and justice.

Transparency and communication. The motives and objectives of survivor engagement should be transparent from the outset. There is a need for clear and consistent communication about expectations, roles, responsibilities, and desired outcomes for all parties involved. This includes open and honest discussion with survivors about an organization's intentions for change and where there may or may not be room to exercise influence. Equitable access to all information, including limitations, helps to develop mutual trust, temper expectations, create a shared understanding, and ground goal consensus in the reality of what is attainable.

Self-determination and empowerment. Survivors of sex trafficking have experienced abuses of power and circumstances that have deprived them of control and confidence. To avoid perpetuating this dynamic, it is pivotal that efforts to engage survivors in anti-trafficking work espouse the principles of self-determination and empowerment. From a rights-based and trauma-informed perspective, survivors should maintain control and agency over if, when, and how they participate. Survivor engagement should be supported in whatever capacity feels most safe, comfortable, and meaningful to them, including autonomy in making internally-motivated decisions to share personal stories of trafficking and trauma. Empowering survivors with access to skill-building opportunities and survivor-centered resources strengthens self-efficacy and capacity to advocate in their own best interests.

Trust and authenticity. Survivors of sex trafficking commonly experience manipulation and coercion by traffickers, as well as disappointment and harm by service providers and systems designed to help. This impedes ability to trust and relate, sometimes resulting in survivors being overly cautious of anyone who may have a hidden agenda or seems disingenuous in their communications or actions. Taking the time to build mutual trust and demonstrate authenticity is fundamental to effective engagement with survivors. Developing survivor-informed

approaches relies on cultivating genuine interpersonal relationships and transparent intentions on both ends. Spaces need to feel safe, supportive, and confidential. To foster trust and authenticity, survivor input should be met with substantive action, not just appreciation.

Dignity and respect. All survivors of sex trafficking have intrinsic worth and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Many have had degrading experiences with traffickers and service providers that alter their sense of self. Responsible survivor inclusion can help to restore identity and rebuild self-worth. To foster dignity and respect, survivors should be recognized and validated as lived experience experts, equals, and valued members of the team. This requires an approach that is nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, free from stigmatization and discrimination, and respectful of rights and choices.

Genuine care and compassion. All interactions with survivors of sex trafficking should come from a place of genuine care and compassion. Leading with kindness is the foundation for building trusting relationships. Moving away from performative or superficial survivor inclusion requires authentic engagement, empathic connection, and sincere desire and action to alleviate suffering. Unconditional regard for survivors' inherent worth and sensitivity to trauma responses promotes understanding and acceptance when challenges arise and mistakes are made.

Resilience, recovery, and hope. Surviving sex trafficking, healing from trauma, and using lived experience to help others are acts of resilience, courage, and strength. Survivors engaged in anti-trafficking work will present at different stages along their individual path to recovery. Through a stages of change lens, both progress and setbacks should be anticipated and normalized. Validating and reframing struggles as opportunities for personal discovery and growth helps to counter shame and instill hope. For young victims of sex trafficking, witnessing the resilience and recovery of survivor leaders inspires a hopeful future. This is the cornerstone of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice.

Collaboration and allyship. To maximize the impact of anti-trafficking efforts, those with and without lived experience need to join forces across disciplines, systems, and sectors. A collaboration-focused approach requires a shared commitment, common agenda, and collective action to effect substantive change. This relies on proactive and sincere allyship at individual and institutional levels. Those without lived experience with sex trafficking and marginalization should acknowledge and use their privilege and power to stand with survivors, advocate for their inclusion, uplift their voices, and work together toward social justice.

2.3. Practice strategies

Advancing along the continuum of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice requires a commitment to embodying and enacting the principles proposed above. Mapped from these guiding principles, the following practice strategies outline actionable steps toward engaging survivors in a manner that meaningfully affects outcomes while diminishing the risk of further harm. To avoid perpetuating oppressive conditions, attention to power dynamics is threaded throughout.

Commitment. An organization's commitment to survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice should be integrated in vision and mission statements, values and ethics, and policies and procedures. This helps to reinforce dedication, foster buy-in, align practices with principles, and promote accountability across all levels of an organization. Commitment to safe and responsible survivor engagement requires infusion of trauma-informed care and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, including decolonial, anti-racist, anti-sexist, gender-responsive, and disability justice principles and practices. Commitment should be renewed regularly, and adherence should be monitored.

Engaging survivor leaders. Actively and continually engaging and empowering survivor leaders and survivor-led organizations as collaborators, consultants, and partners is essential for cultivating an environment where survivor inclusion can thrive. It is important to involve survivor leaders at all stages of a program or project, not just as an add-on at the beginning or end. This creates pathways for equitable and consequential input into decisions that will sustain the integrity of survivor-informed practice, such as guidance on vision and mission statements, strategic planning, policies and procedures, marketing campaigns, fundraising, job creation, role development, hiring practices, compensation and promotion standards, resource allocation, clinical interventions, reporting and supervision structures, performance measures, education and training content, and research directions. Care should be taken to intentionally engage diverse voices, avoid over-burdening a sole survivor for all things, consider the physical and emotional toll of the work, and ensure appropriate remuneration.

Range of opportunities. Survivor engagement should not be limited to sharing personal stories of sex trafficking for shock value or emotional appeal. To foster inclusivity and empowerment, survivors should be involved in various capacities, as partners, consultants, collaborators, employees, board members, and volunteers, among other key roles. Establishing a range of positions tailored to harness unique strengths and interests, and sustaining them over time, will be most impactful. Different types and ranks of survivor participation include executive-level leadership roles, entry-level and mid-level direct service (e.g., peer support), representation on advisory boards or committees, consultation for project-specific expertise, community organizing and advocacy, prevention campaigning, curriculum design and delivery, policy planning, and research in collaboration with academic and community-based teams. Not all positions filled by survivors should necessitate publicly speaking about sex trafficking or disclosing personal experiences. Providing opportunities for skill development and leadership training within and beyond anti-trafficking work recognizes survivors' full potential.

Qualifications and hiring practices. Human resource processes should be trauma-informed and apply a diversity, equity, and inclusion framework. Job descriptions need to align with an organization's commitment to survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice. All employment and volunteer postings, including but not limited to those created specifically for survivors, should encourage people with lived experience with sex trafficking to apply. Outreach efforts should extend to historically underrepresented, racially diverse, and otherwise marginalized communities. Organizations should transition away from traditional job qualifications that inherently exclude survivors. For example, looking beyond academic credentials and being flexible with criminal background checks (recognizing that coercion into criminal activity is not uncommon while being trafficked) will broaden the candidate pool and ensure a wider spectrum of experience and expertise is captured. There is a need for transparency in remuneration and advancement opportunities from the outset. The potential for ethical dilemmas arising from dual relationships and conflicts of interest in survivor roles should be carefully considered.

Competencies. Lived experience alone does not automatically translate to professional expertise. Building on the knowledge generated through lived experience and personal attributes, survivors should be offered relevant education, training, and supervision to acquire the necessary values, knowledge, and skills for the job and develop their leadership capacity. Required competency levels will vary depending on the nature of the role and responsibilities. In unregulated professions involving direct service, such as peer support, developing codes of ethics and standards of practice will promote quality assurance and risk management.

Fair compensation. Survivors of sex trafficking should be fairly compensated for sharing their time and expertise in professional capacities. Compensation signals that their contributions are important and avoids re-exploitation. Lived experience should not be undervalued in the monetary amount attached. For survivors in salaried employment positions, pay scales and benefits should be commensurate with experience and education. Aligning with fair market value will maximize

attraction, retention, and motivation. For consultants and speakers in contract positions, it is important to clearly outline the scope of work and terms of payment in advance, factoring in additional fees and expenses (e.g., travel, childcare) incurred as independent contractors. Some survivors choose to provide volunteer or pro-bono services in an advisory capacity. While volunteer work can be beneficial for survivors who are seeking to build competencies and connections, or have an intrinsic desire to give back, it should not be an alternative to paid work. When volunteer opportunities do arise, an honorarium (e.g., gift card of choice) should be provided as a token of appreciation, and any out-of-pocket expenses should be promptly reimbursed. Maintaining a budget to adequately compensate survivors for their labor requires a sustained fiscal commitment by governments and organizations. This extends to investing in professional development and mentorship for survivor leaders to advance their careers.

Survivor readiness. Not all survivors of sex trafficking are in a positive state of recovery with capacity to support others, directly or indirectly. Survivor readiness to transition to professional anti-trafficking roles should consider length of time out of trafficking and demonstrated wellness. Timelines for emotional readiness to participate in survivor leadership from a safe and healthy place are personal. Factors to consider include survivors' sense of safety and stability, stress levels, resiliency and self-care strategies, and commitment to recovery. Rather than imposing judgment, self-awareness and self-assessment of stage of change, mental health and coping, and pathways to healing should be encouraged. Proactively exploring and addressing risks, needs, and challenges through a trauma-informed lens will promote and sustain readiness.

Naming. Language has the power to construct meaning and shape identity. The terms victim and survivor resonate differently with different people and have unique connotations depending on context (e.g., criminal justice vs. therapeutic). Not all individuals who have experienced sex trafficking identify with these labels. Non-exclusionary language should be identified, and self-naming should be honored.

Disclosure of experience. Survivor leadership involves sharing intimate parts of self. This comes with benefits and risks that must be weighed. Disclosing personal experiences of sex trafficking can be a powerful way to challenge shame and stigma and promote empowerment and healing. Publicly disclosing survivor status also comes with consequences, including threats to safety, and recounting traumatic events can be re-traumatizing. In an unsupportive context, it can feel intrusive, sensationalistic, and exploitative. Survivors own their histories, identities, and experiences. If, when, how, and why they share their stories should be carefully considered and self-determined. Survivor rights and boundaries should be respected to avoid replicating coercive dynamics. Informed consent should be obtained each time personal narratives are publicly shared and can be withdrawn at any time. For those who choose to disclose, it should serve a clear purpose and not be restricted to stories of abuse and trauma but also highlight strengths and resiliencies. Offering debriefing and support afterwards reduces the potential for trauma reactivation.

Traumatization and wellness. Trauma-informed care principles and practices should be embedded within the organizational culture. Healing from the harms of sex trafficking is a lifelong process. Retelling personal stories can trigger distressing memories of frightening experiences, potentially resulting in re-traumatization. For survivors providing direct service to other victims and survivors, exposure to their trauma narratives and safety risks can have a compounding effect. Empathic engagement with the trauma material of others can lead to re-traumatization, vicarious trauma, or secondary traumatic stress. Trauma responses should be normalized, destigmatized, monitored, and mitigated to reduce harm. It is the responsibility of organizations to protect and promote survivor wellness by providing trauma-informed supervision and debriefing, encouraging work-life balance, facilitating self-care, and ensuring appropriate mental health support is available.

Organizational culture. Differences across social locations, personal experiences, educational attainment, and professional status can create real and perceived hierarchies in the workplace. Rooted in diversity, equity, and inclusion principles, organizations should nurture a culture of safety, acceptance, and belonging. This can be achieved by fostering genuine relationships among those with and without lived experience with sex trafficking, creating opportunities for collaboration and networking while respecting boundaries for privacy, accommodating for diverse learning needs and working styles, adjusting language and structure to suit different preferences and comfort levels, and integrating trauma-informed and culturally-sensitive approaches. A supportive team environment has the potential to reduce survivors' sense of isolation, enhance job satisfaction, promote retention, and mitigate workplace trauma.

Supervision and mentorship. Key to empowering survivors to thrive in the workplace are opportunities for personal and professional development. Trauma-informed supervision and mentorship can support the success of survivors by offering a safe space for reflection and guidance on career goals, strengths and areas for growth, self-care and wellness, and common challenges that can emerge in survivor roles (e.g., appropriate use of self-disclosure, managing trauma responses, setting healthy boundaries). Building a survivor-led community of practice can provide additional opportunities for social support, connection, and mentorship among peers.

Feedback and evaluation. Organizations should systematically implement mechanisms for survivor input to inform their anti-trafficking efforts at all stages. The design and administration of feedback and evaluation processes should be survivor-informed. This can be used to assess the extent to which survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice goals are being met and identify targeted areas for improvement. Feedback methods include individual and group interviews, anonymous surveys, focus groups, and advisory committees. Input should be elicited from diverse communities of survivors to ensure representation of different voices. Survivor feedback should be reviewed, analyzed, and incorporated in decision-making in timely, tangible, and meaningful ways.

Barriers to participation. Survivors of sex trafficking have a right to influence practice and policy decisions that affect them and their peers. An equitable approach to survivor inclusion seeks to proactively identify and address barriers to full and sustained survivor participation. Barriers can exist at individual, interpersonal, systemic, and structural levels. Many are surmountable with increased awareness, resources, support, and advocacy. Solutions to common barriers include building an organizational culture where survivors feel safe and valued, challenging stigma, applying trauma-informed approaches, promoting diversity in the workplace, accounting for cultural differences, ensuring equitable treatment, using accessible language, making accommodations for disabilities, providing fair compensation and access to resources required for the job, offering adequate training and supervision, supporting mental health and wellness, enabling flexible schedules and reasonable workloads, assisting with childcare and transportation, facilitating relationship-building and networking, encouraging and integrating feedback, and providing opportunities for career advancement. Offering different levels of engagement and mechanisms for anonymous or confidential input ensures that survivors who choose not to publicly disclose their identity can still contribute.

3. Conclusion

Survivor leadership has gained traction in the anti-trafficking movement. In this critical discussion article, we highlighted the importance and complexities of survivor inclusion and offered a roadmap to meaningful and ethical survivor-informed practice. Our hope is that the principles and practices proposed in our trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, empowerment-based model of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice will guide anti-trafficking and child maltreatment organizations in their pursuit of survivor-centered CST

interventions. Effective implementation demands recognition of lived experience expertise and commitment to transforming power structures, strengthening accountability, and sustaining progress over time. Roadblocks encountered along the way can be overcome by remaining intentional and systematic in efforts to move survivor engagement from a performative gesture to effect substantive change.

Evidence-based models of survivor inclusion and survivor-informed practice are currently lacking, underscoring important avenues for future research. Survivors of sex trafficking are commonly the subjects of research, while excluded as investigators, collaborators, and consultants. Programs of CST research should be survivor-informed and community-engaged. Including lived experience experts at all stages of the research process ensures that research directions, methods, interpretations, and dissemination strategies are relevant and accessible to those most directly impacted. This should be done in a way that is trauma-informed, transparent, responsible, and accountable to those being studied and affected. This will promote equity, build mutual trust, create opportunities for co-learning, and better leverage findings to improve models of care and outcomes for children exposed to sex trafficking.

In Canada and elsewhere, there is a need for certification and regulation of survivor leader professions and accreditation of survivor-informed organizations. While there are established guidelines for the practice and training of peer support (Sunderland et al., 2013) and peer supporter certification (Peer Support Canada, 2023), they are not tailored to human trafficking and do not apply to survivor roles beyond peer support. Survivor-informed practice in anti-trafficking and child maltreatment fields, and more specifically CST, presents unique considerations demanding specialized approaches. Certification, regulation, and accreditation will promote a more structured method for establishing robust ethical and practice standards, evaluating competencies, assuring quality and consistency, managing safety and risks, and building credibility and trust. This will advance our shared goal of supporting children to safely exit sex trafficking, heal from trauma, and rebuild their lives with approaches shaped by lived experience.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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