

30 July 2021

World day against Trafficking in Persons

Elevating the voice of trafficked persons with dignity and respect alongside the critical role of an independent civil society

7 actionable recommendations

Today's World Day Against Trafficking in Persons highlights the importance of listening to and learning from the experiences of trafficked persons. La Strada International - European NGO Platform against trafficking in Human Beings - acknowledges that trafficked persons themselves play a critical role in the development of effective policies and measures to prevent and combat human trafficking. Listening to and understanding the experiences of trafficked persons and incorporating their feedback into anti-trafficking initiatives has always been a core practice amongst many anti-trafficking NGOs, including our own members.

The need to include the voices of trafficked persons in anti-trafficking initiatives has been increasingly promoted by international organisations and other stakeholders working in the field, with an growing number of initiatives being established. However, trafficked persons' contributions are not always integrated in a meaningful and non-stigmatising manner, and instead often fall short in promoting their rights. Moreover, these initiatives sometimes appear to be employed in order to pacify and quell the critical views put forward by anti-trafficking NGOs.

Reflecting on the enduring and vital need for victim-centred and human rights-centered approaches, La Strada International puts forward 7 actionable recommendations:

- 1. Be careful in your use of language to avoid stigmatisation** – Trafficked persons are not a homogenous group, and their experience of trafficking should not become a collective or individual 'label' nor should it define who they are. The reality is that trafficking happened to them at a certain point in their life, but this does not define their life in all its entirety. Many trafficked persons do not recognize themselves as victims, heroes, or survivors. Yet, the language used, can stigmatise them and/or introduce additional harms to groups that are vulnerable to trafficking. Not only is it true that not every trafficked person survives, but also these labels might be a barrier to their recovery and their subsequent social inclusion and integration. They actively resist the idea that their identities, needs, abilities and individual worth could only be based upon their trafficking experience. Some refuse to identify as a trafficking victim and refrain from accepting assistance or repatriation to their home countries, while still seeking to (re)build their lives in hopefully less exploitative circumstances.
- 2. Ensure that trafficked persons can make a meaningful contribution** – For a meaningful contribution, the sharing of personal victim stories, accounts and experiences should not be the main priority. Instead, it is the learnings shared by trafficked persons and their expertise in the nature of trafficking which should be taken into account when developing policies and countermeasures. Where possible, trafficked persons should be involved in the collection of data and obtaining evidence, using consultations and participatory research to allow them to influence policies and actions.

- 3. Engage trafficked persons in a respectful manner** – When engaging with trafficked persons, all stakeholders should take into account the fact that most have suffered a traumatic experience or set of experiences. The principles of respect, participation and inclusion should be followed whenever trafficked persons are engaged in anti-trafficking activities or when they are exposed to media or large public events. It is paramount to give trafficked persons the option of using an alias or otherwise remaining anonymous. The right to privacy is a fundamental human right and is crucial in any anti-trafficking intervention.
- 4. Allow trafficked persons to express their personal opinions** – It is essential to take into account the diversity of trafficked persons (and their experiences) along with the possibility of a selection bias when trafficked persons speak at national and international fora. There is a tendency to privilege the most tragic or shocking stories, despite the fact that trafficking and exploitation can take many subtle forms. Attention should therefore be paid to the diversity of stories, and this should be communicated externally to contribute to the creation of a more realistic picture of human trafficking. Furthermore, trafficked persons must be allowed to freely and openly express their individual opinions, rather than their views being used to serve the political purposes of (international) organisations and bodies, or otherwise being used to promote and support particular policies.
- 5. Manage expectations, and pay attention to safety and conditions** – It is important to always clarify the reasons for engaging with trafficked persons and ensure that the expectations of both parties are identified and addressed. Trafficked persons should be fully informed and enabled to provide their consent about participating in any initiatives; their safety, privacy and personal data must be protected at all times. When involving trafficked persons in anti-trafficking initiatives their expertise must be respected, and they must receive accurate and transparent information and resources (including remuneration) to perform their role.
- 6. Build and support networks of workers, including sex workers** – For many persons who have endured a trafficking situation or who are vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation or abuse, it is often very difficult to self-organise. Workers in irregular sectors or in irregular situations – such as domestic workers, sex workers and undocumented workers – should equally have access to freedom of association and should be (financially) supported to self-organise. It is also important to elevate the voices of people working in sectors that are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, so that they can contribute to the policies that impact their particular sectors. For instance, sex workers are hardly ever invited to anti-trafficking events and fora – but who better than sex workers to explain what is happening in their sector and how to address the exploitation and abuse?
- 7. Engaging trafficked persons should not be an excuse to exclude civil society** – Throughout Europe we note with alarm the shrinking civil society space, despite the fact that civil society organizations (including anti-trafficking NGOs) are particularly well placed to complement governments’ activities in combating trafficking in human, due to their monitoring ‘watch dog’ role and the direct services they provide to trafficked persons. In addition to engagement with trafficked persons, anti-trafficking NGOs possess key insights into the needs and the gaps that currently exist – insights which are built upon their outreach and service provisions around migrant reception, border, transit, detention facilities, and other issues. Anti-trafficking NGOs can therefore also represent trafficking persons who cannot be heard or are not seen. Inviting trafficked persons to engage with or speak at international fora should therefore not be used as an excuse for excluding anti-trafficking NGOs and their critical views.

If the civil society space in Europe continues to shrink, the voices of trafficked persons will be heard even less.

La Strada International is a European NGO platform against human trafficking that works from a human rights perspective, comprising 30 anti-trafficking NGOs in 23 European countries. The platform’s primary goal is empowering trafficked persons and vulnerable groups, improving their position through promoting their universal rights, including the right to choose to emigrate, the right to work abroad, and the right to be protected from violence and abuse. La Strada International is a member of the following NGO networks: GAATW, PICUM, and ICRSE.