

SURVIVOR'S EXPERIENCES OF SHARING THEIR TRAFFICKING STORIES PUBLICLY

Preliminary findings from a survey of 85 survivors

In the spring of 2024, the National Survivor Network conducted a needs assessment survey to inform the development of our upcoming media and storytelling training for survivors.

MOST COMMON TYPES OF ENGAGEMENTS

The three most common types of storytelling engagements were: 1) Speaking at an event for a nonprofit, 2) General public speaking or panel participation, and 3) Being interviewed by a journalist for a magazine, newspaper, or online publication.

WHO IS DOING THE SPEAKING?

52% of all respondents have done 3 or more speaking engagements or media interviews. Of those respondents who've done 3 or more speaking engagements:

Labor only

Trafficked in commercial sex and other forms of labor

Trafficked only in commercial sex

This overrepresentation of survivors trafficked in commercial sex among regular speakers may be caused by and further reinforce the disproportionate emphasis on trafficking in the sex trades in awareness, prevention, and policy efforts.

CONSENT VIOLATIONS EXPERIENCED BY SURVIVOR STORYTELLERS

Many respondents who had shared their stories publicly experienced consent violations related to their choices around if and when to share their story publicly.

33% were willing to share their stories but were pressured to share details they had wanted to keep private.

30% indicated that their stories had been misrepresented

20% were pressured to share their stories when they did not want to.

17% shared their stories under one set of conditions but their stories were later shared without their consent.

16% indicated that their stories were initially shared without their consent.

50% of respondents who done at least one prior storytelling engagement had experienced at least one of these violations. All of them were survivors of trafficking in commercial sex.

Respondents were given a space to write in types of backlash experienced after sharing their stories publicly. Survivors had lost employment, contracts, or scholarships; been treated differently in the workplace; and seen their employers use the employee's survivor status to increase the organization's funding. One survivor noted that there is higher economic benefit for telling stories with greater detail, which led to their revictimization and severe PTSD which left them unable to work and they lost their housing. Another noted that once they stopped sharing their trauma narratives as part of their public speaking the engagements "dried up." Survivors reported being doxxed and harassed online, sometimes by sex workers for speaking up against abusive platforms and sometimes by anti-trafficking "advocates" for disclosing prior or current sex work. In one case, the survivor's trafficker called the news channel after a story, and in another they were told by the reporter that the news outlet wanted something "new and juicy."

FEARS AND CONCERNS OF SURVIVOR STORYTELLERS

Awareness of these violations is reflected in the number of respondents who were concerned about the following:

Storytelling Concern	Very or extremely concerned
Having my boundaries respected	72%
Feeling safe and supported after the engagement	61%
Feeling prepared for what might happen after the engagement	61%
Lack of control over whether my words and perspective will be accurately quoted	58%
Any monetary loss or financial strain connected to the engagement	58%
Feeling exploited or like I've been taken advantage of in any way	55%
Experiencing backlash from or harassment by trolls online in response	53%
Feeling prepared to manage increased visibility	53%
Experiencing backlash or fallout with family or support network	49%
Feeling offended by something a journalist/ documentarian/ anchor/ host does or says	43%
Feeling prepared for the engagement itself	38%

These findings identify needed areas of improvement in how organizations and media prepare and support trauma survivors.

WHAT DO SURVIVORS WANT TO SHARE?

Respondents regularly indicated feeling pressured to share graphic details of the violence they experienced while being trafficked, but in general this is not what our respondents were interested in sharing in public spaces.

In general, there was **strong interest (70% or higher) in sharing:**

BROAD REFERENCES TO:	The kinds of services, supports, policies, and practices that assisted you in your journey toward greater stability
	The services, support, policies, and practices that you were unable to access that would have helped to have in place
	How your life is different now than it was before or during your trafficking experience
	The events, services, people, policies or practices that supported your ability to leave your trafficking situation
	Elements that led to your trafficking experience
DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF:	The kinds of services, supports, policies, and practices that assisted you in your journey toward greater stability
	The services, support, policies, and practices that you were unable to access that would have helped to have in place

This section of the survey allowed individuals to select “yes,” “no,” or “it depends” to whether or not they would be interested in sharing this element in their storytelling for social change. For those who selected “it depends,” many indicated that it would depend on *either* whether or not it was a survivor-only space *or* if the space was strongly facilitated by a clinical professional to ensure the wellbeing of all participants. Some indicated that since their trafficking was familial there was no “before” their trafficking in their memories.

WHAT DO SURVIVORS WANT TO SHARE?

There was **moderate interest (51-69%) in sharing:**

BROAD REFERENCES TO:	Empowering elements of their experiences from before trafficking
	Types of Harm you experienced while being trafficked
	Traumatic experiences before trafficking
DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF:	The events, services, people, policies or practices that supported your ability to leave your trafficking situation
	How your life is different now than it was before or during your trafficking experience

There was **NOT majority interest in sharing:**

DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF:	Elements that led to your trafficking experience
	Types of harm you experienced while being trafficked
	Traumatic experiences before trafficking

These preliminary findings suggest that there is a need for improved organizational and journalistic practices around consent, boundaries, and reducing exploitative behaviors, as well as improved and intentional preparation, and ongoing support for survivor storytellers. Survivors suggested practices such as allowing adequate time to practice, providing questions to the survivor ahead of time, fostering practices for managing anxiety, and peer mentoring with other survivors who have shared their stories. We look forward to providing additional recommendations in future publications and in our training for survivors (currently in development).

This research was conducted in partnership with [The Irina Project](#) under IRB approval from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Project team: Chris Ash, Sabra Boyd, Barbara Friedman, Ethan Levine, Andrea Lorenz. Recommended citation: Ash, et al. Survivors' Experiences of Sharing Their Trafficking Stories Publicly. National Survivor Network - Cast (2024).