



## Remedy as Relational

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What does remedy mean for survivors of modern slavery? As businesses grapple with the complexity of risks in their supply chains, the human dimension of this issue is beginning to break through the haze of reputational concerns. This shift underscores a growing recognition that simply identifying risks is insufficient, and that effective action is needed to remediate those affected by these horrific crimes.

But what does remedy look like for people who have been victimised by situations of modern slavery outside of business supply chains? A person whose exploitation has not been at the hands of a corporate entity, but rather, a personal perpetrator. What kind of remedy would provide restitution for the destruction unleashed by taking ownership of someone else's life?

I have heard a variety of suggestions, all with a degree of merit. Maybe remedy is the help provided to rebuild a life materially: Providing shelter, food, medical care, and a way to start a new life. Perhaps there is an argument to be made for a form of compensation that can balance the scales of harm in financial terms: the sum of unpaid wages, or the profit margin obtained from stolen freedom. Maybe there is a sentence that could be handed down to do justice to the weight of suffering inflicted. Perhaps remedy is all of these things, or something more.

What is the value of someone's *being*, their functional autonomy, their sense of worth, their dreams, and the future they might have had without the trauma of modern slavery? How do we adequately compensate someone for those losses? I have tried to understand this through the lens of my own experience of modern slavery...

They will always live in my memory - the images caught by my lowered eyes. The corner of the bedside cupboard, the carpet disappearing under the bed, the sound of his voice ringing in my ears. It was in that moment, that I truly understood freedom, because it was taken from me. It was visceral – the agony of ownership and the reality of being sold under duress for the profit of another person: An incredulous, searing realisation that my body in its most intimate form was no longer my own. I had experienced abuse before, but this was far darker, and it swallowed every aspect of my life. There was a fierce battle for freedom, but escape was not where the impact ended. It was merely the moment that the dust settled on the crater that my life had become.

At that point, the remedy I needed was immediate, not retrospective. It was less about making restitution for the inordinate amount of profit derived from my body, or even seeing justice for the crimes committed, and more about surviving. It was about dealing with the impact of abuse that left me paralysed at the thought of making even a simple decision for myself, a shameful indictment on my lost ability to function as an adult in the world. It was the struggle to work to keep a roof over my head, while trauma wracked my body, making it almost impossible to eat or sleep. It was about finding a way to pay the endless medical costs to recover. It was the excruciating effort required to interact with anyone in the outside world, and the struggle to know what to say to those who found out what had happened. At that point, I would have said

that remedy was help to survive: to recover enough medically, physically and psychologically to regain functionality.

Slowly the shock wore off and the processing started. I couldn't understand what had happened to me, how it had happened – I didn't even have a name for it. Shame consumed me, and I no longer wanted to survive. I wanted to die. I had nothing left to fight for. I was certain that I would never be able to adjust to life in the outside world, and was convinced that I was doomed to a life without love, family, or a future. The brokenness was all consuming. Sometimes I was desperate enough to give in to late night google searches - trying to find someone or something that could help. Slowly, I started piecing together information, but most of it was from overseas. It was very confusing. They called what happened to me 'trafficking'. It seemed a horrid word, something I was sure couldn't have happened to me.

But there were moments when realisation overcame the denial, and I started to accept it. I found comfort in spending time with the others that had escaped with me. We supported each other in those early days, trying to make sense of it all together. Eventually COVID and our own struggles splintered us apart. I tried to find other survivors outside of our situation that I could talk to. I felt they might be able to help me understand how to recover from this, but I couldn't find any. At that time, remedy would have been access to information. It would have been peer support. It would have been someone to help me process what had happened, or tell me where to get help. Remedy would have been a way to understand and to find hope that there might be a future beyond this.

Eventually the fight returned. As I pieced together more information and accepted what had happened, I started reaching out for help. For myself, and the other girls. I tried everything I could think of - several times: Aid organisations, lawyers, police. It was confusing and heartbreaking. Even now, I still ask myself what I did wrong, what I could have said differently, to get help. Because help didn't come. The reality then was, as one of the other survivors said to me, that our trafficker now was no longer a person. Rather, it was desperation that took the choice and freedom away that we should have been reclaiming.

At that point remedy would have looked like housing, or a way to make an income for the girls who didn't have any qualifications to fall back on. It would have been help from lawyers to understand the legislation, or information about how to report. It could have been access to the Victims Services scheme. Remedy would have been police that recognised the crime and followed up the case. Eventually, my google searches gave me the courage to approach the Federal Police and I was referred to the Support for Trafficked Persons Program through the Red Cross. I also found a social worker who talked to me once a week on the phone as I battled a constant sense of despair. At this point remedy looked like acknowledgement and support.

As our justice process stalled, I needed to find meaning in what had happened to me. I believe that it was a lack of awareness, along with other circumstances of abuse in my life that left me vulnerable to exploitation. I wanted to do everything in my power to prevent others from suffering in the same way. There was also a desperate need to reclaim my voice. My perpetrator had silenced us and believed that he had buried our stories. He thought that we would never be strong enough to speak out. I started pursuing advocacy to fight back. Soon, I found myself working in the antislavery sector and learned that what happened to me had a different name in Australia: Modern Slavery. I started to use my voice and found other survivors and allies who

helped me to get stronger. Now, remedy looks like being heard, being empowered to fight the harm that almost completely destroyed me. I can't change what happened to me, but maybe I can change it for others like me.

So, in all of that, what does remedy mean to survivors of modern slavery? Remedy holds different meaning for every survivor. It can even mean different things at various stages of recovery. There are times where the financial pressure of rebuilding a life would be alleviated by monetary compensation. Access to adequate medical treatment would lessen the ongoing physical and psychological burden of trauma. It would be incredible to see remedy in the form of criminal justice that could, at minimum, prevent perpetrators from reoffending. But in the end, remedy to me, means healing.

So what does healing mean?

I recently read a quote by John Nehme, president and CEO of Allies against Slavery, that resonated with me:

“When harm is relational, healing must be relational. Recovery isn't about shelters, it's about relationships.”

The greatest impact on my life, that no amount of money or justice process can ever remedy, is the daily struggle to overcome the trauma that impacts my ability to be functional and relational as a *person*. We all have a fundamental human need to connect with others in meaningful ways. It is central to the way in which we exist in the world, at work or in personal relationships. Complex trauma that was characterised by grooming, catastrophic betrayals of trust in core relationships, coercive control, psychological abuse, and sexual violence over prolonged periods of time in a situation of entrapment, has decimated my ability to feel safe in building relationships with other humans. I work incredibly hard to counteract the fear and stress responses that make it difficult to trust people, resolve conflict, and make it even harder to show or receive love.

There is ongoing debate about the place of storytelling in survivor advocacy, but the next time you hear a survivor's story, pay attention to the points of remedy. There will be key moments in which they talk about what helped them *heal*. For most, it will be relational – a person that gave them hope. It will be the person that believed them, a case worker that helped them, an ally that gave them an opportunity, or a fellow survivor that supported them. It will be someone that gave them a sense of safety or *delivered* on a promise of help. They may also talk of the agony of re-traumatisation - when any hope they had left was betrayed again - by systems and people that should, or could have helped. Any interactions that are misleading, unreliable, controlling or unkind, can fracture the delicate sense of trust and hope a survivor is struggling to rebuild.

In order to heal, interactions need to *counteract* previous relationships with perpetrators that built trust only to break it, deceived in order to trap, promised help only to take freedom, and exploited you in unspeakable ways. Remedy then, looks like learning to believe that humans can be kind, empathetic, responsive, and respectful. These kinds of relationships give you hope that there is a place where you can be heard, accepted, and your dignity is restored.

So if remedy is relational, does that absolve government and business entities of their responsibility to create effective systems of remediation? Does it negate the need for policies, programs, and infrastructure to meet the material needs of survivors, as they fight for freedom? Is providing justice redundant? My answer to all of these questions, is no. Rather, when we see remedy through the lens of relational healing, we create accountability for personal integrity and meaningful outcomes in system responses.

As human beings, we have the opportunity to respond to the issue of modern slavery, in or outside of the complex mechanism of antislavery efforts. Whether we engage in peer support as survivors, provide case management as social workers, medical care as healthcare professionals, or are part of the criminal justice system, we are more effective when we are person-centred. Whatever our role, we can build an environment of healing and safety in the relationships we foster. We can restore agency, interact with empathy, centre self-determination, provide transparency, act with accountability and support empowerment. We all have an opportunity to extend this kind of remedy to survivors of modern slavery in their journeys of recovery.