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ABSTRACT

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survivors of human trafficking in the Philippines

Laura Cordisco Tsai, PhD

Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government

Jonna Eleccion

Philippine Director, 10ThousandWindows

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Pandemics disproportionately devastate those who are most vulnerable, including people who have experienced human trafficking. To understand the cross-cutting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon human trafficking survivors, we must first listen to survivors themselves about how their basic safety, security, and health have been affected. In this manuscript, we will present findings from a rapid assessment we conducted with human trafficking survivors in the Philippines regarding their experiences, needs, and priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we will briefly describe how the assessment was conducted, followed by key findings and implications for providing services for survivors impacted by COVID-19.

This rapid assessment was implemented by a non-governmental organization (NGO)¹ in Cebu, Philippines that provides economic empowerment and reintegration support programming for survivors of violence and exploitation. The primary populations served by this NGO are survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation and survivors of labor trafficking. During the rapid assessment, a team of NGO staff systematically surveyed a total of 233 human trafficking and child labor survivors regarding their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys were conducted over the phone and virtually with survivors who were already engaged in this NGO's programming. A semi-structured guide was used to ask about the effects of COVID-19 on: survivors' financial status and employment, survivors' physical and mental health, the wellbeing of family members, and sources of support available during the pandemic. The initial rapid assessment

¹ The name of the organization has been withheld at this time for the purposes of a blind review. The name can be inserted at the appropriate time if we are invited to submit a full manuscript.

regarding COVID-related impacts occurred in March and April 2020, followed by systematic outreach that continues through the present.

Results of the rapid assessment revealed four primary concerns and priorities from the perspectives of survivors: food insecurity, loss of employment, escalation in crisis incidents, and mental health concerns. Overwhelmingly, the most urgent challenges identified by survivors were loss of income (for themselves and family members) and the resulting inability to meet basic needs, specifically food. Survivors reported being considerably more concerned about feeding themselves and their families than about contracting COVID-19. Displaced from employment, survivors began running out of food. Significant barriers to accessing government relief goods were identified, including delayed distribution and limitations on aid provided for unregistered voters or informal dwellers, leaving the most marginalized community members without sufficient government assistance.

Additionally, rapid assessment results and subsequent engagement with survivors revealed an escalation in crisis incidents, specifically in reports of violence at home and a sharp increase in suicidal events. Rates of sexual, physical, and emotional gender-based and intimate partner violence rise in emergencies and humanitarian crises. During our engagement with survivors, we found that COVID-related financial stressors coupled with isolation inside the home with violent partners and family members led to an increase in reports of violence during quarantine and heightened difficulties escaping family violence due to financial dependence upon perpetrators. Furthermore, our engagement with survivors revealed a sizable increase in suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior among survivors with an existing suicidal history. Suicidal incidents during COVID-19 were triggered by loss of income, fear regarding inability to provide for family members, familial conflict, uncertainty about future plans, and experiences of family violence. Survivors reported a general rise in mental health concerns during the pandemic, particularly anxiety pertaining to capacity to meet basic needs. Concurrently, access to psychological and psychiatric services were disrupted during the pandemic, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of survivors in communities already lacking sufficient access to mental health services.

The findings from this rapid assessment suggest several critical priorities for intervention with survivors impacted by COVID-19: emergency food assistance, enhanced employment services, crisis intervention support, and access to psychosocial support and psychological services. Given these assessment results, our NGO structured its COVID-19 relief for human trafficking survivors around these four priority areas. First, in response to the assessment, we launched a cash transfer program for survivors facing food insecurity. Survivors' financial needs

were continually assessed to determine ongoing eligibility for cash transfers. Secondly, our NGO expanded its employment services, including significant upscaling of our work immersion program (WIP). WIP provides survivors who are in crisis or in school with a part-time, paid work immersion experience in a safe environment. Along with significantly increasing enrollment, we adapted WIP to include remote work-from-home options for survivors in quarantine during the pandemic and prioritized WIP enrollment for survivors with the greatest financial needs and those in crisis.

To address the mental health concerns and increase in crisis incidents, each survivor enrolled in our program was assigned a counselor or social worker to conduct virtual or phone sessions with them at least once every two weeks to understand their ongoing concerns and priorities, provide psychosocial support, facilitate referrals to outside services, and ensure that survivors were connected to the appropriate programs internally to meet their emerging needs. Further, frontline staff provided crisis intervention services to survivors as needed to address concerns related to family violence and suicide. Crisis intervention refers to immediate, short-term counseling and support to people experiencing significant emotional, mental, and physical distress to help them strengthen their coping skills, access additional supports, and enhance their safety.

It is vital that we listen to the lived experiences of survivors about how they have been impacted and how their rights can be protected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survivors must be engaged as active partners in identifying the best approaches. Through our rapid assessment and the process of providing COVID-19 relief services, we have systematically engaged with survivors affected by COVID-19 – first listening and understanding their concerns, priorities, and suggestions. Together, we are choosing to focus on efforts to promote the safety of the survivor as a whole person, including attention to their basic needs, physical safety, financial needs, and mental and emotional wellbeing. Desperation arising from seemingly impossible circumstances deepens vulnerability to human trafficking, re-trafficking, and other forms of exploitation. It is essential that service providers expand services for survivors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent further exploitation. Survivors' voices and priorities must be at the center of all such efforts.