



Promoting Ethical Survivor Inclusion in **Action to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings**

Working together
for **human rights** and a
democratic Europe*

Survivors are not only beneficiaries of anti-trafficking interventions, but also valuable agents of change, whose perspectives can drive more humane and effective solutions to end human trafficking.

Across the OSCE region, human trafficking remains a low-risk, high-profit crime. The increasingly sophisticated and diverse methods used by traffickers to recruit, control and exploit victims pose serious challenges for OSCE participating States in their fight to end this crime. Indeed, many victims remain unidentified and trapped in cycles of exploitation and abuse. Even when victims are identified, the path to recovery is often long and complex, taking years to heal from the trauma, regain their sense of autonomy and reintegrate into society.

Effective anti-trafficking responses need to be informed by lived experiences rather than assumptions. Survivors possess **unique insights** into how exploitation occurs, why people may not seek help and where systems fail, enabling more accurate identification, better-designed services and stronger prevention strategies.

Who are survivor leaders?

While the term ‘survivor of trafficking’ is not defined in international legal frameworks, it has become widely recognized within the global anti-

trafficking movement. The term acknowledges the process of overcoming victimization but focuses on resilience, recovery, agency and empowerment following experiences of trafficking.

A ‘survivor leader’ or ‘expert/individual with lived experience’ is a survivor who chooses to engage in anti-trafficking work. Survivor leaders may be founders of NGOs or businesses, consultants, trainers, public speakers or advocates from across government, civil society and the private sector. They are, therefore, professionals with a broad range of skill sets who apply both their lived and professional experiences to strengthen anti-trafficking systems.

Why work with survivor leaders?

Survivor leaders understand trafficking from ‘the inside-out’ and can, therefore, offer unique insights on the tactics and modus operandi of traffickers, as well as patterns of victim behaviour, which can often be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Survivors also have direct experience of many of the systems designed to identify, protect and support victims. They have gone through national identification, support and assistance programmes, as well as criminal justice, migration, asylum and healthcare systems. This places them in a unique position to identify gaps and barriers, and to ensure these systems are truly trauma-informed, survivor-centred and responsive to gender- and age-specific issues.



Members of ISTAC, Warsaw, 30 June 2023



Jeanne Celestine Lakin, ISTAC member, Warsaw, 15 October 2025

International commitments on survivor engagement

The ethical engagement of survivors is now widely recognized as a cornerstone of anti-trafficking action. OSCE participating States made commitments to survivor engagement in [Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/17](#) and [Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/18](#), which recognize the importance of the input and recommendations from survivors of human trafficking in elaborating effective anti-trafficking strategies.

In the [2025 Political Declaration on the Implementation of the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking](#), UN States Parties also explicitly recognized the role of survivors as agents of change in the global fight against trafficking in persons.

The [Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking](#) adopted by the United Nations High Commissioner in 2002, further recognize “the important contribution that survivors of trafficking can, on a strictly voluntary basis, make to developing and implementing anti-trafficking interventions and evaluating their impact”.

Survivor engagement as ethical, meaningful and trauma-informed

The systematic engagement of survivors in anti-trafficking responses should discourage patterns of tokenism, exclusion, discrimination and inequality.

Rather, survivor engagement should be fundamentally ethical, meaningful and trauma-informed. This means ensuring that survivor leaders are treated as equal partners in decision-making and that their participation is voluntary, safe, informed and fairly compensated, while protecting confidentiality and minimizing the risk of re-traumatization.

Meaningful engagement creates genuine opportunities for survivors to influence policies and programmes, and trauma-informed approaches prioritize safety, trust, choice, empowerment and appropriate support throughout the process.

ODIHR's work on ethical survivor engagement

What is ISTAC?

The International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC) was established by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in 2021, as the first body of this kind to an international organization. Its role is to provide advice, guidance and recommendations to ODIHR and, through ODIHR, to the OSCE participating States on matters pertaining to human trafficking.

ISTAC also provides guidance to survivor leaders on the tools necessary to foster the growth of national and international survivor networks, while promoting the standardization of survivor-related terminology within these frameworks.



Jane Lasonder, ISTAC member, Warsaw, 15 October 2025



Mariaam Bhatti, ISTAC member, Warsaw, 15 October 2025

What is an NSTAC?

ODIHR promotes the establishment of National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils (NSTACs) as a central component of effective responses to combating trafficking in human beings. Creating NSTACs helps institutionalize survivor inclusion by providing structured and sustainable mechanisms through which survivors can inform national anti-trafficking efforts. Rather than relying on ad hoc engagements, NSTACs ensure that lived experience is consistently incorporated in decision-making, thus improving the relevance and effectiveness of responses, while strengthening accountability.

To this end, NSTACs should be independent, fully resourced bodies composed of survivor leaders representing a diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities, religious and cultural backgrounds, disabilities and lived experiences. They should be mandated and enabled to advise governments and any other relevant institutions or entities on national laws, policies, protocols

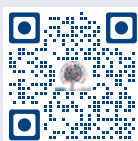
and procedures related to human trafficking, including on the establishment and functioning of National Referral Mechanisms or equivalent identification and referral systems.

“National Survivors Advisory Councils (NSTACs) ensure that survivor leaders are seated close to power. They are appointed to advise governments in the OSCE region on law and policies to address and combat human trafficking. As leaders, NSTAC members provide unique guidance, expertise and insight for governments, creating a vital bridge between authorities and civil society and giving voice to millions of victims who are silenced.” — *Jane Lasonder, Chair of ISTAC 2026-2028*

An NSTAC can also inform service delivery, procedures, stakeholder education and training as well as frontline support for victims and survivors.

All NSTAC members should be compensated adequately for their expertise, time and experience.

More information about ODIHR and the EEA and Norway Grants is available at:
<https://odihr.osce.org/project/665539>



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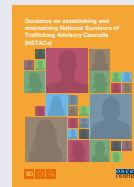
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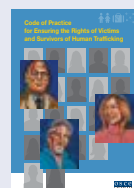
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Useful tools for participating States and practitioners



Guidance on establishing and maintaining National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils (NSTACs)



Code of Practice for Ensuring the Rights of Victims and Survivors of Human Trafficking



Survivor informed indicators for the identification of victims and survivors of trafficking in human beings



National Referral Mechanisms – Joining efforts to protect the rights of trafficked persons: A practical handbook



Guidance on Trauma-Informed National Referral Mechanisms and Responses to Human Trafficking