

SEPTEMBER 2025

# SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN TRAFFICKING RECOVERY PROGRAMS

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ECONOMIC  
EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs are often framed as tools for empowerment, offering survivors of sex trafficking opportunities to earn income, build work experience, and develop job skills within a supportive environment. While these initiatives have the potential to support long-term stability, they frequently fall short of their intended impact due to structural, ethical, and programmatic gaps or misalignment. At their best, social enterprises can serve as transitional platforms that equip survivors with tools for long-term independence. However, the structure and implementation of these programs vary widely, and many fall short of delivering the empowerment they promise.

Common challenges faced by social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs include a lack of trauma-informed integration, inadequate legal and employment protections, and program designs that prioritize organizational visibility or donor appeal over survivor well-being. In some cases, access to housing or services is directly or indirectly tied to participation in a social enterprise, creating conditional care models that mirror the control dynamics of trafficking itself. These programs often offer below-market wages, lack opportunities for meaningful skill development, and offer limited transferability of the work experience. Any of these factors can lead to survivors' frustration, exploitation, and ultimately a loss of trust in the very programs intended to support recovery.

The environments created by these enterprises may also isolate survivors in "program bubbles," limiting their ability to interact with the broader community or develop relationships outside of staff and peers. This lack of real-world exposure hinders survivors' ability to transition into mainstream employment and build independent lives. Additionally, survivors may experience blurred boundaries and power imbalances when care providers also serve as work supervisors, which can discourage feedback, suppress concerns, and foster emotional dependency.

Effective social enterprise models must begin by acknowledging that healing is not linear and that readiness for employment varies widely. Survivors should never be pressured to participate in economic programming as a condition for receiving services. Instead, survivor choice, agency, and consent must guide participation at every step. Programs must offer employment opportunities that are legally compliant, fairly compensated, and structured to build transferable, market-relevant skills. These opportunities must be flexible, culturally responsive, and grounded in trauma-informed practices that allow for adaptation based on each survivor's evolving needs.

To ensure accountability, programs must incorporate independent oversight, offer transparent grievance procedures, and involve survivors in program governance. Survivor advisory boards and regular audits can help maintain ethical standards and ensure that the voices of those most impacted remain central. Marketing practices must also reflect respect for survivor autonomy, avoiding coercive storytelling or commodification of trauma for consumer or donor engagement.

Social enterprises that align with these principles have the potential to support survivors not just in short-term employment, but in building lives rooted in autonomy, dignity, and sustainable self-sufficiency. When recovery programs center survivor-defined progress and prioritize ethical design, social enterprises can achieve their goal to become powerful tools of healing and long-term mobility.



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## THE GAPS BETWEEN INTENTION & IMPACT

Recovery from human trafficking is a multidimensional process that involves more than physical safety, mental health care, or having a safe place to stay. While these elements are critical to building a stable foundation, a survivor's journey toward healing is far from linear and constantly evolves. Effective support must address a survivor's immediate stability, while also empowering survivors to build resilience, autonomy, and self-defined success. Any support program, including social enterprises, must be designed to fit into this broader framework of care, respecting each survivor's individual pace and priorities.

A social enterprise is a mission-driven business that seeks to generate revenue while advancing a social goal, in the context of human trafficking, providing economic opportunities to survivors. These initiatives are usually structured as product or service-based businesses, operated by trafficking recovery programs or survivor support organizations. These programs are intended to create a safe and supportive work environment to help survivors earn income, build skills, and gain work experience during their journey toward healing [1][2]. Currently, most social enterprises in the anti-trafficking field are small businesses offering survivor-made candles, jewelry, or body care products.

The role of a social enterprise in trafficking recovery is both complex and controversial. At best, it can provide survivors with fair wages, transferable skills, a resume, and a path toward economic independence [1][3]. Without careful design, however, a social enterprise can quickly become an extension of control over survivors, as they link access to housing or services to their willingness to participate in the work. Social enterprises frequently offer low-value tasks that fail to lead to sustainable employment or use survivor stories as a marketing tool without informed consent or compensation [4][5]. In the anti-trafficking field, a truly ethical social enterprise must not

only operate as a self-sustaining business but also align with trauma-informed best practices that prioritize survivor choice and long-term empowerment over short-term symbolic impact or financial gain [6][7].

## THE RISK OF CONDITIONAL CARE

In some trafficking recovery programs, a survivor's acceptance, whether explicitly stated or subconsciously implied, is tied to their agreement to participate in the social enterprise, which can directly mimic trafficking dynamics and exploitation. When so many survivors face homelessness, continued abuse, or further victimization if they are unable to find placement, this dynamic can significantly compromise their ability to freely choose whether or not to take part. As survivors exit trafficking situations or other unstable circumstances and seek specialized care, they focus on meeting their more urgent needs for shelter and safety first. These external factors may influence survivors to agree to these conditions without fully considering whether the program, and the social enterprise, align with their personal goals for recovery or their current ability to participate in work at all [12][7]. The desire to empower survivors through employment is admirable, and survivors' needs for financial independence and self-sufficiency are undoubtedly crucial to their long-term success. However, the approach of social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs too often places pressure on survivors to compromise or conform to frameworks that fail to meet their individualized needs for healing.

After entering a trafficking recovery program, some survivors begin participation in the social enterprise without fully understanding or being provided with the details of the terms of their employment, such as pay rate, how paychecks are distributed, job responsibilities, required hours, or grievance procedures [1][8]. This often stems from a lack of transparency

[1] Helmsing, A. H. J. (2015). Conditions for social entrepreneurship. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 5(1), 51–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26179347>

[2] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswve.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

[3] Smith, C. (2022). Economic barriers facing survivors of trafficking. *Human Trafficking Search, Freedom United*. <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/economic-barriers-facing-survivors-of-trafficking/>

[4] Melander, C., Charm, S., Vollinger, L., D'Arcangelo, B., Pfeffer, R., Ouya, C., Hang U., Roseborough, D., & Coleman, L. (2023). Economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking: A guide for anti-trafficking service providers. *OPRE Brief # 2023-XX*, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[5] Pinkston, L.M. (n.d.). Profitable & sustainable freedom business: A for-profit/non-profit hybrid model. *Freedom Business Alliance*. <https://www.freedombusinessalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Sustainable-and-Scalable-Models-for-Profitable-Freedom-Businesses-04.pdf>

[6] Surtees, R. & de Kerchove, F. (2014). Who funds re/integration? Ensuring sustainable services for trafficking victims. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, (3). <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121434df>

[7] Lagon, M. P. (2015). Traits of Transformative Anti-Trafficking Partnerships. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1008883>

[8] Jumarali, S. N., Nnawulezi, N., Royson, S., Lippy, C., Rivera, A. N., & Toopet, T. (2021). Participatory Research Engagement of Vulnerable Populations: Employing Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Approaches. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.24414>



from the program in communicating the social enterprise expectations to residents in the program. They may believe that they have to accept all the stated terms to maintain access to the other aspects of the program, leaving them feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place [9][10]. Over time, survivors may become frustrated, feel manipulated or taken advantage of, or lose trust in the program's ability to meet their actual needs for healing support. In extreme cases, this dynamic of conditional access to care can replicate the coercive dynamics of trafficking situations, deeply impacting survivors' abilities to move out of survival mode and truly build self-sufficiency. While programs may not intend for their social enterprises or their acceptance processes to be coercive, intention cannot negate the practical effect that it has on survivors.

Furthermore, the structure of the social enterprise, including its compensation design and participation expectations, can be particularly difficult for survivors to fully evaluate during the admission process, due to being in a state of fight or flight, and being desperate to get out of their situation [11][12]. This is especially damaging in cases where compensation for participation in the program's social enterprise is provided in the form of stipends, training allowances, or classifications like "therapeutic work", rather than wages that align with or exceed legal minimums [12][13]. This approach is usually adopted with the intent of emphasizing personal growth and skill development over the financial success of the program, but it can also result in survivors being paid less than minimum wage or receiving a below-market rate for comparable work in the open market, which is ultimately exploitation.

The concept of "therapeutic work" itself reflects a well-meaning belief that structured, purposeful activity can support recovery. In many cases, it is true that routine and competency building can be valuable components of healing. At the same time, if this work brings direct benefits to the program or produces goods for sale, ethical considerations around fair compensation and worker rights remain relevant. Without safeguards and transparency, there is a risk that survivors' contributions may not translate into meaningful, personal

economic progress, which can inadvertently extend the survivor's dependency on the program rather than promote long-term self-sufficiency [10][14]. For survivors, being expected to work without fair compensation may echo the dynamics they experienced during trafficking, where their exploitation benefited others far more than it benefited them. Balancing these considerations requires thoughtful program design that ensures that survivor well-being and agency remain priorities, while still recognizing the value that economic empowerment and competency can bring to their recovery.

## A LACK OF TRAUMA-INFORMED INTEGRATION

The structure and demands of some social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs are not adapted to the complex realities of recovery from trauma. Many of the products created in these programs require intricate or high-pressure processes, assigned to survivors without adequate consideration for the cognitive, emotional, or physical effects of trauma on their ability to carry out the tasks. These effects often include difficulty concentrating, especially for long periods of time, and remembering detailed instructions. Impaired executive function and heightened startle responses are also symptoms of trauma [15][16]. The hours, productivity expectations, and complexity of the work may exceed the readiness of survivors, especially those who have just arrived at the program. This mismatch can result in heightened stress, shame, or disengagement responses. In the first stages of healing, when establishing safety, a sense of control, and baseline emotional regulation are primary needs [14][16], participation in a social enterprise can be extremely overwhelming for survivors.

In some cases, the negative impact of these demands on survivors is magnified by an underlying expectation to demonstrate their progress toward healing through their productivity in the social enterprise. This can shift the work from being a supportive, empowering complement to survivors' recovery into a benchmark for success, which may minimize the effort of survivors whose journey is moving at a slower pace or whose priorities are mental well-being, physical rehabilitation,

[9] Melander, C., Charm, S., Vollinger, L., D'Arcangelo, B., Pfeffer, R., Ouya, C., Hang U., Roseborough, D. & Coleman, L. (2023). Economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking: A guide for anti-trafficking service providers. OPRE Brief # 2023-XX, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[10] Lagon, M. P. (2015). Traits of Transformative Anti-Trafficking Partnerships. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1008883>

[11] Helmsing, A. H. J. (2015). Conditions for social entrepreneurship. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 5(1), 51–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26179347>

[12] Jumarali, S. N., Nnawulezi, N., Royson, S., Lippy, C., Rivera, A. N., & Toopet, T. (2021). Participatory Research Engagement of Vulnerable Populations: Employing Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Approaches. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.24414>

[13] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswve.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

[14] Survivor engagement in the anti-trafficking field: History, lessons learned, and looking forward. (2023). Office to Monitor & Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/engaging-survivors-of-human-trafficking-2/>

[15] A survivor-defined framework for economic empowerment. (n.d.). Eleison Foundation. <https://eleisonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Survivor-defined-framework-for-economic-empowerment.pdf>

[16] Bull, M. & Ridley-Duff, R. (2019). Towards an appreciation of ethics in social enterprise business models. *J Bus Ethics*, 159. 619–634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3794-5>



or rebuilding trust and relationships [17][18]. Survivors who struggle to meet expectations in a social enterprise setting may internalize a sense of failure, even if they are making strides in non-work-related areas of recovery. This is especially damaging in programs where care staff also function as supervisors in the social enterprise, which, at minimum, subconsciously ties a survivor's progress toward healing with their work productivity. This model risks reinforcing harmful messages that survivors may already believe as a result of their victimization: that their value is tied to output, that struggle is equivalent to failure, or that rest reflects weakness. By framing success in the context of work and productivity, social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs can promote harmful standards and devalue other, arguably more important, markers of healing.

Social enterprises may also fail to accommodate a survivor's trafficking experience. Inflexible or required work hours can create challenges for survivors managing trauma responses or anxiety about navigating expectations. For some, the dynamic of authority figures and workplace relationships can bring up memories of past control or exploitation, making consistent participation difficult. When programs require survivors to participate in social enterprises regardless of these challenges, survivors may face the choice of compromising their healing process or risking their place or acceptance in the program altogether. In these situations, the intended benefits of social enterprises can be far overshadowed by stress, setbacks, and diminished trust in the program's capacity to support survivors' well-being and empowerment [19].

Another problematic practice in some social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs is the withholding of wages until survivors complete the program. While this policy may be presented as an incentive to encourage engagement or promote stability, this model can easily mirror the types of control and financial abuse that are common in trafficking situations. Delaying compensation can be damaging in multiple ways, including removing survivors' agency over their earnings, risking economic dependency, and reinforcing a power imbalance between programs and participants. In situations where a survivor exits a program early or on unfavorable terms, they may lose access to the wages they rightfully earned, adding a layer of financial coercion and ongoing control. This approach is not only contradictory to trauma-

informed and ethical best practices but also compromises survivor well-being and risks further traumatization.

In some programs, survivors receive no compensation for their participation in the social enterprise. Instead, the financial value of their labor is internally allocated to cover the cost of room and board, therapy, or other program expenses. While these programs may consider this practice to simply be an element of a comprehensive care model, it ultimately commodifies survivor labor without pay and obscures ethical lines between care and control. Survivors in these situations are left to work without compensation under the justification that their needs are being met — an arrangement that echoes many trafficking dynamics. This undermines survivors' right to fair compensation, breaks labor laws, and reinforces harmful narratives that survivors must earn their keep. Economic empowerment cannot be achieved through social enterprises when survivors are not treated as employees, but recipients of charity whose contributions are quietly monetized by the programs meant to support them.

While trafficking recovery programs may not intend for the structure of their social enterprise to create barriers for survivors, the absence of trauma-informed integration frequently decreases the positive impact that the initiative might otherwise have. By contrast, programs that tailor job roles to an individual's current capacity, allow gradual skill-building, prioritize survivor agency and willing participation, and utilize ethical compensation practices can create an empowering environment that genuinely contributes to healing.

## A FOCUS ON NON-TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Many social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs focus heavily on producing goods like candles, jewelry, or self-care products. While these items can be relatively easy to make in small-scale businesses, they often offer minimal opportunities for advancement or competitive earning potential in the job market outside of the program [20][21]. Without strong and sustained demand, these products will generate limited revenue for the enterprise and are unlikely to equip survivors with skills that can be transferred to other industries.

In many cases, these types of social enterprises fail to consider the interests, aptitudes, or long-term career goals of the

[17--7] A survivor-defined framework for economic empowerment. (n.d.). Eleison Foundation. <https://eleisonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Survivor-defined-framework-for-economic-empowerment.pdf>

[18--11] Cruz, E. (2021). 'We need dignified jobs': How a human trafficking survivor sparked a social enterprise to empower victims of exploitation. NextBillion. <https://nextbillion.net/jobs-human-trafficking-social-enterprise-empower-victims/>

[19--14] Survivor engagement in the anti-trafficking field: History, lessons learned, and looking forward. (2023). Office to Monitor & Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/engaging-survivors-of-human-trafficking-2/>

[20--3] Helmsing, A. H. J. (2015). Conditions for social entrepreneurship. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 5(1), 51-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26179347>

[21--13] Collaboration to increase access to employment opportunities for survivors of human trafficking and domestic and sexual violence. (n.d.). Futures Without Violence. <https://ta2ta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/1176-collaboration-for-access-to-employment-ht-dv-sa.pdf>



survivors themselves [22][23]. As a result, survivors may be expected or required to contribute to initiatives that have no relation to their plans for supporting themselves after leaving the program, even though social enterprises are often framed as pathways to economic self-sufficiency or “job readiness” training. These frameworks often miss valuable opportunities to empower survivors to discover and pursue employment that aligns with their goals for the future.

Additionally, job training in social enterprise settings is typically narrowly focused on specific products, without incorporating the development of transferable skills like digital literacy, customer services, project management, or vocational trades [23][24]. For survivors without employment experience, the absence of this skill development can significantly reduce their ability to navigate the modern job market, adapt to a new work environment, or pursue further education and job preparation. Many social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs, despite their design as employment training, only function as short-term work opportunities, rather than genuine pathways to economic self-sufficiency and independence.

## A LACK OF REAL-WORLD PREPARATION

Some trafficking recovery programs operate social enterprises in ways that unintentionally create “program bubbles”, where survivors spend most or all of their time at the program’s physical location and interact primarily with staff and peers [22][23]. While a contained environment provides important safety and consistency, especially for survivors in the first stages of recovery, a program bubble can significantly limit opportunities for survivors to engage with the broader community, build healthy relationships, and adjust to everyday environments outside of the program’s structure. This is an important consideration for trafficking recovery programs with social enterprises, which are intended to provide survivors with opportunities to gain employment experience and transition more easily into life outside the program. If the structure of a program instead limits survivors’ access to interacting with the broader community, the eventual transition to independent living can be far more challenging.

In addition to the challenges of program bubbles, some social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs are not legally established as businesses, which prevents them from offering survivors formal employment records or references. Beyond the ethical concerns of operating businesses outside of legal structures, these systems fail to truly equip survivors for long-

term participation in the workforce. Survivors may be compensated with stipends or gift cards at a rate below minimum wage, only to discover later that they cannot list the experience on a resume or request a recommendation letter for other employment due to the social enterprise’s lack of legal standing as a business. This practice not only diminishes the legitimacy of the social enterprise, but can also reinforce survivors’ economic vulnerability and limit their access to future employment opportunities.

Another consequence of program bubbles is a lack of exposure to workplace norms, professional boundaries and expectations, and conflict resolution practices that are necessary elements of typical employment settings [23]. In a trafficking-related social enterprise, expectations are likely adjusted for therapeutic and trauma-informed purposes, and conflicts may be handled in different ways from standard workplace procedures. This is especially true for situations in which the work supervisor has other roles in the trafficking recovery program, such as a program director also running the social enterprise. Crossover in authority structures can add extra layers to the work dynamic that are not typically present in workplaces, and may present ethical concerns about power and authority. While a transitional, more supportive work environment may be an important step for many survivors re-entering the workforce, the current model of many social enterprises in the anti-trafficking field fails to adequately prepare survivors for the dynamics, accountability standards, and interpersonal relationships they are likely to encounter in typical jobs.

In many cases, survivors have few opportunities to apply their skills in typical employment settings with external employers before leaving a trafficking recovery program [24][25]. Without this bridge, they often face a steep learning curve when entering the broader job market, where they are expected to adapt quickly, manage responsibilities independently, and advocate for themselves in unfamiliar environments with little accommodation for the impact of trauma. This challenge is amplified when a survivor’s completion of a trafficking recovery program is followed by a quick transition to independent living, with little or no phased re-entry period [22] [23]. Without gradual exposure to the demands and unpredictability of the outside world, survivors may experience setbacks that could have been mitigated with more intentional preparation. Social enterprises are often framed as the solution to this, but program bubbles regularly disrupt the actual benefits of participation to survivors.

[22] Bull, M. & Ridley-Duff, R. (2019). Towards an appreciation of ethics in social enterprise business models. *J Bus Ethics*, 159. 619-634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3794-5>

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## DUAL RELATIONSHIPS & POWER IMBALANCES

In some situations, the same staff members responsible for providing care and support to survivors in the trafficking recovery program also hold supervisory authority over their participation in the social enterprise [26][27]. Understaffing and financial limitations certainly contribute to these arrangements, but they can easily create dual relationships in which the boundaries between therapeutic and workplace relationships become blurred.

Dual relationships occur when a professional engages with the same individual in two or more roles that have different and potentially conflicting expectations, responsibilities, and/or power dynamics. In the context of trafficking recovery programs, this can mean that the same staff member is both a survivor's caregiver and their employment supervisor within a social enterprise. While dual relationships are not inherently problematic or unethical, they can become so when the overlapping roles create a conflict of interest or a power imbalance that harms the survivor's well-being or compromises professional boundaries. This dynamic can place survivors in vulnerable positions, as the people evaluating their work performance also have influence over whether they can remain in the program or continue receiving services [28].

Dual relationships make it difficult for survivors to raise concerns or grievances about their work environment. When a survivor fears that sharing their concerns or experiences could jeopardize their access to housing, therapy, or key services, they may choose to remain silent rather than take the risk [29] [30]. This hesitance can minimize real issues in social enterprises and trafficking recovery programs, especially those that lack clear, accessible grievance procedures that operate independently of the staff members involved [31][32]. When speaking up about inequitable or exploitative practices in social

enterprises may cost them access to housing and therapy, and reporting this issue may have similar consequences, survivors are left with no safe way to advocate for themselves.

Additionally, dual relationships can foster emotional dependence, particularly in cases where survivors live in a program bubble or have limited external support networks. The blending of therapeutic care and employment can create a power imbalance, pressuring survivors to conform to their supervisor's expectations not only to maintain their job and access to the program, but also to preserve the relationships that are supporting their recovery [33]. Over time, this dependence can limit survivors' capacity to make independent decisions, advocate for themselves in conflicts, or transition successfully into external workplaces with different supervisory structures.

## MISUSE OF MARKETING NARRATIVES

In some trafficking recovery programs, marketing and fundraising strategies draw heavily on survivor stories to promote the organization's mission. While this practice is not inherently harmful and may be empowering for individual survivors who voluntarily participate, problems can arise when survivor participation occurs without fully informed, revocable consent [34][35][36]. Survivors may agree to share their personal history without understanding how their information will be used, how widely it will be distributed, or that they have the right to withdraw consent at any time. This is especially concerning in the context of social enterprises, where the potential consequences of a survivor refusing to share their story publicly can affect their employment as well as their access to the program. For social enterprises that also operate in program bubbles and include dual relationships, the power imbalances, social structure, and isolation of the initiative itself may add a level of subconscious coercion that

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[29] A survivor-defined framework for economic empowerment. (n.d.). Eleison Foundation. <https://eleisonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Survivor-defined-framework-for-economic-empowerment.pdf>

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[31] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswve.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

[32] Smith, C. (2022). Economic barriers facing survivors of trafficking. *Human Trafficking Search, Freedom United*. <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/economic-barriers-facing-survivors-of-trafficking/>

[33] Lagon, M. P. (2015). Traits of Transformative Anti-Trafficking Partnerships. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1008883>

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[36] Melander, C., Charm, S., Vollinger, L., D'Arcangelo, B., Pfeffer, R., Ouya, C., Hang U., Roseborough, D. & Coleman, L. (2023). Understanding key concepts of economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking. OPRE Brief # 2023-XX, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/understanding-key-concepts-economic-empowerment-people-who-have-experienced-human>





means a survivor's participation is never truly voluntary.

Marketing narratives can also cross into exploitation when they rely on emotional appeals that commodify the trauma of trafficking survivors to attract donors or boost product sales [37][38]. In these cases, the survivor's story is used as a marketing tactic designed to evoke sympathy or urgency from the audience, rather than a celebration of resilience and a genuine call to action. Social enterprises may use this type of marketing to sell products by labeling them as “survivor-made”. While the intention of this strategy is often to connect customers with a meaningful cause and generate financial support for trafficking recovery programs, it can inadvertently reduce complex lived experiences to a marketing label and shift the focus from survivors themselves to the program. These tactics risk reducing survivors to symbols of victimhood rather than accurately portraying them as whole individuals with agency, resilience, and diversity.

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# SUPPORTING, NOT SHAPING, SURVIVOR EMPOWERMENT

For social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs to truly foster survivor empowerment, they must prioritize survivor choice, agency, and self-determination over prescriptive models of success or progress. Too often, well-intended program structures set narrow expectations for what recovery looks like, tying access to services or opportunities to a survivor's participation in a few activities or career paths. This approach risks replicating control dynamics that survivors experienced in trafficking situations, even as it tries to provide stability and growth.

Effective models for survivor empowerment should focus on creating flexible, trauma-informed systems that prioritize individual survivors' goals, readiness, and evolving needs for support. By encouraging survivors to define their own measures of success, whether that includes pursuing a certain type of work or not, programs can promote long-term resilience and independence without shaping those outcomes to fit their own ideals.

## CENTERING SURVIVOR CHOICE

Effective social enterprises in trafficking recovery must be founded on a clear commitment to survivor agency, with all forms of participation being completely voluntary. Programs must take intentional action to prevent survivors from experiencing consequences, whether direct or implied, for choosing not to take part in a social enterprise [39][40]. This includes being proactive about the subconscious ways program structure or staff can communicate that refusal to participate will negatively impact a survivor's opportunities or experience in the program. Creating truly empowering frameworks requires trafficking recovery programs to remove any sense of obligation or pressure, and ensure that participation in a social enterprise is offered to survivors as an available tool, not a requirement for support.

A survivor's experience in a trafficking recovery program should reflect a collaborative, person-centered approach. They

should have the opportunity to define and communicate their own goals and priorities for healing, which may span employment, education, parenting, emotional wellness, stable mental health, coping skills, or long-term independence. Not every survivor will have the same aspirations for life outside of the program, and organizations must be prepared to support the trajectory of each survivor. Recovery plans that center survivor voices, rather than staff expectations or organizational benchmarks, will better support genuine growth and personal ownership of survivors' healing processes [41][42].

A survivor-centered approach is especially important for trafficking recovery programs with social enterprises. These frameworks risk placing far too much value on employment and adherence to the expectations of the social enterprise as indicators of progress or success for survivors' healing. Survivors may prioritize physical or mental health, rebuilding relationships, spiritual healing, or simply achieving a feeling of safety and security above their ability to work. Many survivors need space to explore what autonomy and agency look like for them before taking on the responsibilities of a job. When programs push toward a singular version of success, commonly tied to productivity, willingness to meet expectations, or skill building, they are far more likely to overlook or invalidate other outcomes that are equally or more important in an individual survivor's recovery [43][44].

## PRIORITIZING ETHICAL BUSINESS

To truly foster survivor empowerment, social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs must align to ethical labor standards and operate with transparency. This includes compensation structures, which should reflect not only the time and effort of survivors participating in the social enterprise, but also fair market rates. Social enterprises that describe the work as therapeutic in order to offer wages far below market rate, or frame compensation as secondary to recovery goals, undermine the economic value and stability that they are intended to promote [45][46]. Fair pay and clear

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[45] Helmsing, A. H. J. (2015). Conditions for social entrepreneurship. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 5(1), 51–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26179347>

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boundaries between work and therapeutic care are essential to affirming the dignity and value of survivor labor and helping survivors build strong expectations for healthy employment outside of the program.

Sustainability is another key ethical concern for social enterprises. Programs that rely heavily on short-term grants or donor-driven marketing campaigns can face pressure to prioritize fundraising goals over survivor well-being, resulting in greater emphasis on “survivor-made” labels and public promotion of survivor involvement. However, social enterprises that depend on the participation of survivors to sell products or make a profit have a significant risk of unintentionally exploiting them. If the business could not be successful with workers who are not survivors, then it is likely too dependent on a public narrative about survivor empowerment [47]. Developing a sustainable revenue model grounded in competitive products and pricing allows social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs to operate with or without survivor participation, providing much-needed flexibility over time as the number of survivors who choose to be involved fluctuates. Programs that are unable to achieve this standard of independence and flexibility should consider alternative models of social enterprise, or reconsider whether including a social enterprise in their framework is helpful to achieving their goal of survivor economic empowerment.

All trafficking recovery programs operating social enterprises should publish regular reports to show how profits are used and how survivor workers benefit directly from the business's success. This transparency builds trust with customers, donors, and survivors themselves. It also reinforces the goal that the social enterprise exists to support the goals of survivors, not to use survivor identity to further the organization's visibility or drive donations [47][48]. When transparency and equity guide day-to-day business practices, social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs are far more likely to achieve their mission of genuine survivor empowerment.

## SUPPORTING LONG-TERM MOBILITY

Social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs have the potential to provide more than short-term work opportunities to survivors. When carefully designed, they can serve as

launchpads for long-term economic opportunity for survivors by focusing on skills that are relevant and transferable in today's job market and aligned with each survivor's personal goals [49][50]. However, when programs have a narrow focus on a certain type of work or fail to consider whether those skills are valuable in other forms of employment, they fall short of realizing that potential.

Social enterprises should also be structured around clear pathways to external employment. While internal work within the program can be valuable for practicing job readiness, adhering to schedules, and communicating in workplaces, social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs, by nature, do not reflect the practices of typical employers. Without opportunities to work outside the program, survivors' progress toward economic independence will stagnate. Trafficking recovery programs that support survivors in transitioning into roles with external employers are most beneficial to survivors, as they gain access to work across a variety of sectors and develop stronger interpersonal skills through regular communication with people outside of program staff and other survivors [51][52]. This approach could include forming partnerships with local businesses, offering job shadowing, or arranging internships.

This is especially important for organizations where survivors live in program bubbles with limited outside contact. In these environments, exposure to external work environments plays a critical role in allowing survivors to gradually adjust to life beyond the program without an unsupported transition into independence. Without structured, time-limited opportunities to interact with supervisors, coworkers, and the general public in a range of settings, survivors may struggle to adapt to unfamiliar communication styles, expectations, conflict, or social dynamics. These environments also help survivors practice setting boundaries, utilize coping skills, and manage trauma responses, while being able to return to the familiar structure of the program to rest. Creating intentional bridges between the protective space of the program and an external workplace helps survivors develop a sense of competence grounded in real-world, transferable experience.

Comprehensive career development should also include access to foundational support like higher education, financial literacy classes, and leadership training. Depending on their experience,

[47] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswe.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

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survivors may need to complete a GED, earn a college degree, or acquire certifications to prepare to pursue a chosen career. Some survivors may benefit from understanding how to budget, build credit, or save for long-term financial stability. Leadership training can further support survivors in building confidence, setting goals, and participating in advocacy or peer mentoring if they choose to do so [53][54]. Trafficking survivors enter recovery programs with highly variable levels of education, life experience, and preparation for independent living, and the opportunities offered to them should support their ability to gain the additional skills or qualifications needed to achieve their self-determined goals for the future.

Trafficking recovery programs should also recognize and support survivors who are interested in self-employment or entrepreneurship. Not all survivors will be prepared for or interested in traditional forms of employment, and some may prefer the autonomy and flexibility of starting their own business. Programs can provide mentorship and guidance, as well as seek opportunities for external mentorship, to help these survivors build a strong foundation of skills to support their long-term success [54][55]. When training and development opportunities reflect both the agency of survivors and the realities of the job market, trafficking recovery programs can build frameworks that equip survivors to develop sustainable, fulfilling futures on their own terms.

However, before social enterprise engagement can serve as a tool for survivors' economic mobility, it must be considered within the broader context of their individual recovery. Not all survivors will be ready to immediately participate in social enterprise, and the initial focus must be on stabilization, rest, and acclimation. Healing is not linear, and recovery programs must recognize that engagement in social enterprise is not a one-size-fits-all intervention. Survivor-centered approaches must honor individual timelines, needs, and capacities to ensure that any employment or skill-building component of a trafficking recovery program is offered as a truly supportive next step when a survivor is ready to pursue it.

## FOCUSING ON TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Effectively supporting the recovery and long-term success of

trafficking survivors requires social enterprises to focus on trauma-informed care at every level. Programs must recognize that trauma impacts everyone differently, but research has shown it can have significant impacts on memory, focus, emotional regulation, and physical ability that significantly interfere with traditional models of work. While some survivors may develop the skills and abilities necessary to succeed in typical job structures, others may be prevented from doing so by the psychological, emotional, or physical effects of their lived experiences. Trafficking recovery programs with social enterprises should integrate flexible scheduling, accommodations for mental health needs, and choice-based assignments that empower survivors to participate in ways that align with their current capacity [55][56][57]. Offering individualized options for how and when work is completed can reduce the pressure that survivors feel to measure up to a certain standard and encourage them to share when adjustments need to be made.

Cultural competence is equally essential. Trafficking survivors represent a wide range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and social backgrounds, and their lived experiences can substantially affect how they interact with care systems, work, and therapeutic support. Programs that intentionally reflect the diversity of survivors through culturally relevant services, language accessibility, regular staff training, and inclusive workplace practices are far more equipped to foster survivors' sense of belonging and safety [54][58]. When survivors feel respected and understood as individuals, they are more likely to engage with services and experience participation in a social enterprise as a positive support for their recovery. Social enterprises that overlook the significance of cultural context may unintentionally reinforce survivors' feelings of exclusion or misunderstanding. Embedding culturally responsive practices into daily participation, supervision, and team culture will help programs ensure that their social enterprises are supportive and affirming environments for survivors.

Additionally, marketing strategies for social enterprises must incorporate trauma-informed and survivor-informed practices. Campaigns that rely on personal storytelling or visual imagery can retraumatize survivors, particularly when they feel pressured to share more than they are comfortable with [59].

[53] Helmsing, A. H. J. (2015). Conditions for social entrepreneurship. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 5(1), 51–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26179347>

[54] Smith, C. (2022). Economic barriers facing survivors of trafficking. *Human Trafficking Search, Freedom United*. <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/economic-barriers-facing-survivors-of-trafficking/>

[55] Bull, M. & Ridley-Duff, R. (2019). Towards an appreciation of ethics in social enterprise business models. *J Bus Ethics*, 159, 619–634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3794-5>

[56] A survivor-defined framework for economic empowerment. (n.d.). Eleison Foundation. <https://eleisonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Survivor-defined-framework-for-economic-empowerment.pdf>

[57] Survivor engagement in the anti-trafficking field: History, lessons learned, and looking forward. (2023). Office to Monitor & Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/engaging-survivors-of-human-trafficking-2/>

[58] Cruz, E. (2021). 'We need dignified jobs': How a human trafficking survivor sparked a social enterprise to empower victims of exploitation. *NextBillion*. <https://nextbillion.net/jobs-human-trafficking-social-enterprise-empower-victims/>

[59] Melander, C., Charm, S., Vollinger, L., D'Arcangelo, B., Pfeffer, R., Ouya, C., Hang U., Roseborough, D. & Coleman, L. (2023). Economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking: A guide for anti-trafficking service providers. *OPRE Brief # 2023-XX*, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



In extreme cases, survivors may feel that programs take advantage of them in order to use their stories, or that the publicized version of their story does not accurately reflect their experiences [60]. All trafficking recovery programs, but especially those that run social enterprises for profit, should avoid using survivor stories or images in any promotional materials without fully informed, revocable consent, with regularly reviewed marketing practices to ensure that they are not exploitative or harmful.

## INTEGRATING ACCOUNTABILITY & OVERSIGHT

Strong systems of accountability are essential to ensuring that social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs are truly ethical and survivor-centered. An organization's commitment to fair labor standards and trauma-informed practices must be reinforced by regular independent audits that verify workplace conditions, pay equity, informed consent, and compliance with relevant labor laws [61][62]. These audits must be conducted by neutral, professional third parties and include a comprehensive framework for survivor feedback to assess whether official policies are effectively implemented in daily practice. Transparency in this process helps programs maintain their credibility and prevent their social enterprise structure from replicating power imbalances, which can reflect the same dynamics that survivors experienced in trafficking situations.

Survivor advisory boards should also play an engaged, formal role in shaping the policies and operations of social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs. Rather than functioning only as symbolic participants, survivor advisors should have access to all information related to the social enterprises' operations, structure, and survivor grievances to be equipped to fully understand the dynamics of the business and ensure that survivors are truly empowered through their participation in it. Survivor advisors must have decision-making influence and be compensated for their time and expertise [63][64]. Their lived experience offers critical insight into how seemingly neutral policies may negatively impact survivors in practice and helps trafficking recovery programs remain grounded in the real needs of survivors. Advisory boards are also a key protective mechanism for identifying blind spots in social enterprises, ensuring that survivor voices and priorities remain central as the initiative grows and evolves.

In addition to internal governance and state business laws and regulations, social enterprises may benefit from pursuing third-party certifications to externally validate their adherence to ethical, trauma-informed, and labor-conscious standards. These certifications can demonstrate to donors, customers, and partners that the organization is committed to maintaining quality and integrity across its business activities [61], and provide an external evaluation of their social enterprise to prevent mission drift. When partnered with regular internal evaluations and ongoing improvement efforts, certifications can help trafficking recovery programs commit to strong labor practices and ethical standards.

[60] Melander, C., Charm, S., Vollinger, L., D'Arcangelo, B., Pfeffer, R., Ouya, C., Hang U., Roseborough, D. & Coleman, L. (2023). Understanding key concepts of economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking. OPRE Brief # 2023-XX, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/understanding-key-concepts-economic-empowerment-people-who-have-experienced-human>

[61] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswve.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

[62] Smith, C. (2022). Economic barriers facing survivors of trafficking. *Human Trafficking Search*, Freedom United. <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/economic-barriers-facing-survivors-of-trafficking/>

[63] Bielefeld, W. (2009). Issues in social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 15(1), 69–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40215838>

[64] The importance of criminal record relief for trafficking survivors. (n.d.). HTI Labs. <https://htilabs.org/blog/criminal-record-relief-trafficking-survivors/>



# BUILDING SURVIVOR-CENTERED ENTERPRISE MODELS

For social enterprises to function as effective tools in recovery from human trafficking, they must be structured around the needs, rights, and long-term goals of survivors, not around organizational financial goals or public visibility. Survivors deserve access to restorative care without being required to participate in social enterprises, and those who choose to participate deserve access to safe, dignified work that respects their agency, accommodates their healing process, and supports their perspective on success. This requires intentional program design founded in trauma-informed best practices, ethical labor standards, and meaningful accountability.

The following recommendations offer a framework for refining operating models for social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs to create opportunities for real choice, growth, and long-term stability for survivors, while avoiding the potential harms that arise when economic programming becomes prescriptive or disconnected from survivors' experiences.

## PROGRAM DESIGN & STRUCTURE

The design of a social enterprise in a trafficking recovery program plays a critical role in shaping survivor experience. Effective design must include clear boundaries between caregiving and employment supervision roles, with the staff members who supervise survivors' work performance having different roles from those who provide housing, counseling, or therapeutic services [65][66]. Distinct positions of authority and caregiving are incredibly important in preventing dual relationships, conflicts of interest, and power imbalances that undermine trust and make it difficult for survivors to raise concerns about their experience in the program. Employment supervisors should be separate from care teams and trained in trauma-informed management practices that prioritize psychological safety, emotional regulation, and supportive communication [67][68].

Program design should also account for the fact that healing and

work readiness do not follow a linear or uniform timeline, and may not have a correlation to each other. Survivors need space to make their own decisions about their emotional and physical capacity to participate in a social enterprise. Assessments of readiness for employment should be fully collaborative and rooted in trauma-informed tools that emphasize the agency of the survivor rather than compliance with a standard timeline [69][70]. Social enterprises should offer flexible entry and exit practices, allowing survivors to pause or change their level of engagement with the enterprise without affecting their access to other programming, such as housing or therapy [67]. These options are particularly important in creating a work environment that is truly supportive and responsive to the variable, individualized needs of survivors during their recovery.

Most importantly, trafficking recovery programs must adopt a broad and inclusive definition of success. Too many programs expect all survivors to follow the same path to recovery without accounting for different values and goals for the future, such as becoming a social worker, therapist, or survivor leader in the anti-trafficking field. However, these programs fail to recognize other meaningful and legitimate recovery goals, like achieving stable emotional well-being, building a safe, self-sufficient life, establishing healthy friendships, or reconnecting with family [71] [72]. Employment, especially in the anti-trafficking field, is a valuable goal for some survivors, but it should not be treated as the only indicator of progress. Social enterprise models that prioritize public-facing advocacy roles or organizational leadership can reinforce the "perfect victim" narrative, where a survivor's worth is measured by visibility or their contribution to the field [71][72]. This framework excludes survivors who have different priorities, such as private family life, creative pursuits, or careers outside of the anti-trafficking space. Survivors who choose these alternatives deserve equal support. When programs shift their perspective from rigid expectations and embrace diverse, self-defined measures of success, they affirm the inherent dignity and individuality of each person they serve.

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[67] Bull, M. & Ridley-Duff, R. (2019). Towards an appreciation of ethics in social enterprise business models. *J Bus Ethics*, 159, 619–634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3794-5>

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[71] Lagon, M. P. (2015). Traits of Transformative Anti-Trafficking Partnerships. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1008883>

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## EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Social enterprises that employ survivors of human trafficking must adhere to the same standards of fairness and professionalism expected in any ethical workplace. Survivors should be offered written employment agreements that clearly outline expectations, responsibilities, and protections. These contracts must be accessible, written in plain language, and reviewed with survivors to ensure that they fully understand their participation and their right to refuse [73][74]. Key details, such as work hours, wages, payment processes, grievance procedures, and employment rights, should be explicitly stated to prevent confusion and any potential coercive effects [75]. Transparency in this process not only establishes trust, but also reinforces a survivor's right to informed decision-making and self-advocacy in the workplace.

Employment within social enterprises should also prepare survivors for long-term opportunities by building skills that are both valuable in the current job market and reflective of the survivor's individual goals. This is often best accomplished through establishing partnerships with external businesses in the local community, rather than focusing solely on an in-house social enterprise. When trafficking recovery programs partner with employers across a wide range of industries, they can offer a far wider variety of opportunities to survivors through internships, mentorships, job shadowing, or transitional placements that bring real-world experience and help survivors apply their skills outside the supportive environment of the program. Vetted partnerships can help programs balance survivors' need for a trauma-informed work environment while capitalizing on the benefits of external work opportunities. Exposure to different workplaces helps survivors gain confidence in their abilities, reinforces professional expectations, and builds on their strengths and interests for employment after leaving the program. Programs that proactively cultivate external work opportunities give survivors more choice, more mobility, and a stronger foundation for a self-sufficient life.

Collaborations with local businesses can also create direct opportunities for long-term employment. When organizations take the time to build relationships with vetted employers who understand the value of hiring survivors, they create safer and more supportive work environments for survivors entering the

workforce [76][77]. Programs can serve as advocates and intermediaries, helping both the employer and the survivor navigate workplace expectations, necessary accommodations, and trauma-informed communication. This added layer of support reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and helps employers provide a positive, mutually beneficial work experience to survivors.

In addition to job placements, trafficking recovery programs should invest time in establishing mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities. Partnering with industry professionals in a survivor's field of interest provides a structured environment for building confidence, skills, and professional networks, which can be extremely valuable as survivors leave the program and seek long-term employment [77][78]. Apprenticeship models that include clear milestones and progression pathways give survivors the opportunity to build expertise gradually and learn from established professionals [74]. These hands-on learning relationships both reinforce a survivor's skill development and foster a greater sense of competence and ability to pursue a specific career path in the long term.

When employment practices are grounded in clarity, fairness, and real-world applicability, social enterprises become platforms for sustainable empowerment, rather than short-term solutions. Survivors are encouraged to gain the financial resources, tools, experience, and confidence necessary to pursue a wide variety of work that aligns with their goals for the future. Fair wages, transparent contracts, and pathways to diverse employment options reflect a commitment to dignity and choice in every aspect of a survivor's work experience in trafficking recovery programs and social enterprises. By focusing on long-term impact, programs can support survivors' legitimate economic empowerment and ability to achieve self-defined success.

## MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS POLICIES

All marketing and communications strategies used by trafficking recovery programs and any associated social enterprises must be grounded in ethical, transparent, and survivor-centered best practices. Survivors should never be expected or required to participate in marketing efforts as a

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[74] Mayer, L.M. (2025). Professional boundaries in dual relationships: A social work dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, 2(2). <https://www.jswve.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/10-002-205-JSWVE-2005.pdf>

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[77] Jumarali, S. N., Nnawulezi, N., Royson, S., Lippy, C., Rivera, A. N., & Toopet, T. (2021). Participatory Research Engagement of Vulnerable Populations: Employing Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Approaches. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.24414>

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condition of receiving services, remaining at the program, or continuing employment in the social enterprise. Furthermore, any use of a survivor's image, name, personal history, or creative work must be voluntary, opt-in rather than opt-out, and revocable at any time without any consequences for their participation in the program [79][80]. Programs must be especially sensitive to the subconscious pressures to comply that survivors experience in these situations. Consent for marketing participation should be considered ongoing, not a one-time agreement, and should always include clear and accessible information about how and where a survivor's story or likeness will be used.

Ethical storytelling requires that survivors retain full control over their own narratives. Survivors should be able to review and approve all materials including their information before publishing, posting, or distribution [80][81]. This ensures that their stories are not misrepresented, sensationalized, or framed in ways that reinforce harmful or inaccurate stereotypes or one-dimensional portrayals. Survivors who do choose to share their experiences should be fully supported during that process, and their decision to refuse or withdraw consent must not jeopardize their ability to access services through the trafficking recovery program.

In the context of social enterprises or economic empowerment initiatives, organizations must take care to accurately represent the role that survivors play in the creation of goods or services sold through the enterprise. If the enterprise decides to publicize survivor involvement, marketing should clearly and honestly describe the level at which survivors participate in product design, production, or packaging [81]. Overstating survivor participation for the sake of market appeal can undermine trust and indirectly exploit the very individuals that the social enterprise is intended to support. Transparent communication around product origins and survivor contributions helps ensure that consumer interest is based on respect and authenticity, rather than emotional manipulation or commodified survivor stories.

By adopting responsible marketing and communication practices, social enterprises can demonstrate their commitment to survivor agency, prevent further victimization, and strengthen the credibility of their operations in both the social impact and commercial spheres. This commitment

encourages a more accurate, holistic public understanding of trafficking recovery as a complex, individualized process, not a simplified narrative to be packaged for consumer engagement.

## OVERSIGHT & CERTIFICATION

Consistent oversight and external evaluation are essential to ensure that social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs operate with integrity and accountability. Annual third-party audits should be conducted to assess employment practices, wage equity, workplace safety, and the overall impact of the social enterprise on survivors' well-being and long-term economic opportunities [82][83]. These audits should be conducted by independent evaluators who bring expertise in both labor standards and trauma-informed care. Making this a regular practice will help social enterprises assess the real-world impact of their approach, policies, and activities on survivors.

Trafficking recovery programs may also benefit from working directly with ethical trade groups or independent, expert monitors to verify that the conditions of their social enterprises meet or exceed the highest standards. These partnerships can offer technical guidance and a neutral lens to identify problems or risks in the social enterprise's current operations. Involving survivors in these oversight processes with external experts, whether through advisory boards, leadership positions, or participatory evaluations, will further strengthen the ability of the trafficking recovery program to incorporate best practices and recommendations from leaders in the field. When survivors have a voice in shaping enterprise standards and practices, social enterprises are far more equipped to accomplish their mission to provide economic empowerment and mobility to survivors.

One opportunity for trafficking recovery programs to seek external evaluation for their social enterprises is to apply for the Safe House Certification Economic Empowerment Badge through Safe House Project. This certification offers a comprehensive, survivor-informed assessment of social enterprise initiatives and recognizes those that successfully meet criteria for highly ethical practices and survivor-centered program design. The Economic Empowerment Badge affirms the program's quality and signals a strong public commitment to upholding best practices in economic empowerment for survivors in trafficking recovery.

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## CONCLUSION

As social enterprises continue to grow in prominence in the anti-trafficking field, it is critical to examine not just their intentions but their actual impact on trafficking survivors. While many of these initiatives are intended to promote the economic empowerment of survivors, their effectiveness depends on whether they adopt trauma-informed, ethically sound, and survivor-centered models that truly benefit survivors in the long term. For these programs to successfully empower survivors, social enterprises must shift away from one-dimensional models and toward approaches that are intentional, accountable, and founded on addressing the real needs and goals of survivors.

Genuine empowerment must be co-created with survivors through frameworks that prioritize safety, choice, dignity, and long-term mobility. Social enterprises that adhere to trauma-informed best practices, pay fair wages, offer individualized opportunities, and deeply value transparency and constant improvement represent the future of ethical practice in the anti-trafficking field. These models reject performative and symbolic narratives, focusing instead on the healing, agency, and rights of survivors to define success for themselves.

Creating these conditions requires a collective commitment. Trafficking recovery programs must design services that place survivor needs at the forefront and are responsive to changing needs. Funders must align their expectations for business performance with ethical standards that support flexibility, individualized care, and sustainable outcomes. Policymakers must strengthen protections and support oversight mechanisms that ensure social enterprises remain accountable. When every stakeholder shares responsibility for the impact of social enterprises in trafficking recovery programs, economic empowerment moves beyond being a program feature, becoming a transformative tool that affirms survivors' rights to build healing on their own terms.

The recommendations in this paper offer practical guidance for programs seeking to align their social enterprises with ethical standards and survivor-defined values. By committing to these principles, stakeholders can help build social enterprises that support true economic empowerment for survivors and contribute meaningfully to their long-term opportunities.