

Choices. Chances. Changes.

EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP
AMONGST LEADERS OF UTTHAN AND SAANS

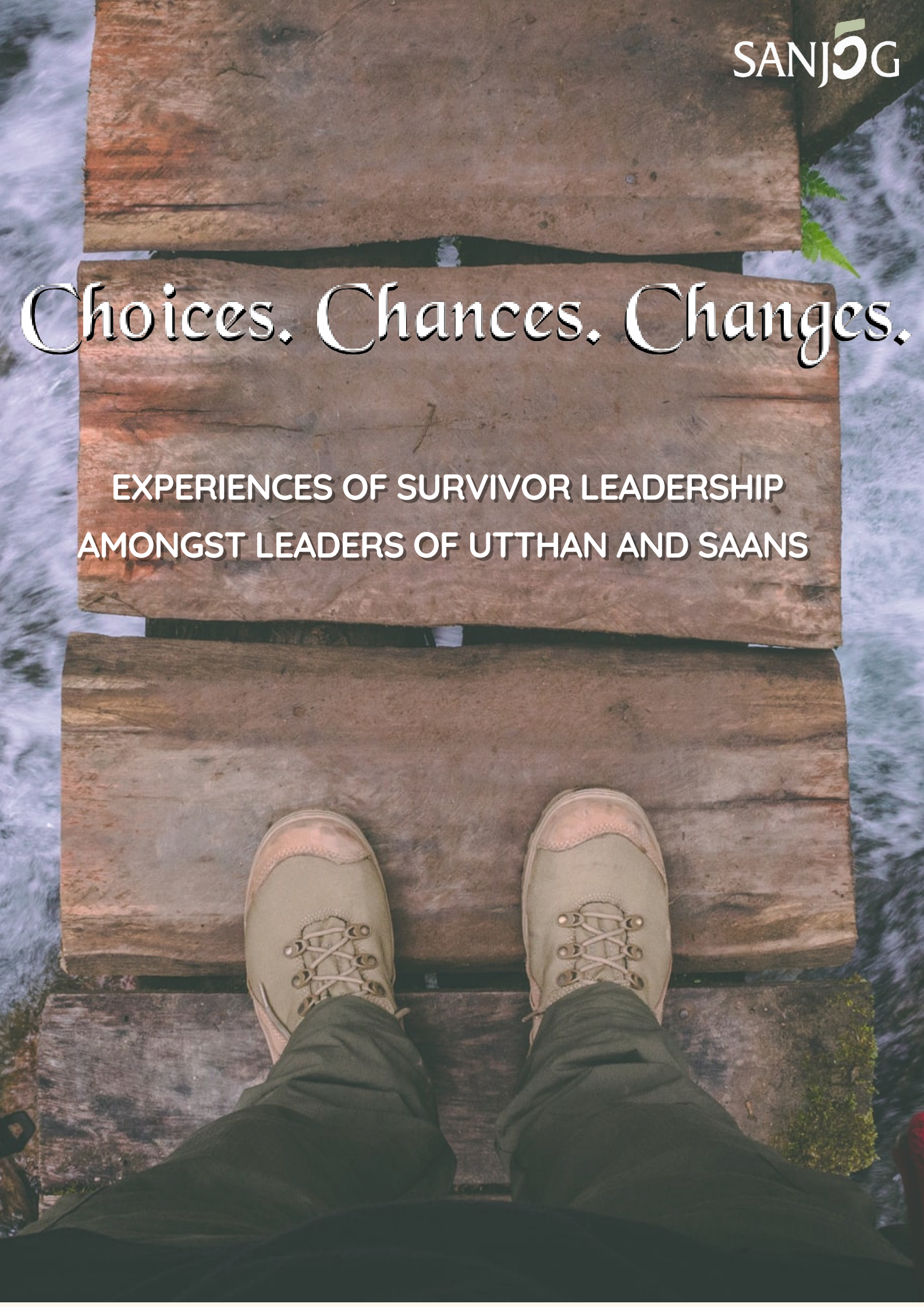


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SECTION 1

THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The stories of leadership of survivors of human trafficking are often just heard as stories- hardly ever as demands or needs to create a conducive environment for human beings to live. The anti-trafficking movement in India has been a long one. Having a fundamental right against human exploitation in place in the constitution does not stop trafficking from being a cruel reality for many marginalized communities in the country. Having the voice of survivors weaved into comprehensive anti-trafficking strategies that are effective is much needed. Survivors as leaders in the movement to prevent trafficking are vital now more than ever, as they have key insight into what is needed to improve policies and create meaningful interventions. With their lived experiences, these leaders can provide perspectives for government, business or any other organization who wants to take an informed approach by taking inputs from the survivor community at each stage of their program. To continue the anti-trafficking movement by making a shift from non-profit initiatives to survivor led initiatives with mentoring organizations taking facilitation roles, results from this study will inform future strategies for Sanjog and other such organizations.

OBJECTIVE

This study is being undertaken by Sanjog with respondents from two survivor leaders' collectives- Utthan, operating in North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas, West Bengal and Sramik Adikar Aur Nyay Sangathan (SAANS) operating in Baloda Bazar, Mahasamud, Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh to understand what youth leadership is. The main objective is to understand how these youth leaders envision their leadership, what changes they want to make in the system and what more (or less) could mentor organizations do to facilitate this leadership.

**SURVIVORS AS LEADERS IN THE MOVEMENT
AGAINST TRAFFICKING ARE VITAL ..
.. NOW MORE THAN EVER!**

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was performed using grounded theory methodology. “Grounded theory is a respected qualitative way of moving from individual knowledge to collective knowledge” (Stake, 2010). Glaser and Strauss (1967) created this methodology where theory could emerge by methodically coding interviews with terms that succinctly and conceptually summarize each phrase, line, or even word. This research study sought to understand the meaning of youth leadership through each participant’s experiences, through coding the data from interviews, and gather the interpretation of their shared and lived experiences. Wherever possible, comparisons have been drawn between two survivors collectives to inform similarities and differences in the emerging themes. Overall, the purpose of the analysis was to cull out independent themes to understand meaning of leadership for two participants group.

PARTICIPANTS

All the participants in the sample belong either to SAANS (7 participants) and Utthan (18 participants) which represents a survivor-collective group as identified by Sanjog. These survivor leaders have been part of the collectives for at least one year and have attended numerous training and other programs that aim to develop key leadership skills and integrate survivors back into their community and lead a movement of change, especially for those who may have gone through a similar experience.

DATA COLLECTION

This study used an interviewing method, using 10 standard open-ended questions created by Sanjog Team (see Appendix). These interviews were done over telephone, video call using Zoom or as a focus group. The interviews were recorded electronically. Each interview was transcribed by a Sanjog representative and shared with the researchers for the purpose of analyses and interpretation.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands shaping a piece of clay on a pottery wheel. The hands are positioned to guide the clay as it rotates. The background is a blurred blue fabric. The image is partially obscured by a dark blue diagonal overlay on the right side.

SECTION 2

CONCEPTS OF SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP

2.1 MEANING OF SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP

Typically, leadership is described in the context of organizations and followership, where there are often formal roles and power that impart varying flavors to the leader-follower dynamic. Unlike theoretical understandings of leadership, the construal of survivor leadership in our study emerged from personal growth, internal reflections and events that served to mark the graduation of survivors into a state of existence characterized by independence and self-efficacy.

1. SAANS leaders viewed youth leadership as an amalgamation, in different proportions, of traits, motivations and actions. Traits of youth leadership are characteristics that make an individual a youth leader. Some of these such as **education and knowledge** (legal and technical) can be acquired formally, whereas others such as energy and strength are either innate or can be developed experientially and/ or formally. Some traits such as knowledge were seen as both an independent trait, and as enhancers of other traits - strength, for instance. Some distinguishing characteristics such as the **new ways of thinking and energy** demarcate youth (leadership) from the elderly.

2. Youth leadership was also characterised by certain motivations and actions - pursuits, intentions and behavior that affected the leaders as well as those around them. SAANS leaders asserted that youth leaders not only understand the problems of the society, but also **take initiative** to solve them and inspire others around by communicating effectively and standing up for the rights of all. Standing up for oneself and others, and striving to change the society serve as both motivations as well as markers of leadership-graduation, particularly in semi-urban and rural settings. For SAANS leaders, youth leadership's primary purpose was **to rid the society of evils** such as trafficking, corruption and socio-economic inequalities. To this end, some leaders thought of the role of youth leaders as pivotal, whereas others saw it as a means to the empowerment of others in the fight for the right.

“The youth are energetic and [have] a determination to move forward and hence leadership of the youth is vital”



Though Utthan leaders acknowledged the importance of acquired and experientially developed traits such as strength, courage and skill, they also highlighted traits such as:

- Power
- Bravery
- Grit
- Resilience
- Fearlessness
- Conviction

as significant elements of survivor leadership, themes that didn't surface in discussions with SAANS leaders. Some participants also emphasized collaborative thought and action as characteristic of youth leadership whereas others mentioned flavors of optimism and positivity exhibited in hopes, dreams and prosocial thought.

Apart from sharing the visions of an ill-free world with SAANS leaders, Utthan leaders considered freedom, personal growth and social recognition as goals of youth leadership. Again, unlike typically conceived notions of leadership, Utthan leaders' vision revolved around achieving dignity, respect and personal safety. For one participant, leadership was about **"being able to walk in the dark"** freely, whereas for another, it was about **"(having) a source of income"**. Not everyone viewed a drastically changed world as the goal of youth leadership - according to a participant, the desired state was one where **"(people would) live with each other in harmony"**



"We dream of standing on our own feet, we want to be able to introduce ourselves as a somebody. This is all I want."

OVERVIEW OF SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP

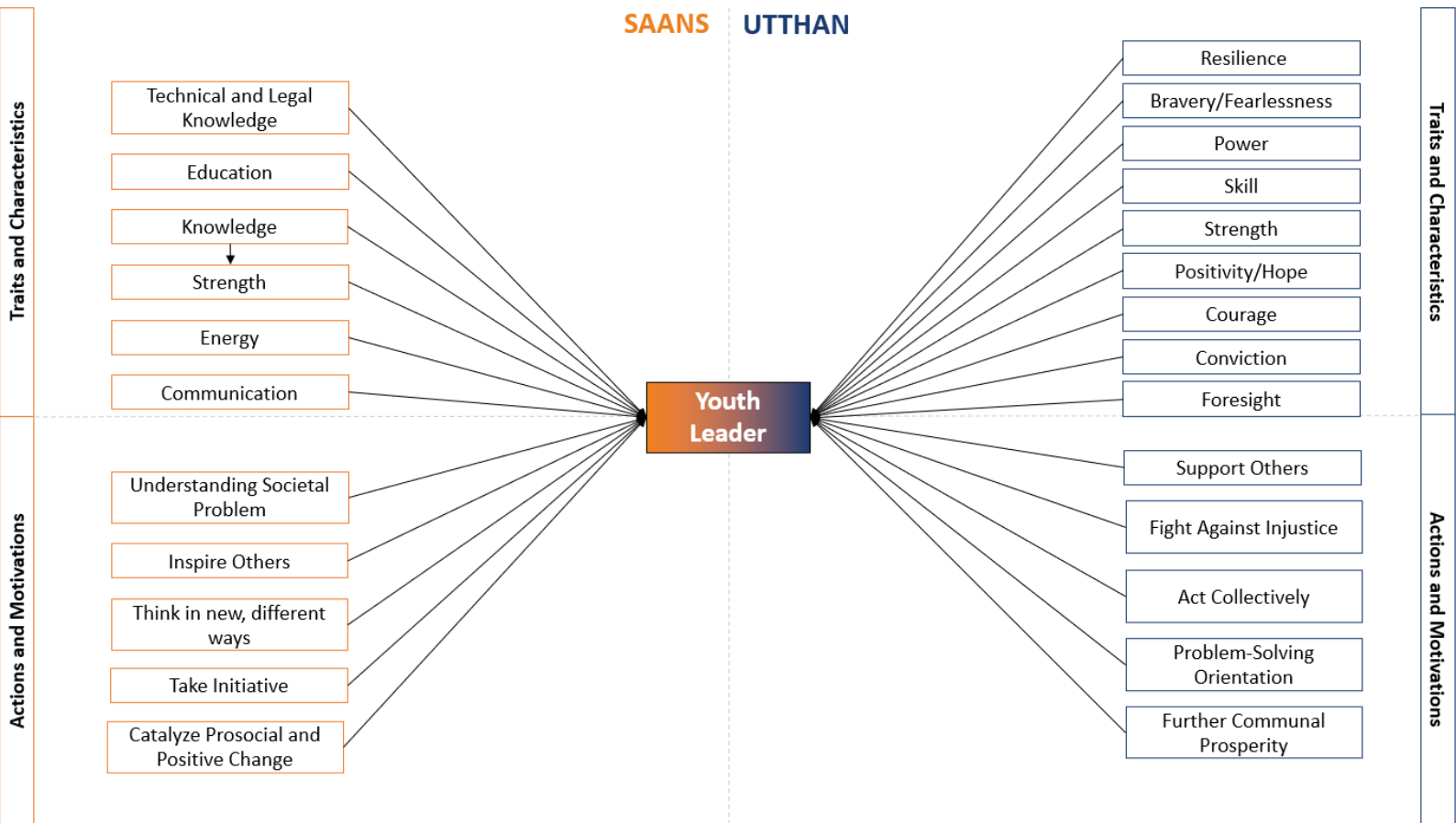


Exhibit 1: Dominant Themes Describing Meaning of Youth Leadership for SAANS and Utthan Leaders

2.2 ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Enablers and barriers are factors that affect the momentum of youth leadership. These may be external or internal, positive or negative. **The same entity or factor may serve as an enabler for one and a barrier for another.** Even though there are no objective enablers or barriers, we found some commonalities in how participants experienced these, likely due to other underlying shared realities such as similar communities, backgrounds, experiences and work. Interestingly, the same enabler (eg. education) may be logistical in nature for some, while social for others.

1. **For SAANS leaders, some traits of youth leadership such as knowledge and education were seen to be enablers.** This natural overlap highlights the role such factors play in both building and furthering youth leadership. External support such as economic and educational (training) was seen to be important enablers as these often form the foundations of resources and knowledge which are essential constituents of youth leadership.

2. Perhaps most importantly, the experiences of struggle, injustice and trauma are seen to be central enablers of youth leadership. This suggests that the participants and many others like them are leader-buds waiting to grow.



3. The need is to water them with the support they require to blossom. Such support may come in the form of training and knowledge, but it may also emanate from the opportunities and platforms they need - to address collective traumas and to speak up for themselves and others. Interestingly, a lack of enablers is more than a mere lack of positive factors- it results in a counteraction against the positive experiences of youth leadership!

4. As suggested by a participant, an inability (fear) to communicate and lack of education act as barriers to youth leadership. This implies that certain enablers aren't mere additives, but also foundations which are critical for leadership to emerge.

5. **Societal vices such as untouchability, blind-faith, religious and caste divisions were also seen as barriers to youth leadership.**

Other hurdles included governance-related barriers such as corrupt leaders and bureaucracy, personal-barriers such as unsupportive families and geographical barriers such as those of language and dwelling. A participant mentioned how there is a presence of gender bias that acts as an obstacle.

“Being a woman is a barrier”

6. For many Utthan leaders, social support from family, friends, community and peers were important enablers, whereas family and disapproval from others were barriers for some.

7. Positive feelings, resolve and positive self-perceptions also acted as enhancers in certain cases, whereas in others, courage, conviction and energy seemed to resonate with many. Some enablers, such as freedom (“to be able to move freely”), were both prerequisites and facilitators for youth leadership, highlighting the dual role some factors can play in starting and maintaining the light of leadership.

8. Operational enablers also existed - ‘organization’ and ‘information on schemes’, for instance.

9. Some factors that happened to be enablers for some also found place in the list of barriers for others - family, society, social disapproval and stigma were typical examples in this category. For few of the participants, such roadblocks were closely related with their identities (and therefore harder to change) - young age and gender, for instance.

“I have sacrificed so much for this work, why should I leave this work? Now this has become my determination to keep working.”



10. One may be inclined to think of barriers as hindrances that are negative in most respects, however, for some Utthan leaders, this wasn't the case - marriages, romantic relationships, and husbands were noted as a barrier by some participants.

10. Similar to SAANS leaders, in the case of Utthan leaders, public officers, duty bearers, and social perceptions of their work were not perceived in a positive light.

11. For some, emotional states such as disillusionment of dreams, and mental health became strong hindrances. These may be self-originating or may have stemmed from other experiences.

12. Lastly, barriers such as failure may be multi-dimensional - from being an undesirable outcome to being the source of unpleasant emotional states. As these difficulties are assessed by organizations, the next step should be identifying the taxes these put on a leader, and their amenability to change.

ENABLERS AND BARRIERS SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP

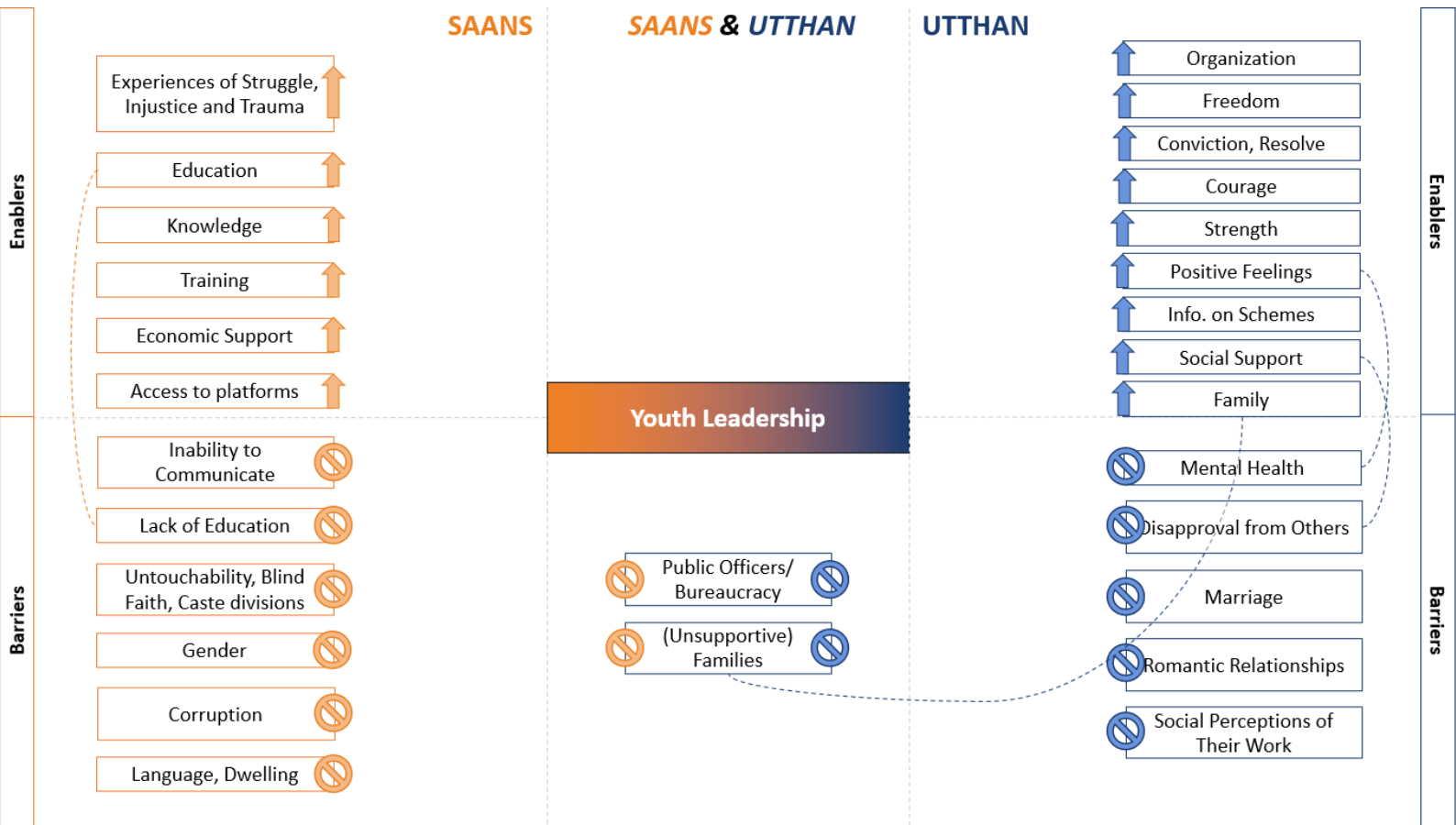


Exhibit 2: Enablers and Barriers of Youth Leadership for SAANS and Utthan Leaders



SECTION 3

PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS

3.1 LEARNING THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCES

Since notions of leadership in the case of our participants emerge not from formal roles or positions but from an evolution into an empowered state of personal and social appreciation, participants almost always recollect a transformation journey when asked to think of their starting point. For some, the journey was marked by ‘milestone-events’ that served as graduation ceremonies of leadership initiation; for others, the culmination of the journey, as experienced in the newer state of being, held primary importance. The experience of being in a changed state could be felt both as a result of reflection and introspection, as well as from external, social validation. Interestingly, **training at Sanjog was noted by many across SAANS and Utthan as their gateway into leadership.**

Training and programming can thus serve an educative as well as ceremonial purpose.

1. Some SAANS leaders recollected milestone-events where they experienced personal injustice and fought against it, speaking up for themselves and for others. While there were few other participants who recollected episodes where they empowered others to stand up for themselves.
2. On the other hand, certain participants spoke about the change process - from an old state of ignorance and fear to a new state of awareness and confidence - as their leadership journey. These participants mentioned sound financial position and awareness of laws and rights as important enablers in the change process. For many, their new state was strengthened by social validation in the form of respect, appreciation and reliance from others
“Now that I have become a leader, people consult me. I have gained respect.”
3. For Utthan leaders, there was a similar transition to a state of responsibility, social acceptance, recognition, and fearlessness. For some, being able to fulfil their responsibilities, financially and otherwise, became the positive experience that got associated with construal of leadership.
4. Some Utthan leaders recollected the change in their newly discovered abilities to communicate with officials and act to stop the ills of trafficking and abuse. Whether leadership caused feelings of empowerment and accomplishment or whether the feelings of empowerment and accomplishment precipitated the feelings of leadership is a matter for further exploration.
5. For some participants, small responsibilities and tasks such as the submission of periodic reports acted to reinforce the positive feelings of capability, responsibility and leadership.

3.2 SELF ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP

SAANS

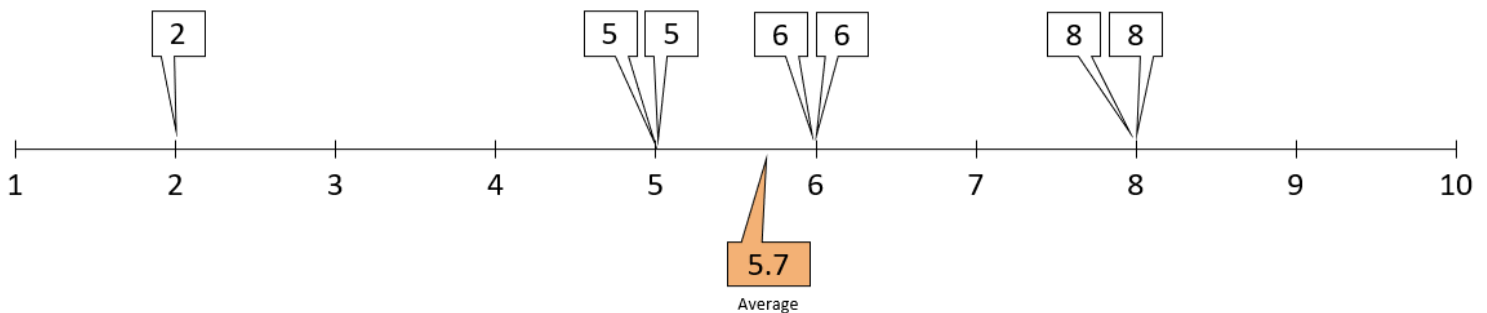


1. When participants in SAANS survivor-collective were asked to describe where they see them on the leadership ladder and what exactly is their self-assessment of their leadership capabilities, their responses revealed a dedication to fight against exploitation and to bring forth a change in society by fostering equality and end bonded labour. However, they were not oblivious of their own shortcomings but at the same time all participants expressed tremendous amounts of zeal to learn and become better with time and experiences

“I have the ability and passion, I can speak and I have information, but lack of money to support others or go places for social work”

“I want to change society, to end slavery and bonded labour”

2. The significant gaps in the leadership style that most of our participants in this cohort quoted was a lack of financial resources, poor communication skills and relevant knowledge that was needed to create a large impact on the society



SAANS Leaders' - Leadership Self-Ratings

1. For Utthan leaders, there were some similarities in terms of zeal, determination and courageous attitude to end exploitation.

These leaders differentiated themselves through the adversities they faced and prescribed it as a life-changing event which acted as a trigger to lead them on a path of survivor-leadership.

2. Most of the participants shared a sense of accomplishment by observing a change from being scared, helpless to becoming independent. Through training and association with mentoring organizations, these leaders gained self-confidence to speak up for their own rights and crossed the bridge from being frustrated and angry to feeling energetic and driven by a cause, leading a movement of change.

3. While assessing themselves on the leadership ladder, participants in this cohort, based their ratings on tangible outcomes as a success criteria. They were able to share their experiences with others, voice their opinions and teach others about what they are entitled to, contribute meaningfully towards informing policies intended to stop exploitation such as child marriage and domestic violence, and guide others towards actions they could take to support efforts against exploitation and sex-trafficking.

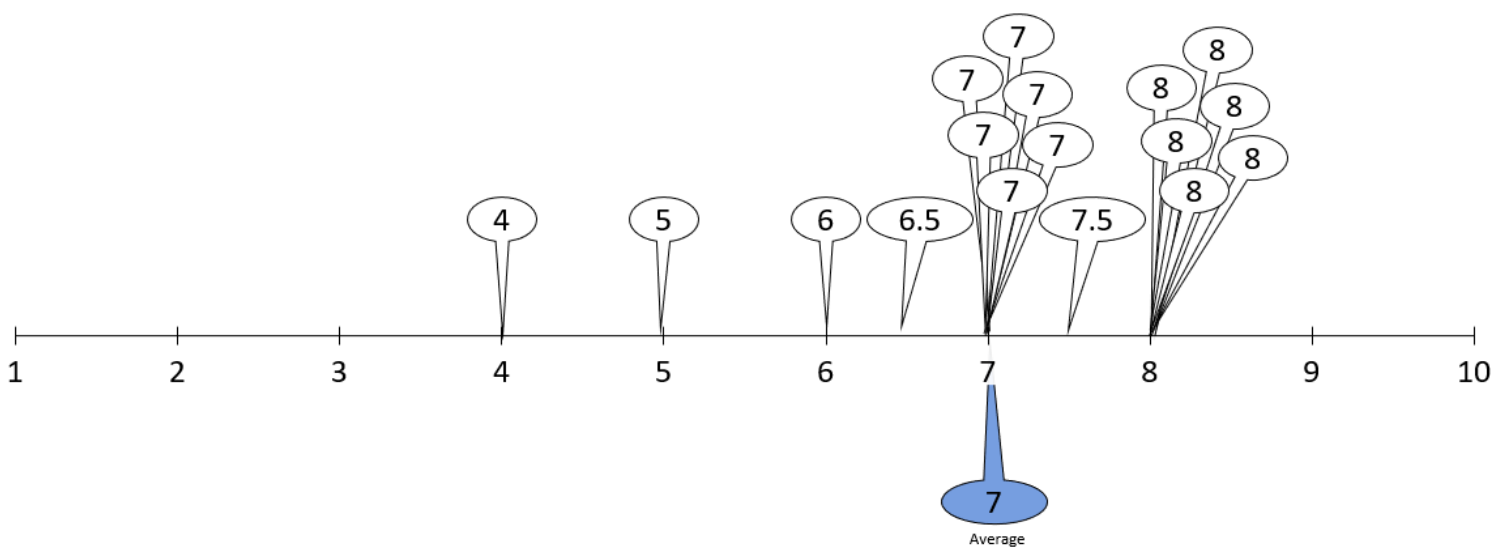
4. Some Utthan leaders stated that they felt a sense of belonging by connecting with other survivors, they no longer felt alone in this traumatic journey. Being a part of the group made them feel more confident and aided in understanding what happened to them from a survivor perspective rather than looking at it as a victim. This enriching experience of sharing their pain with others in the group gave them strength, motivation and will power to end the suffering of other girls. In a way, negative experiences and struggles are construed as a fountainhead of leadership. Surviving a trauma became a differentiator.



“If I wasn't trafficked, I wouldn't be a leader”

7. Leadership for this cohort now became fighting alongside other women who are suffering and feeling a sense of accomplishment beyond the set expectations by helping other people. Their own ability to persuade others, exert positive influence and communicate effectively, patiently to end stigmatization of sex-trafficked survivors became key indicators of displaying leadership.

8. Yet there are certain areas where these leaders need help and improvement to become even stronger advocates to end human-trafficking such as gaining technical knowledge and superior communication skills. They also expressed a need to become financially independent. Indeed, these leaders seek more opportunities to influence the communities in which they live.



Utthan Leaders'- Leadership Self-Ratings



SECTION 4

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MENTORING ORGANIZATIONS

4.1 ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS

as perceived and experienced by **Utthan** and **SAANS** leaders

Organizations have a major role to play when it comes to reducing the incidence of human trafficking and expanding the movement by including the voices of youth. As a result of the increased effort in encouraging youth involvement in the anti-human trafficking movement, Survivor-Leadership Model has gained much traction. Participants in this study talked about their dependence on mentoring organizations to learn relevant skills and gain support to start their journey as a leader. They expressed how organizations play a major role in identifying growth opportunities and training them continually:

“It has been like a school where we have studied, participated in activities and gained a lot of technical knowledge”

1. For both the groups, social workers played the role of moulding them and guiding them just like parents would. These leaders sought inspiration and motivational support from their mentoring organizations and over time this relationship became indispensable.



2. For SAANS leaders, mentoring organizations are seen as a catalyst in creating a platform to make their voices heard with their abundant resources needed to combat challenges, to make them aware of their rights to integrate these survivors back into society and impart knowledge to contribute towards crucial policy interventions.

3. Many participants acknowledged the vital role of such organizations to counsel survivors according to their needs, thus placing this model in clinical context to enable survivors to better serve as an expert.

“Mentoring organizations are parents for youth leadership. They are responsible for moulding us”



7. Further, these organisations link survivors to opportunities to engage in livelihood activities and gain financial independence, and inspire motivation to contribute meaningfully to the community. This has helped many survivor leaders in reframing their identity, putting an end to internalised stigma and increased feelings of self-worth.

Thus, organizations are responsible for:

- Survivors' overall development
- Provide motivational support to uplift youth leadership
- Guide them through uncertain times, support their personal growth
- Offer encouragement

Organisations inspire them to become better leaders. They may serve as a psychologically safe place where members feel confident about their chances of becoming a successful leader and provide a supportive context that reduces obstacles to progress and allows survivors to effectively journey towards their goals.

4. For Utthan leaders, the role of the mentoring organization was largely focused on having a support system, a safety net which aids in their overall growth. Social workers encourage survivors to realize and become confident of their own leadership qualities, aware of their rights and to value their insight not just as survivors but also as experts in the field.

5. Survivor leaders also look for support from organisations to support them in accessing medical services for their mental and physical health. In a way, the services provided by organizations are seen as indispensable to well being and even remaining as part of the collectives.

“Without them, we would not have been aware of so many things”

6. Social workers set an example of positive role models and display hope to overcome hurdles in life. They are also pillars of trust and dependability in times of crises as experienced and shared by both groups. In this process of mentoring and companionship, sometimes the mentors (social workers) also become “like parents” and integral to survival/ basic nurture.

ROLE OF MENTORING ORGANIZATIONS

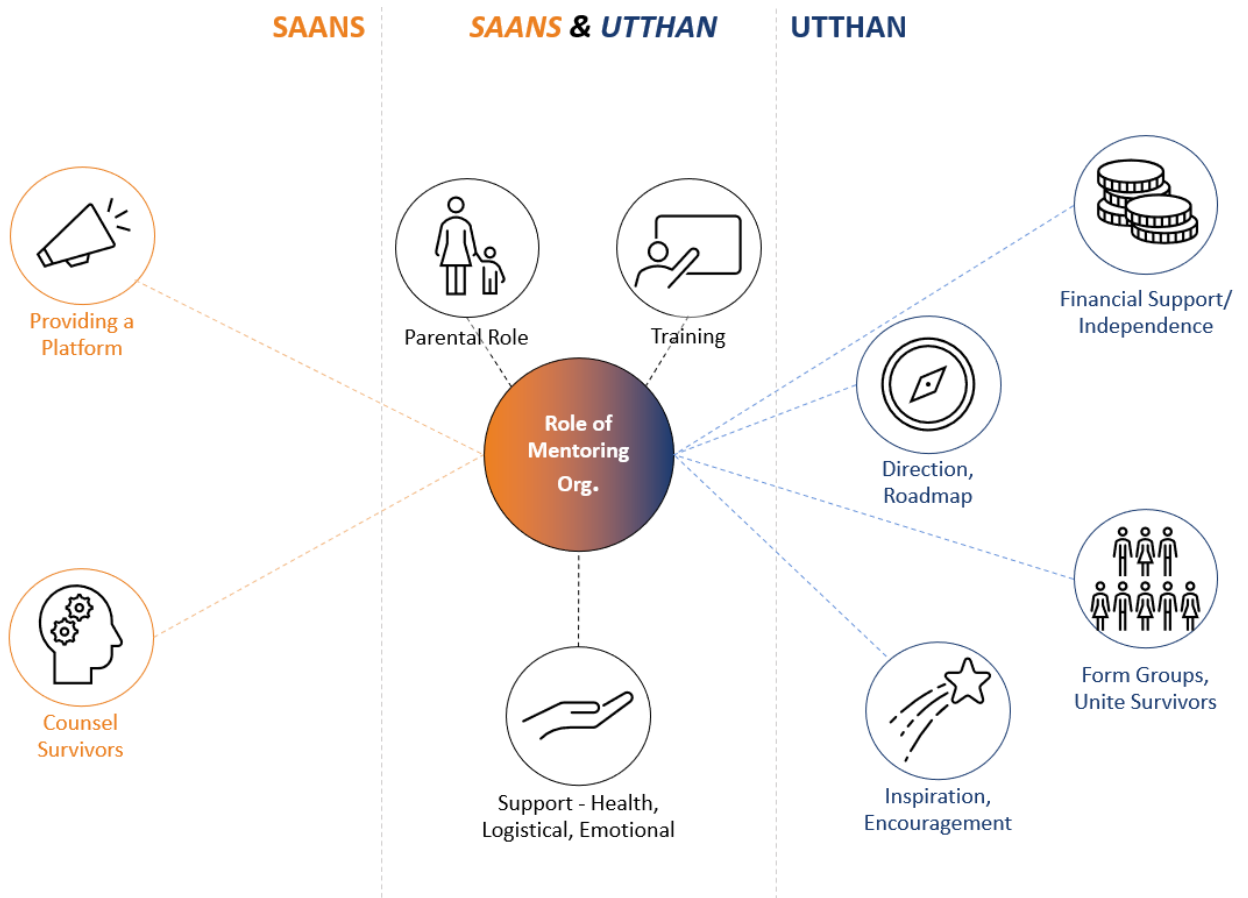
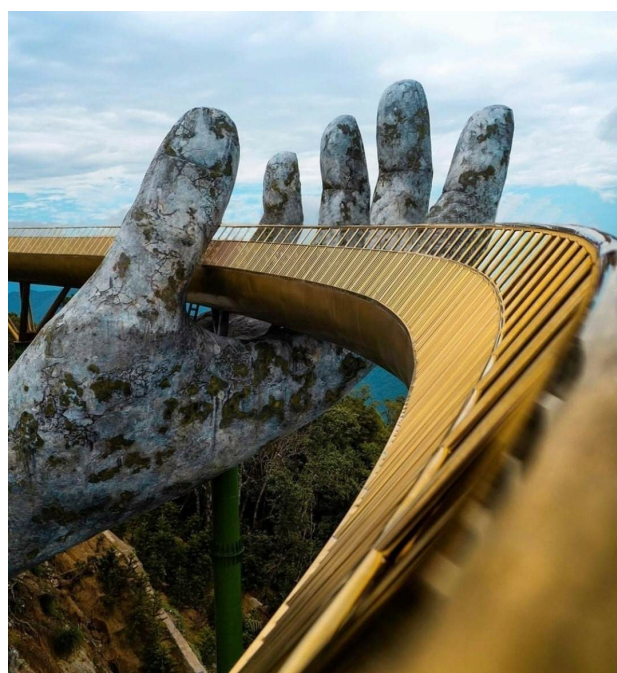


Exhibit 3: Role of Mentoring Organizations in Developing Youth Leaders for SAANS and Utthan Leaders

4.2 RELATIONSHIP WITH MENTORING ORGANISATIONS: CHALLENGES & DIFFICULTIES

All participants of the study talked about much-needed improvement in the counselling processes that NGOs have with them. They emphasized the need for more sensitivity and trauma-informed care approaches, for example, incorporating and emphasizing survivors' inputs throughout the process and foster an understanding of the physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma on the survivor.



1. One of the themes was about the internal challenges they (survivors) experience when they see/ experience a sense of mistrust in the ethical practices of the organizations . A few participants stated how they felt that in some cases organizations communicated activities on paper and reports that actually were different from that happening on the ground or the process in which those were happening.

2. Further, participants shared their disappointment when organizations do not involve survivor leaders in the decision-making process and do not place enough value on the expertise of survivors, engaging them in designing effective training and evaluating the outcome for continuous improvement.

“Leaders must also be involved in deciding and planning the specifics of projects etc., which they don’t do now”

3. Organizations must create mechanisms/ spaces/ safe opportunities for meaningful survivor input. Organizations need to see the worth in centering their practices around the expertise of survivors to inform more effective policies and interventions. Such spaces are often missing and even when they are present, the role of the organisation is parental/ the all-knowing and instruction giving, which makes inputs from survivors unheard/ invisibilised.



4. Another theme that emerged in the participants' narrative as feedback for the organizations was inculcating ethical practices which respects survivor's privacy and takes informed consent before sharing their traumatic experiences with other stakeholders. Information about being trafficked or the steps involved in the process needs to remain in the case study and not shared during introductions of leaders with all stakeholders.

5. Some of the leaders expressed their disappointment with social workers, how their attitude in many ways is discriminatory and behaviors become disrespectful towards survivors, especially when the survivors disagree or "disobey. The lack of dignified conversation then becomes a barrier for any further sharing or communication. Leaders demand respect and inclusion as equal members in the anti-trafficking ecosystem and not spoken "down to" by social workers.

6. Many participants felt social workers' approach lacks problem-solving focus which consequently make survivors feel less important when social workers do not appreciate leaders' constructive feedback.

7. Difficulty amongst social workers to handle differences in leaders collectives, deal with dynamics between the collective members and not discriminate between the collectives is another challenge. Lack of being able to do that creates rivalry and triggers a sense of rejection, alienation, jealousy and insensitivity.

8. They face barriers when trying to have/ strengthen their own voice in the anti-trafficking movement. Organisations need to work on learning how to facilitate and understand mentoring leaders so that they (survivors) are able to take up all roles of accessing services and entitlements themselves from police or BDOs. Unless that empowerment happens, the best of policies and laws will remain only on paper and community will not become strong.

9. In many ways, these leaders expressed a strong desire to drive social change through their lived experiences and a need to be leading at every level by resisting this lack of inclusion and be involved as a crucial member of the decision-making process.

10. Many participants shared they would want the organization to provide with more awareness and legal and technical knowledge such as rights of women, especially, anti-dowry laws, how to tackle domestic violence cases and using video conferencing tools to create awareness for child protection as well as putting an end to child marriage in their community.

11. Organizations should identify gaps and opportunities to build leadership skills in each survivor keeping in mind his/ her strength and challenges/ weaknesses. Each leader will need some special inputs which are critical to respond effectively and enable effective leadership.

“Alongside paperwork, mentoring organizations must focus on building leadership. They must know where we are lacking and must think about how to address these shortcomings.”

Thus, organizations should:

- Promote survivor empowerment and self-sufficiency
- Consider ways to include diverse survivor voices who share their unique and vital experiences for greater effectiveness across all efforts to combat human trafficking.
- Provide freedom to express and engage even when the communication becomes angry and difficult



ENDNOTES

Leadership is the evolution of a trafficked individual from a state of inability to a state of self-efficacy and social recognition. Enablers and barriers play a role in either crystalizing the experiences of leadership or taxing the leader as they tread on their paths, respectively. These come in a variety of shapes and sizes - social, innate, situational and at times organizational. At each stage, stakeholder plays a vital role in developing leadership skills in the survivors. These stakeholders need to address survivors' trauma of the trafficking experience and guide them in embracing their identities thereby leading them on a path that drives a social change. Survivor leaders should know their worth and understand how to use their voice and power. These things must not only be taught in theory, but must be modeled and practiced in the context of long-term committed supportive relationships. This may imply that for the leaders-in-the-making who are yet to feel a concrete sense of leadership, pivotal experiences could be created to facilitate the maturation process.

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APPENDIX - Interview Questions

- What is youth leadership to you?
- What does youth leadership dream to achieve in your community?
- What enables youth leadership?
- What works as a barrier to youth leadership?
- How have you experienced leadership in yourself?
- How has it changed you in relation to the outside world and in your own life?
- If you had to rate yourself as a leader, what score would you give from 0 to 10 and why?
- Complete the sentence: I am a leader because _____
- What is the role of mentoring organizations in building leadership?
- What are the things mentoring organizations should do that they are not doing currently?
- What are the things that mentoring organizations are currently doing that they should not do?