

# Research Brief: Impact of a matched savings program on survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence

Survivors of human trafficking experience significant financial difficulties, which can heighten their risk for further violence and exploitation. Evidence-based economic empowerment programs for survivors are, however, limited. Although research has found that matched savings programs can provide greater financial stability for vulnerable populations, very few research studies have explored the impact of such programs in Asia. In this brief, we present findings of a mixed methods evaluation of Barug, a two-year matched savings program for survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV) and their family members in the Philippines.

## The Barug Program

Barug uses a three-pronged approach:



**A financial literacy training course (FLT)**, which is a 3-month long program teaching about budgeting, debt, savings, emotional wellness, and financial negotiation/communication



**A matched savings program** in which participants can have a year of their savings matched at a 1:1 ratio by Eleison. Participants can access these savings for specific purposes such as education, housing repair, medical care, and family emergencies.



**Individual and group support meetings** that target individualized goals, problem solving, putting lessons learned in the FLT into action, and building a supportive peer community.

## Research Methods

Eleison collaborated with a community partner to conduct this evaluation. The partner collected data from 10 survivors who had graduated from Barug, including 10 interviews, 3 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 10 pre-post surveys. Data collection by an independent organization provided the opportunity for Barug graduates to provide honest feedback about Barug, reducing social desirability bias.



## Quantitative Findings

Our quantitative findings demonstrate that Barug participants increased their savings:

- ❖ **30% of survivors had savings prior to Barug, whereas 70% of survivors had savings after Barug.**
- ❖ **30% of survivors had over 10,000 Philippine Pesos in savings after Barug.**
- ❖ **Barug participants increased their savings by over 400% on average.**

# Qualitative Findings

**Survivors described the impact of Barug as multifaceted, including financial, social, and psychological benefits. Five themes were identified regarding survivors' experiences with the Barug program:**

## Escaping a cycle of debt

Participants gained skills to get out of debt and avoid future debt. Though many survivors had high levels of debt before Barug, many participants managed to lower or erase their debt during the program. Survivors felt that escaping a cycle of debt strongly benefitted their emotional well-being, reducing anxiety and stress.

## Psychosocial impact

Before Barug, being unable to meet daily financial needs and being trapped in debt caused survivors to experience anxiety, stress, and fear. After Barug, survivors reported positive changes to their psychological well-being such as feeling calmer, safer, and experiencing lower levels of stress.

## Enhanced budgeting skills

Participants highlighted the benefits of learning how to budget and track their expenses. This helped them gain awareness and take a more active role in their finances. Participants noted that they made changes to their daily habits which continued after Barug ended. Budgeting skills helped them save and lower debt.

## Prioritizing asset development

Participants felt that following the program, they understood the importance of building assets/having savings as a safety net. Many survivors developed the habit of regular savings, which helped them to become more future-oriented and clear in their goals. The data demonstrated that participants had increased their levels of savings following the Barug program.

## Improved family relationships

Survivors reported facing difficulties with culturally-embedded financial expectations from family members, but felt that Barug helped them navigate these tensions in a safe and open space. Participants described enhanced communication skills and capacity to set boundaries with family members regarding finances.

*"Because of Barug, I was able to save money for emergencies. I thought before that I couldn't save because I had a lot of debts. Because when you have a lot of debts, it will cause you headaches, emotional distress. Now, it's better. If you know how to budget and negotiate [with other people about money], the stress will be minimized." – Barug Participant*



# Summary of Recommendations



Findings reveal that incorporating three intervention components (asset development/savings, financial literacy education, and psychosocial support) can strengthen both the financial and psychological well-being of survivors. The following are recommended:

- ❖ Anti-trafficking organizations should incorporate **savings and asset development** into their services for survivors. Asset-building programs can help survivors develop a safety net for emergencies, reduce financial vulnerability, and strengthen future orientation and skills in planning for the future.
- ❖ **Debt relief assistance** should be provided. Support escaping debt can reduce survivors' vulnerability, as well as improve their psychological wellbeing, e.g. decreasing anxiety, lowering stress, and strengthening a sense of personal control.
- ❖ **Financial literacy education** is critical in helping survivors achieve their goals. Training should incorporate attention to confidence-building around financial management, which helps survivors feel more empowered and in greater control.
- ❖ Interventions should provide an **emotionally supportive environment** sensitive to survivors' socio-cultural contexts. Survivors benefit from a space in which they can openly communicate about financial anxieties and pressures.

## Why it matters

- Financial instability increases a survivor's risk of being re-trafficked. However, evidence-based economic empowerment programs for survivors are lacking.
- A matched savings approach can successfully help survivors build savings and a safety net for future emergencies, increasing financial stability.
- Asset development/savings should be accompanied by financial literacy training and emotional support to help survivors cope with financial pressures and put their learnings into action.