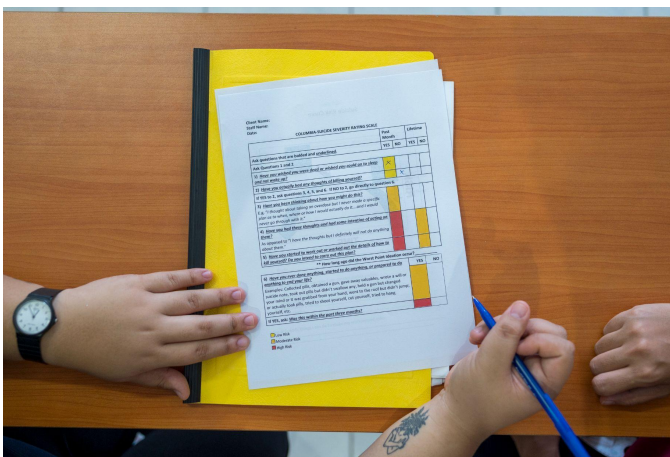


# Research Brief: Experiences of Anti-Trafficking Service Providers Responding to Suicide Risk among Survivors

Survivors of human trafficking experience high rates of suicidal behavior and ideation. However, in Southeast Asia, many survivors are unable to obtain needed mental health services. Anti-trafficking service providers also report difficulties working with clients exhibiting suicidal thoughts and behaviors, as well as a lack of training related to suicide.



## Research Methods

This study explored how service providers can be equipped to prevent suicide among survivors. In Phase 1, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with service providers in Cebu, Philippines to understand their challenges in working with clients at risk for suicide. In Phase 2, an evidence-based intervention – the Suicide Safety Planning Intervention (SPI) – was adapted for use with survivors in the Philippines and staff were trained in this intervention. In Phase 3, staff implemented SPI and feedback was gathered to understand how the intervention was working. In this research brief, Phase 1 is described, focusing on understanding staff's experiences in working with clients at risk for suicide.

## Findings

In this focused ethnography, staff revealed the following experiences:

### **Emotional burden on service providers:**

Service providers felt emotionally burdened and anxious about their ability to support clients with suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

### **Stigma regarding suicide:**

Staff reported a tendency to spiritualize conversations about suicide or make light of the topic through joking.

### **Confusion about suicide risk**

**assessment:** Staff reported being unsure of how to assess suicide risk. Some felt that clients expressing suicidal thoughts were attention-seeking or manipulating.

### **Lack of mental health services and support systems:**

Very few referral options are available for mental health services, and many survivors do not have strong social support networks.

### **Transferring responsibility to other providers:**

Staff sometimes discharged clients or referred clients out to other services, despite the perceived low quality of care.

### **Need for training, supervision, and organizational systems:**

Service providers reported a strong need for suicide prevention training, protocols, and clinical supervision.

All study findings revealed that service providers faced significant and recurring challenges working with clients exhibiting suicidal thoughts and behaviors, leading to job stress, anxiety, and a sense of being emotionally burdened. Despite the lack of training for staff, anti-trafficking staff are often still the ones who survivors turn to when they are feeling suicidal and need help. The following steps are recommended to address these needs among service providers and clients:

## Summary of recommendations

- Anti-stigma training about suicide and mental health
- Training in culturally-adapted evidence-based suicide prevention interventions like SPI
- Systems for suicide risk assessment that proactively screen clients for suicidal ideation
- Clear organizational protocols for how staff should respond to crises
- Ongoing technical support and mentorship for staff
- Frequent opportunities for staff to process and debrief their experiences and feelings

These recommendations aim to minimize the emotional burden experienced by anti-trafficking staff when working with clients at risk for suicide. They provide the foundation for culturally-specific, formalized, and sustainable systems to support anti-trafficking service providers and their clients experiencing suicidal ideation. Implementing suicide intervention training can not only help clients, but also minimize the emotional burden for service providers.

**“[We need to] capacitate anti-trafficking service providers because the psychologists are not that accessible or the psychological services. At least with this project, this is at our level. Although we have a few trainings, we still don’t have enough knowledge and skills on how to address this kind of need in our clients.” – Research Participant**

## Why it matters

- Anti-trafficking service providers face a lack of referral options, training, and systems to address suicidal ideation and behavior amongst clients.
- This lack of training and support creates an emotional burden on service providers and allows for potentially harmful practices.
- Training anti-trafficking staff in evidence-based suicide interventions and providing staff with proper support systems can benefit both clients and staff.