

# A Survivor-Defined Framework for Economic Empowerment

Although economic empowerment has been identified as a critical priority for human trafficking survivors, very little research directly explores what economic empowerment means to survivors themselves. Without this knowledge, programs and policies may fail to center survivors' priorities and goals, ultimately hindering their effectiveness. Our research presents a framework for economic empowerment defined by survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV) in the Philippines. To generate this framework, we conducted community-based participatory research utilizing photovoice. By defining economic empowerment from the lens of survivors themselves, we discuss a framework that provides actionable direction to service providers seeking to address survivors' real needs and goals.



## Research Methods

Photovoice is a participatory action research method grounded in empowerment theory, documentary photography, and feminist theory. In photovoice, community members take photos to reflect on a topic of inquiry

and portray their own perspectives and experiences. Photographs are used to promote community dialogue and to advocate for social change. Male and female survivors of human trafficking and GBV were recruited through purposive sampling, and were referred by a community organization in Cebu, Philippines. In this study, the research question was: "What does economic empowerment mean to survivors?"

## Photovoice occurred in seven stages:



Participants were asked to take photographs and write reflections regarding their definitions of economic empowerment.



Group discussions were conducted in which participants shared their photos and thoughts, and were invited to join a leadership team.



Survivor leaders were trained in data analysis. Transcripts from the group discussions were analyzed by the survivor leadership team. Photos were selected and themes were identified.



A member check was conducted by the leadership team with peers to refine and finalize themes.



The survivor leadership team planned the final community forum in the fifth and sixth meetings.



Participants shared their stories, photographs, and findings with partner organizations and peers at a community event.

# Findings

**Survivors defined economic empowerment as encompassing seven key dimensions, which can serve as a guiding framework for service providers and policy makers:**

## 2. Safe employment with benefits

Survivors emphasized the importance of safe employment to allow them to provide for themselves and their families. Safe employment was defined as offering comprehensive benefits (such as health insurance), worker protection, and a pathway for growth.

## 4. Goal achievement

Personal goal achievement was consistently mentioned by survivors as critical to their own empowerment. This involved overcoming personal challenges, problem-solving solutions to recurring difficulties, and accomplishing their own goals.

## 6. Psychosocial wellbeing

Survivors conceptualized mental and emotional strength as key to economic empowerment. This included building self-care mechanisms, self-regulation skills, self-confidence, and bravery to take incremental steps toward their own goals.

## 1. Meeting basic needs for self and family

Survivors prioritized meeting their daily needs and their family members' essential needs. In many socio-cultural contexts, economic empowerment is a collective, not individual, experience.

## 3. Holistic education

Participants articulated the need for access to formal education as well as holistic life skills development. They valued continuous learning opportunities to help them understand their rights, build new life skills, and live meaningful lives.

## 5. Financial management

Survivors highlighted the importance of gaining the skills to manage their finances successfully. Survivors noted that Barug, a matched savings program run by Eleison, allowed them to escape a cycle of debt and build assets, both of which were noted as critical to economic empowerment.

## 7. Support systems

Survivors stressed the need for safe support systems, including community protection mechanisms, guidance from mentors, and accepting, non-judgmental, and emotionally safe relationships with support persons.

**“A person who is empowered financially should know the importance of savings. I chose this photograph because having savings makes me feel secure, happy, and stable. There will be instances in which we need money for emergency purposes. And if that happens, we get crazy looking for a loan shark for us to help contribute something to our family’s emergency. For me, savings is life.” – Photovoice participant**



# Summary of Recommendations



This study is the first in which survivors defined economic empowerment themselves, a critical step in ensuring that services are carefully aligned to survivors' perspectives and goals. The seven aforementioned dimensions of economic empowerment are all interconnected. Findings suggest several recommendations, including the following:

- ❑ Findings stress the need for **culturally-responsive services**. Survivors emphasize the importance of family members' financial needs and familial engagement. Economic empowerment is not an individual phenomenon, which should be reflected in programming.
- ❑ Survivors identify a deep interconnection between **economic stability and psychosocial wellbeing**. Psychosocial wellbeing provides a safe foundation for survivors to pursue financial goals. Enhanced financial security strengthens a sense of emotional safety, autonomy, and self-efficacy.
- ❑ Services should assist survivors access **safe employment** that aligns with their interests and has comprehensive benefits, such as health insurance, as well as pathways for future growth.
- ❑ **Asset development, financial management skills training, and debt relief** should be incorporated into economic empowerment programs. These services enhance financial stability and hold psychosocial benefits such as a greater sense of security and control.
- ❑ Economic empowerment programs should be implemented in a **trauma-informed manner**. Emotionally safe, accepting, non-judgmental, and consistent support systems are crucial.

## Why it matters

- Economic empowerment is a high priority for survivors, but many programs are not survivor-centered or evidence-based. This is the first study in which survivors defined economic empowerment.
- Economic empowerment models for survivors need to be multi-dimensional, addressing all components of the framework. Access to employment alone is not sufficient.
- Survivors stress that financial and psychosocial support are inseparable and both instrumental to achieving economic empowerment. Integrated economic and psychosocial programming is recommended.