Fair Futures | project respect | SURVIVOR CONNECTIONS

Media Release

Survivor-led report pushes economic empowerment as key to slavery prevention

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Fast Facts:

- A newly-released survivor-led report sheds light on just how critical economic empowerment is to preventing exploitation, enabling recovery and restoring agency to survivors of modern slavery.
- Financial instability puts people at risk of coercion and exploitation, characteristics of modern slavery which traps an estimated 41,000 people in Australia.
- Only a fraction of actual cases are identified. For every recorded survivor in Australia, there are about four undetected survivors.
- In the 2024–25 financial year, the AFP received 420 reports of suspected modern slavery offences, the highest annual number on record.
- The report found that survivors needed consistent access to safe, long-term housing, education, trauma responsive work opportunities, financial literacy, healthcare, and peer support in order to thrive.
- Fundamentally, everyone should have the ability to leave unsafe relationships and jobs but barriers like trauma, discrimination, visa/legal restrictions, cost-of-living pressures, service gaps and long waitlists enable predatory behaviour from perpetrators.
- Current systems require major reform if we want to prevent exploitation and support sustainable futures.
- Long-term support is needed as well as crisis-led responses to tackle modern slavery.

Regardless of our background, we all deserve to live free from harm and exploitation.

But picture a packed football stadium, like Sydney Football Stadium, with 41,000 people in it. That's about the same number of people that are estimated to be stuck, controlled and exploited through forced labour, human trafficking and slavery in Australia.

People who have lived experience of these forms of coercion and exploitation, sometimes referred to as modern slavery, have critical insights to share with decision makers about "what works" to support prevention and recovery from these crimes.

Through consultations with 18 people with lived experience of modern slavery, a groundbreaking new project has shed light on the critical role of economic empowerment to both prevention and recovery.

Published today, *Learning from Experience* is a new report from Survivor Connections, Project Respect and Fair Futures, which brings together findings grounded in lived experience of modern slavery, alongside practical recommendations for government, business and service providers on strengthening prevention and recovery efforts.

Uniquely, this project was undertaken with people with lived experience of modern slavery leading and participating right across the process, starting with the project's conceptualisation, and continuing through to the drafting of the final report and its recommendations.

As Sarah Schricker, Director of Survivor Connections explains, *"This project was born out of the need to be a part of the conversations about our economic recovery and empowerment, rather than just being the subjects of them. To ensure our voices lead conversations about the barriers and opportunities in building economic empowerment, supporting our healing and preventing further harm.*"

Findings include that:

- For people who have experienced modern slavery, economic empowerment is not just about earning an income, it's central to their ability to rebuild functional autonomy, safety, dignity, and long-term recovery.
- Survivors need consistent access to safe, long term housing, education, trauma responsive work opportunities, financial literacy, healthcare, and peer support.
- Current systems require major reform if we want to prevent exploitation and support sustainable futures.

"Participants talked about major financial burdens they carried after their exploitation, such as having lost apartments they had owned, or being saddled with large debts related to their exploitation. Some described having to live constantly on the move, in their car with their children, either for safety reasons or for lack of housing. These are fixable issues that need to be urgently addressed." said Fiona David, CEO of Fair Futures, the delivery partner for this project.

"It was important to us that the design of this project was truly survivor led, to support unrestrained truth telling from survivors. Survivors responded, and were clear that they wanted their experiences known in order to influence positive system change. It is now up to all of us to make this change happen." Carolyn Gowers, Executive Director of Project Respect.

The report includes a number of recommendations for reform, including to:

1. Design and deliver services for survivors of modern slavery that restore functional autonomy.
2. Recognise and embed lived expertise across all anti-slavery efforts.
3. Expand services from crisis to long term recovery, early intervention and prevention.
4. Ensure sustainable economic recovery for survivors of modern slavery.
5. Implement trauma responsive and trauma transformative practice across anti-slavery efforts.

As Matilda Constable-Webb, Director of Operations for Survivor Connections notes, *"Prevention starts when systems listen. This report proves what happens when survivors are not just the subject of research, they are also the co-authors of solutions."*

Background

This project was a collaboration between Survivor Connections, Project Respect and Fair Futures, with funding from the Community Crime Prevention Program: National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020-25 Grant Program Round 2.

Survivor Connections led with lived expertise, provided peer support, and created opportunities to build community. It shaped the project's vision to centre survivor perspectives on economic empowerment and prevention.

Project Respect brought frontline service expertise, created the opportunity for a survivor-led collaboration, and ensured participant wellbeing through interpretation services and access to case managers or counsellors.

Fair Futures contributed consultation expertise, project management, and a trauma-informed approach, as the project delivery partner. This balanced survivor leadership with operational rigour.

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