

WHY SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA SHOULDN'T SPEAK TO THE MEDIA

“A single conversation can undo months of psychological healing”

In journalism, nothing is more powerful than first-hand testimony.

Any reporter shining a light on human trafficking, slavery or child sexual abuse knows this and wants to include the voice of a survivor; because nobody tells a story better than someone with lived experience.

However, survivors of both human trafficking and child sexual abuse carry life-long psychological scars that media exposure may aggravate. Blue Dragon wants to share with the media stories which will inspire hope and effect change, but we do not allow journalists or researchers to interview survivors who are in our care. Here, we explain why.



TRAUMA AND RE-TRAUMATISATION

A key reason for protecting abuse survivors from media interviews, or interviews with researchers is something psychologists call “re-traumatisation”.

Chau Thi Minh Dinh, Blue Dragon’s senior psychologist, puts it in simple terms: “Talking about their traumatic experiences can traumatise the survivors again.”

Dinh, who has personally treated over 600 human trafficking survivors and 60 survivors of child sexual abuse in the past decade, emphasises that after a seemingly harmless conversation “a lot of problems will come up... It might take months or years of therapy to fix that,” she says.

According to Blue Dragon's co-CEO Skye Maconachie, trafficking survivors typically haven't been through **"just a single episode of trauma."** The girls and women who fall prey to traffickers tend to already be vulnerable, "because they come from very poor or very difficult backgrounds," she says. "Quite often, there is a history of childhood trauma already. Just talking about one episode can trigger a very complex history of trauma."

This "complex psychology" also applies to children who have been sexually abused. In these cases, in addition to the low self-esteem and history of trauma, the survivors might experience conflicting feelings. "If a paedophile has groomed them, there can be a feeling of loyalty or care towards their abuser. What happens after the abuse and in the process of reporting it and working with the police is very, very difficult for a child," explains Maconachie.

That is why asking children who have been sexually abused to "talk about it to someone who is not working with them closely and has the expertise to support them long-term is not helpful to the child, but rather the opposite. It's very harmful," says Blue Dragon's co-CEO. Maconachie also emphasizes that this doesn't necessarily improve when time passes and the children become adults. Even years after that experience, "talking about it is still opening a can of worms for that person."

Both for trafficking and child sexual abuse survivors, the potential effects a conversation with the media can have on their mental health are devastating. "We work with survivors over a very long period of time to help them recover, and one conversation can undo all of that."

"TRAUMA IS BURIED DEEP"

When survivors first arrive at Blue Dragon, they are deeply traumatised, and unraveling that trauma is a complex, multi-layered process. "They usually feel shame and guilt, and they blame themselves for what happened," says psychologist Dinh.

When girls and young women who have been enslaved and deprived of their freedom arrive at Blue Dragon, the first step is helping them become "functional in their daily routines and see that they have control over their lives again," says Maconachie. That first part of the recovery process usually takes from six months to a year and it includes basic aspects, such as taking care of their personal hygiene, learning how to make friends again and building up their confidence, trust and soft skills.

With victims of sexual abuse, the age of the child plays a major role in determining the type of treatment they need. "Particularly with younger children, there's family involvement in the process, in order to build up their skills so they know how to support their child," says Maconachie.

In common with trafficking survivors, it may take a very long time until the child is ready to talk about their traumatic experience. "Trauma is the main problem, but it's buried deep," says Blue Dragon's senior psychologist.

Throughout the two or three months that patient and therapist spend directly tackling the most traumatic episodes of their experience, there are plenty of "ups and downs." The negative emotions come up, and there are both behavioural and physical responses, according to Dinh.

“A PSYCHOLOGIST IS EQUIPPED TO UNDERSTAND EACH INDIVIDUAL, THEIR EXPERIENCE AND THEIR TRIGGERS. IF SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T HAVE THE FULL CONTEXT TALKS TO THEM ABOUT IT, THAT'S WHEN THE RE-TRAUMATISATION CAN BE TRIGGERED. THEY MIGHT FEEL LIKE THEY ARE BEING FORCED TO RETELL PARTS OF THEIR STORY THAT THEY HAVEN'T YET DEALT WITH DURING THEIR THERAPEUTIC PROCESS,” BLUE DRAGON'S CO-CEO SAYS.



As a result, an array of problems may arise. **Lack of concentration**, feelings of loneliness, **shame** or moodiness are some of the mildest responses, according to Dinh. However, more severe problems can appear. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the worst one,” the psychologist says.

Some symptoms of this disorder include **nightmares, vivid reliving of traumatic episodes** and physical pain. In some cases, survivors can “engage in some very high risk behaviours and inflict **self-harm**,” adds Maconachie.

SURVIVORS WILL AGREE TO TALK OUT OF GRATITUDE, EVEN IF THEY DON'T WANT TO

When Blue Dragon receives media or researcher requests to talk to trafficking or sexual abuse survivors, we respond that it will not be possible to talk directly to survivors, and we don't approach survivors asking for their participation.

It's impossible to get real consent from survivors in this situation because of a basic power imbalance. “Because Blue Dragon supports them, they want to give back to say ‘thank you’ for the support. It's difficult for them to say ‘no’ if they don't want to talk to a journalist or researcher. They feel like they have to say yes,” says Dinh.

Blue Dragon does not want to put the survivors in this position, as their recovery is the top priority. “Blue Dragon is the one with the money and resources to help their life get better. The gratitude they feel because of our help immediately creates a power imbalance. For people who have experienced terrible trauma and who come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, that's deeply ingrained,” elaborates Maconachie.



HAVING CONTROL OVER THEIR STORY EMPOWERS SURVIVORS

In addition to helping survivors regain control over their lives, Blue Dragon advocates for them having “control over their own story.” According to both Maconachie and Dinh, ensuring that survivors decide how and what parts of their story are shared has several positive implications.

This helps to prevent “victim blaming” and the stigma from their communities when they go back, as it means survivors can keep their anonymity and choose what episodes of their experience they want to disclose.

And when the decision about sharing the story is left to the survivor, trust is maintained. This trust is “crucial” for street children who have suffered sexual abuse, says Maconachie, as Blue Dragon “intervenes in a point of great vulnerability.”

The girls and women rescued from trafficking “have been tricked, they have been sold one or several times, they’ve been abused or raped on many occasions... Before they get here, their trust has been destroyed,” says Blue Dragon’s co-CEO.

Because of this, social workers and psychologists may work with the survivors for hundreds of hours in order to rebuild that sense of trust. Blue Dragon sees that trust as an “anchor” for the survivors as they rebuild their lives. A survivor’s recovery is a path filled with ups and downs in which having someone they trust who they can reach out to is essential. “It’s challenging for us, people they trust, to absolutely guarantee how a published story or a piece of research is going to be used, especially once it goes online,” says Maconachie.

For Blue Dragon, a crucial goal of therapy is for survivors to be able to move on, and having to retell their story doesn’t help them attain this goal. “We allow them to leave the whole experience behind them and not have to return to it. We want them to lead normal lives, instead of being forever defined as a survivor of trafficking or sexual abuse”.

ENSURING THE SURVIVORS’ AND THEIR FAMILIES’ SAFETY

The safety of survivors also plays an important role in Blue Dragon’s decision to not allow interviews. “There is a real risk to physical safety if a trafficker was to follow a story and get enough information to figure out where the survivor is or how she got away,” says Maconachie. In these cases, even if the trafficker is arrested - which can take time - they may have been part of a larger trafficking ring, or the trafficker’s family members may be out for revenge. There are many unknowns.

Blue Dragon’s co-CEO recalls a time when a bounty was offered for one of the girls the organisation rescued. “The message travelled back to her trafficker. Threats were made to her family and money was offered in exchange for information on her whereabouts. And that’s without being in the media, just from word of mouth,” she says.

Just as an interview with a trafficking survivor can lead to unexpected danger, filming or following a rescue operation is also very dangerous. “The safety and protection of the victims is our priority. **You need a trained team working on that, without any distractions** that could put the girl’s life at risk,” says Maconachie.

The dangers are also plenty when it comes to children who have suffered sexual abuse and their families. Some of the children Blue Dragon rescues have been groomed into paedophile rings. Maconachie explains in these situations, if the members of the criminal organisation found out a survivor was talking, they would team up to threaten the child, in an attempt to silence them so they can avoid legal charges.

In the same way, when the abuse takes place in a community where both victim and abuser live, “there is a huge threat to the child and their family,” she says. The family of the perpetrator, who may be a neighbour, an acquaintance or even a relative, may “deny the abuse ever happened and threaten the family of the child.”

The families of abusers feel “shame” when one of their members is labelled a sex abuser, and so they sometimes resort to “victim blaming” and threats. In some cases, the threats result in the children and families withdrawing their statements. “Those families have to live in those communities and face those threats,” Maconachie says.

“We do not share stories for the sake of sharing a story, or to glorify the work that we do. At the end of the day, we are here to save lives and we can’t let anything endanger that.”

DOES THIS MEAN WE WILL NOT SHARE STORIES?

Despite the barriers to interviewing survivors and joining rescue operations, Blue Dragon does share stories and information. We not only believe these stories will help the world understand the terrifying reality of sexual abuse and modern day slavery, but also that they are necessary to stir people to action so they can become a part of the solution.

We regularly share stories on social media, with identities concealed, and can make available more detailed case studies for journalists looking for a story or researchers who need information. Blue Dragon staff who work directly with trafficking survivors are able to explain their work and, where appropriate, share the stories of individual survivors.

Protecting the wellbeing and safety of survivors, while also bringing their stories to the world’s attention, requires sensitivity and care. We hope that the information here sheds light on the scope and depth of the trauma survivors must deal with, and we encourage reporters to use and quote this source when publishing about our work or on human trafficking, slavery and sex abuse more generally.



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