

A youth work approach to raising awareness of human trafficking locally and globally.

By Megan Phair from Invisible Traffick

Human trafficking is the movement, coercion, and exploitation of people for profit. This profit doesn't go into the hands of the person being trafficked but the one who owns them. Invisible Traffick exists as an educational force within the UK. The 'Journey to Empowerment' programme and the 'Junior Education Programme' are two of the main educational areas of work. These educate the respective ages of children and young people about human trafficking and the risks, in an age-appropriate way. The programme that I coordinate is 'The Journey' which is an 8-week educational programme for young people aged 12-18. Our programme has to have a multidisciplinary approach because we are in a multitude of different settings where young people are found - from alternative education to secure care. This is a reflection on the approach and role of the youth worker within multi-disciplinary settings and in partnership across other disciplines.

As I reflect on our work with this programme, I have found it interesting to observe the different approaches taken by different fields in working with young people. The approach to trauma is but one. Some of the elements of our work may cause a traumatic response from the young people as they face or connect with issues and events. Indeed, Dr Gabor Maté states that, "Trauma causes us to disconnect from ourselves, our sense of value, and from the present moment." Through our work, we want young people to feel, to be inspired, to fight against trafficking with us and be ambassadors for change with their friends and in their communities. Due to the nature of this work we have to reflect and attentively find the right steps to working with the most vulnerable young people. The reflection guides us in managing the trauma responses for each young person as we stop, pause, and think after each movement forward. Through this process we may find that thorough training is needed for the staff members who are working with the young people day to day or there is a need to state at the beginning of each session that young people may leave at any point and that they are allowed to do so. The process of reflection for young people helps them to reinstate and understand the power of choices when we as practitioners respect their choices and boundaries, compared to other professions that these young people may have interacted with.

It's complicated moving between health and social care environments and centre-based youth environments as the methods of communication with young people and articulation of young people can vary. Within a care home environment there is a different energy that a youth worker will bring, which a young person may be more receptive to, especially with this subject matter. Within the skillset of youth work we have the ability to play out scenarios and outcomes, to predict behaviours

and how to respond. For me, as a youth worker, I'm focused on micro behaviours. An example of this is when we bring up a subject such as CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) there may be glances that the young people share that others would dismiss whereas I am asking the question 'Why?', 'Why this subject?', 'Why the glance at that person?'. Ultimately the workers who are with young people daily will know more about them and their story. However, there is a latent superpower for those workers who are not familiar with the young people. We may notice things that others do not and can pursue some subtle behaviour where another worker cannot. The young people may also feel that they are in a safe space with someone who hasn't known them for years or has an opinion on who they are or what they have 'done'.

Within the space and mindset of a charity there might be an expectation to share the story of a victim but due to my knowledge base as a youth worker I know that the story that has been generously shared with me is not mine to use for a tick box or profit exercise. Trafficked victims are often made to feel like they have no agency over their choices, not dissimilar to the way some adults treat young people (removing choices from them). As youth workers we emphasise that young people have the agency of choice, we respect and nurture the stories they tell us and thank them for their story. To put it simply 'Journey to Empowerment' is the path we walk with young people; they've experienced the worst of humanity and have survived. Where some professionals see troublesome young people, we see potential. These young people are leaders, community activists, future youth workers, lawyers and much more. We cannot state that we are ethical practitioners without emphasising agency to these young people, especially in this sensitive line of work.

I will not claim that we get it right in every situation or circumstance, but I know that we are diligently showing up for young people in this arena. Especially young people who have only known the justice system as the response to their trauma; we intercede for these young people by educating them but also educating police officers, youth workers and social workers. We take tentative steps forward to gain their trust and respect through consistently reflecting on our work and ensuring it is helping young people. These young people need their stories to be heard, they need to feel understood and cared for and I believe that the sensitivity, congruence, and energy that a youth workers holistic approach brings provides that space for them to be themselves and heal.

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