

Executive summary

“Economic empowerment to me means that no one has power over you because of poverty or disadvantage. It means that you can thrive instead of fighting just to survive. It means you can do the things you need to be well, and not be forced to do things that make you unwell. It means when people do bad things to you, you have a way to do something about it.”

(Pre-interview survey response)

This project captured survivor perspectives on how economic empowerment and participation through community engagement can shape strategies to prevent modern slavery. This project was undertaken with survivors leading and participating in each part of the following processes:

1. **An Inception Workshop** held with survivors to develop the concept and approach.
2. **A pre-interview survey** used to help participants prepare and share their views more broadly on the topic.
3. **Individual structured interviews** which captured survivor perspectives on economic empowerment.
4. **Reviewing interview transcripts, analysing survey and interview results**, and preparing a summary of key themes.
5. **A Meaning Making Workshop** held with survivors to explore important themes and consider recommendations for the report.
6. **A post-interview survey** that invited survivors to share feedback on their experience of participation.
7. **A report was produced** outlining the project’s undertakings, findings, and recommendations.

The project recognised that engagement offered survivors opportunities for growth, and provided access to support that strengthened capabilities and ensured that participation aligned with people’s recovery journey.

Empowering participation: Towards partnership

True empowerment requires shifting power so survivors become active partners in both their recovery and systemic responses to modern slavery. This project embodied this through a unique cross-sectoral partnership involving government, a service provider, a business, and a survivor-led organisation:

The Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department provided resourcing and a strategic focus on prevention. Its *Modern Slavery Lived Experience Engagement and Empowerment* document identifies the following key considerations for engaging and empowering lived experience in anti-slavery efforts as:

- Increasing avenues and opportunities for lived experience contribution.
- Creating professional development opportunities.
- Supporting organisations and networks led by people with lived experience.
- Creating employment opportunities.
- Committing to continuous improvement.

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

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.

Together, these partners delivered a trauma-informed, survivor-led project that demonstrates how uniting lived and professional expertise produces stronger outcomes for both prevention and remedy of modern slavery.

Lived experience in practice: Participation and engagement

Meaningful engagement with people with lived

Figure 1 - Levels of engagement²



experience is intentional, creating space for different levels of participation and recognising diverse ways of contributing and connecting. Survivor Connections' *Levels of Engagement* framework³ utilises a spectrum of contribution based on levels of inclusion, ranging from more consultative to more collaborative approaches (Figure 1). In this project, people with lived experience engaged at all levels, in three different contexts of participation:

- **Survivor leadership** in the co-design and codelivery of this project.
- **Collaborative partnership with allies**, as participants, consultants and employees to advise and collaborate on deliverables.
- **Connecting with peers in the broader survivor community** to participate and collaborate in the project.

Findings

An Inception Workshop co-designed by Fair Futures and Survivor Connections shaped the project's direction and produced the Freedom Tree metaphor (Figure 2) to frame the concept of economic empowerment across three categories:

1. The conditions that enable economic empowerment (roots).
2. How economic empowerment is expressed in someone's life (leaves).
3. Influences on economic empowerment outside one's control (clouds).

Analysis of the interview and survey findings through the Freedom Tree framework identified six foundational conditions of economic empowerment (roots).

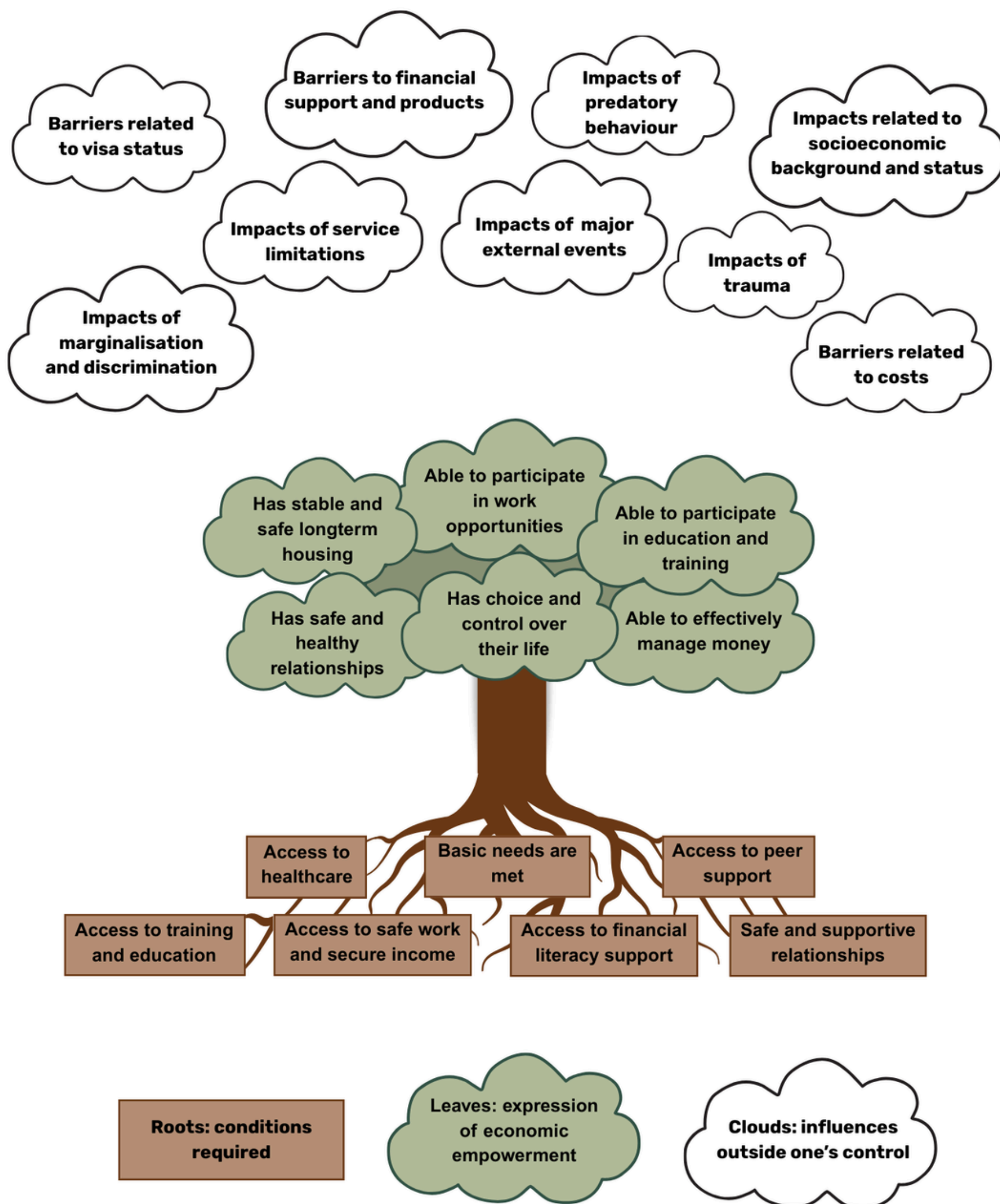
Participants noted that meeting basic needs is essential but not sufficient, with lasting empowerment also requiring access to:

- Safe housing.
- Flexible education.
- Secure work.
- Financial literacy and capability.
- Relational safety and peer support.
- Healthcare.

Participants described the expression of economic empowerment (leaves) as having financial security that enables choice and control across relationships, housing, financial autonomy, education, and work. Participants identified external impacts and barriers (clouds) to economic empowerment, including trauma, marginalisation, discrimination, major external events, and predatory behaviour by perpetrators. Additional barriers arose from service limitations, socioeconomic status, costs, legal status, and restricted access to financial support.

Survivor perspectives stressed that prevention relies on protecting agency, choice, and control, requiring reforms to antislavery efforts that restore self-determination. They emphasised that the conditions enabling economic empowerment play a protective role against modern slavery. The project also demonstrated the value of lived experience participation, showing that when survivors are supported, remunerated, and engaged as experts, it strengthens both their voices and economic independence. It created professional opportunities to build skills, confidence, and community connection crucial for recovery and empowerment.

Figure 2 - The Freedom Tree



NB: This concept was inspired by the Centre for Social Impact and Social Policy Research Centre's 'Financial wellbeing tree'.⁴ The key features of the leaves, roots and clouds that appear in this report were sourced from surveys and interviews with participants in this project.

Recommendations

A Meaning Making Workshop with the Survivor Connections Steering Committee analysed the themes in the interview and survey findings. These were refined by Fair Futures, survivor consultants, and Project Respect to create recommendations that aim to inform policy, including Australia's next National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery, by strengthening prevention and remedy in practical, measurable ways.

Recommendation 1: Design and deliver services to restore *functional autonomy*

Recommendation 2: Recognise and embed lived expertise across all anti-slavery efforts

Recommendation 3: Expand from crisis response to long-term recovery, early intervention and prevention models

Recommendation 4: Ensure sustainable economic recovery

Recommendation 5: Implement trauma responsive and trauma transformative practice across anti-slavery efforts

Recommendation 1: Design and deliver services to restore *functional autonomy*

We recommend services are designed and delivered to centre survivor choice and control, to restore agency, meet basic needs, strengthen financial and relational capacity, and create self-determined pathways to economic stability, including education and employment.

Implementing in practice: Service plans should support survivors to set goals that address each root condition of economic empowerment, as determinants of access to:

1. Safe housing.
2. Flexible education.
3. Secure work.
4. Financial literacy and capability.
5. Relational safety and peer support.
6. Healthcare.

Measurement of outcome: Progress on each goal

should be evaluated quarterly over 12 months, starting at intake and, with consent, followed up longitudinally. A 12-month review will provide vital feedback on how well services support ongoing progress, regardless of service duration.

Recommendation 2: Recognise and embed lived expertise across all anti-slavery efforts

We recommend anti-slavery efforts across government, civil society and business create opportunities for people with lived experience to engage at every level (participate, advise, collaborate, co-design, co-delivery), developing clear pathways for professional growth and survivor leadership.

Implementing in practice: This will require resourcing and operationalising the integration of lived expertise throughout *all* anti-slavery efforts (e.g., strategic planning, legislative reform, justice responses, policy development, service delivery and projects or initiatives), and creating opportunities for survivors to engage at increasing levels from participation through to co-delivery (participate, advise, collaborate, co-design, co-delivery).

Measurement of outcome: Each funded initiative or project should be required to report on level of lived experience integration based on the following:

1. Number or percentage of people with lived experience that were engaged with or participated.
2. In what capacity (eg. participant, consultant, employee).
3. At what level lived expertise was integrated (participate, advise, collaborate, co-design, co-delivery).

Recommendation 3: Expand from crisis response to long-term recovery, early intervention and prevention models

We recommend needs-based services are resourced for long-term recovery. This is also an investment in prevention, reducing reliance on crisis responses at the expense of effective remediation.

Implementing in practice: This will require instituting multi-year (5–10 year) funding streams for the determinants identified as creating conditions for economic empowerment - access to:

1. Safe housing.
2. Flexible education.
3. Secure work.
4. Financial literacy and capability.
5. Relational safety and peer support.
6. Healthcare.

Measurement of outcome: This will require:

- Sustainable service models to embed assessment mechanisms to conduct quarterly reviews of housing stability, education and employment engagement, retention, and service recipient wellbeing across physical, psychological, and social domains.
- Incorporating survivor feedback processes that capture perspectives on satisfaction, accessibility, and timeliness.

Recommendation 4: Ensure sustainable economic recovery

Legislation and policy reforms must ensure that survivors have direct and consistent access to resources placed in their own hands, enabling them to achieve economic recovery and long-term stability.

Implementing in practice: This will require coordinated legislative and policy reform to:

- Increase financial support payments and income thresholds when transitioning from pensions/support payments to paid employment, so survivors can participate in education and work without losing stability.
- Providing eligibility based, fee-free or subsidised education and training pathways.
- Establishing accessible compensation and reparation schemes that reflect the impact of these serious crimes.

Measurement of outcome: This will require financial support and service programs to embed regular evaluation of outcomes including:

1. Survivor-identified progress on financial stability and livable income.
2. The monitoring or successful access to compensation and reparation schemes.

Recommendation 5: Implement trauma responsive and trauma transformative practice across anti-slavery efforts

We recommend that services, governments, and/or businesses that are engaging with survivors, either as recipients or colleagues sharing lived expertise, prioritise turning trauma-informed theory into trauma-transformative practice to ensure that they contribute to long-term recovery and economic empowerment of survivors.

Implementing in practice: This will need to involve implementing evidence-based, trauma-informed principles:⁵

1. **Creating safety** in interpersonal interactions and practices.
2. Implementing processes that are **clearly communicated, transparent and trustworthy**.
3. Embed access to **peer support** across service provision and engagement contexts.
4. **Collaborative approach** to service provision (between service recipients/provider) and mutual benefits in engagement (as colleagues or participants).
5. Anti-slavery work should put survivor leadership at the heart, ensuring their **voice and choices** guide every effort.
6. Processes for onboarding, accessibility, participation, engagement, and service provision embed intersectional awareness of **cultural, historical, and gender factors**.

Measurement of outcomes: This will require each funded initiative or project to report on the implementation of trauma-informed practice under the principles identified above via reflective practice and continuous improvement mechanisms.

Next steps for Survivor Connections

For survivor leaders, it is essential that knowledge and recommendations are backed by concrete action, ensuring that insights translate into real change and meaningful impact. This project served as a pilot for key tools of Survivor Connections' *Connecting with Engagement Initiative*, including the Levels of Engagement Framework and Engagement Activity Guide. It showed how survivor-led engagement, peer support, and fair remuneration can be embedded in practice.

These learnings are now informing the finalisation of the *Connecting with Engagement Initiative*, which will professionalise how lived expertise is engaged and shared through:

- **A Development Pathway** for survivor consultants and entities engaging with them in ethical, trauma-transformative ways.
- **An Engagement Network** linking survivor consultants with organisations seeking to integrate lived expertise.
- **Practice Resources** providing frameworks, templates, and tools for ethical, professional engagement.

Survivor Connections will act on these findings to pioneer a survivor-led prevention model that integrates economic empowerment, peer support, and systemic advocacy. It is through action and meaningful change that survivors find hope for the future.

**Sarah Schricker and Matilda Constable-Webb,
Survivor Connections.**

