

MOBILIZING JUSTICE FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH SURVIVORS OF EXTREMIST POLYGAMOUS GROUPS

When providing legal services to survivors of human trafficking, it is important to be aware of the cultural factors that may influence the survivor's behaviors, feelings, communication and worldview.

Individuals who have been trafficked through their polygamous culture may be:

- Girls forced to marry older men.
- Boys forced to work to earn their place in the community.

Similar to familial trafficking generally, exploitation taking place in religious cult activity is often normalized and accepted in the family and/or community. The adults entrusted with caring for the children are often the ones grooming and manipulating the children through religious indoctrination. The children in closed communities may have limited or no access to other trusted adults.

Survivors may hold some of the following beliefs:

PATRIARCHY

- Women and children have less value than men.
- Men are the disciplinarians.

LEADER'S ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY

- The religious leader (or, in some cases, the council leading the community) is infallible. He is God's voice and representative on Earth.
- There is no law higher than him, including U.S. law.

1. See "Navigating the Unique Complexities in Familial Trafficking," United States Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2021.

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DUTY

- The main duty is to obey. It is not the individual's place to make decisions for themselves. The individuals are taught to be quiet and not show emotions.
- The family unit is not about the relationship between family members, but the family's obedience and contribution to the community.

FAITH

- Suffering and/or abuse is OK because it means the individual will be blessed in heaven.
- The more the individual suffers, the greater the blessings.

IDENTITY

- Anything that suggests the individual is a victim, including reporting abuse or identifying mental health issues, is weakness.

CHILDREN

- The children don't belong to the parents. They belong to the church or community.
- The parents' main role is to raise righteous, obedient children.

POLYGAMY

- Plural marriage is not only normal but holy and necessary to reach heaven.

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- Sexuality outside of the community's proscribed rules is a sin. Girls and women are not allowed to interact with men who are not their family members.
- Teenagers' exploration of sexuality, including commingling with the opposite sex, pornography and masturbation, are forbidden.

PUNISHMENT

- The worst possible punishment is to not be part of the community. It means spiritual damnation.

OUTSIDERS

- Outsiders are not to be trusted. Social services, law enforcement and other non-community members asking questions do not understand the community's way of life and are a threat.

Survivors may be going through a long process of coming to terms with the abuse and religious indoctrination they have experienced. They may not have the language or clarity to understand, much less express, what they have gone through. Feelings of shame, confusion and sadness may arise.

To build rapport, respect and trust with the survivors you serve, we recommend employing some of the following techniques:

SAFETY

- Creating a safe and unrushed environment for the to feel comfortable is of utmost importance.

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SAFETY

- Avoid making assumptions, including about what part of the traumatic event the individual would find most disturbing.
- Avoid intrusive questions to satiate your own curiosity into unnecessary information about family members. Limit questions to what is relevant to the case.

PATIENCE

- Plan on having multiple meetings with the individual. Take things very slowly, particularly in the first meeting.
- Let them guide the conversation and information that they want to share.
- Offer to take breaks or slow things down.
- Survivors might not be able to remember past traumatic events in a linear fashion. Find creative ways to get the details out. For example, ask the survivor if they recall what season the event occurred in, whether it was morning or night and if they would prefer to write out what happened on their own (instead of verbalizing it).

EYE CONTACT & SEATING

- Some survivors were taught not to make eye contact with those who are not their family members, Thus, an attorney's direct gaze from across the table can be uncomfortable.
- Some survivors may associate a "face-to-face" conversation with punishment. Consider seating arrangements so that the attorney is not directly across from the survivor and staring at them. Sitting side-by-side to talk could be more appropriate - but at a safe distance.

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ACTIVE LISTENING

- Conveying that the person has your full attention. Use nonverbal cues to show that they are your priority. Limit interruptions.

HONESTY

- Be open about limited knowledge in this area. Ask open-ended questions about their experience in a non-judgmental way. Try to understand and empathize before determining the proper course of action.

RESPECT

- Many survivors will be very sensitive about being treated as a victim or viewed as weak. Make sure that you employ the various methods to empower them, including by focusing on survivor choice and careful use of language.

LANGUAGE

- Observe what language the individual uses to describe their experience and use that language consistently. Or ask them how they would like certain individuals referenced.
- Many survivors grew up with more formal references for their family members. Rather than using informal terms for family members (e.g., dad, grandpa, kid), use more formal terms (e.g., father, grandfather, daughter, son). Expect that they will be soft-spoken and emotionally restrained in their responses.

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SYMBOLISM

- Dress modestly (cover your arms and legs).
- Don't wear the color red (it may be associated with the devil).

TRIGGERS

- Many survivors will experience triggering events that put them back into a state of re-experiencing their trauma. Usually, these triggers are very specific and personal. For example, a smell in your office may remind them of a particular scent they smelled when they were being trafficked. Another example is them seeing an individual that reminds them of their trafficker.
- Be aware of the signs, such as shutting down, panicking, rapid breathing and sweating.

The good news is that investing in building rapport, respect and trust on the front end can mitigate some of the effects of trauma and help repair the person's sense of distrust with outsiders. The more the survivors trust you and feel you are there to support and help them, the easier it should become for them to open up and share their stories with you.

For additional techniques, see ALIGHT's "[Tips for Attorneys Working with Trafficking Survivors.](#)"