

UNDERSTANDING ASSISTANCE

**The psycho-social needs
of survivors of slavery
in Mauritania**

Guide for practitioners



Introduction

Slavery is a complex reality in Mauritania. People in slavery are deprived of fundamental rights and of access to civil status, education, health, decent accommodation, and often suffer extreme poverty.

Experience of slavery from birth have a huge impact on the construction of identity of the survivors and leave a significant legacy after they manage to escape slavery and live free lives. Having lived in the state of total subjugation to their masters all their lives, they often struggle to adapt to new reality after they emerge from slavery and make decisions about their lives.

It is important to know about, recognise and understand this legacy to effectively assist and support survivors of slavery.

Although securing the most basic living needs for survivors is usually prioritised, an increasing body of evidence points to the importance of addressing people's psychological needs as well in order to really break the cycle of slavery.

Better knowledge of the mental health of survivors of slavery makes it possible to better understand the effects of slavery on the victims and offers additional tools to assist survivors with rebuilding their lives.

This guide aims to support those in the field and provide insights into the less visible, but no less important, psychosocial needs of victims of slavery in Mauritania.

Being a victim, being a survivor

Victims of slavery have been deprived of their liberty, voice and agency. Even when they survive physically, the psychological effects endure long after they leave slavery.

Each survivor, in their uniqueness and depending on their experience, will have developed survival strategies and defence mechanisms against violence. But if they were useful in slavery, they may prove to be a hindrance post-exploitation.

For example, several of the women encountered talked about their isolation and their difficulties with relationships as a source of suffering. They may experience guilt about not being able to have friends, not being liked, and shame about having been in slavery. This fragility surrounding relationships is one of the consequences of the relationships being discouraged or forbidden during exploitation, of avoiding relationships in a context of violence or simply a lack of self-esteem.

How can 'otherness' be overcome afterwards? How do you find your place in a group from which you have been excluded, whose codes remain unknown, to which you did not have the right to belong and in which you feel you don't have legitimacy ?

The path to rebuilding lives is long when the roots go deep; slavery is a state passed down through the generations.





Mental health in Mauritania

Mental health has only recently been raised as an issue in Mauritania.

In situations where there is psychological suffering, recourse to traditional medicine is more common.

Structural and human resources appear limited. In 2005, there were just seven psychologists in Mauritania, including three practising in the mental health sector.

There are currently no psychology training courses in Mauritania.

Mental health is understood through the lens of psychiatric pathology.

Action on mental health is undertaken as part of a national policy to address poverty, support reintegration and ensure respect for human rights.

Key figures

Beneficiaries of SOS-Esclaves,

(based on internal data from the 465 people assisted since 2005)

69% women

31 % men

51 % children

96 % in slavery from birth

100% in a precarious economic situation

96 % suffered physical violence

65 % have psychological problems

80 % of people encountered in interviews appear to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



Slavery and its consequences

Descent-based slavery is the most common form of slavery in Mauritania.

The children of slaves can be given by the masters to members of their families or friends.

People in slavery are usually engaged in household chores, looking after animals and fetching water from the well; they are generally at the disposal of masters.

The violence suffered has major consequences for physical and mental health.

Only a few cases have been judged to date, even though several hundred complaints have been filed.



Representations

Under international law, slavery is defined as the status or condition of a person over whom any or all the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.

Representations of slavery often feature the transatlantic slave trade, and chains. However, current forms of slavery are complex and identifying them is sometimes made difficult by pre-existing beliefs about them.

Deconstructing our representations is essential not only to recognize situations where there is slavery, but also to recognize those who are still victims of it today.

Exercising the powers of ownership does not only mean the physical deprivation of freedom, but also and especially the establishment of a system which deprives the enslaved person of these rights as a human and citizen.

The person is deprived of fundamental rights such as civil status and access to education.

12 stereotypes about slavery

Workshop Nouakchott 2018

1	Slaves are chained	The chains are no longer used as in the days of the slave trader. However, it is the relationship of domination and control that has replaced it depriving the slave of freedom
2	there are slave markets in mauritania.	There is no slave market in Mauritania.
3	slaves are necessarily black	Slavery affects all countries of the world and blacks are not the only victims
4	only the harratines would be enslaved	It is not only the Harratines who are concerned, Soninkés, Wolofs and Pulaar are also victims
5	having slaves is a social notoriety	As slavery is punishable by law, it can not constitute fame. However some people still believe it.
6	the slave is a liar, he is ugly	These are prejudices aimed at degrading slaves
7	The slave is not allowed to marry	It is wrong anyone can get married
8	the masters equally treat his children and the children of slaves	There is no equal treatment, the children of the masters are free, schooled while the children of slaves are not free and do not have access to education, they must work from an early age
9	the slave inherits	All that is to the slave his master is appropriate, there is no inheritance possible.
10	slaves can not have marital status	False they can and should have a civil status, it is often the master who opposes it. The absence of marital status is a major problem for their social insertions
11	the slaves are all dressed in rags	Having no resources, slaves wear the clothes they are given
12	the slave is lazy, docile he lacks ambition	Given his workload he is far from lazy. His condition forces him to submit and his prospects are reduced

The mental health conditions of survivors of slavery

Getting out of slavery is not about physically moving somewhere, and going from one world to another. It is a major, radical change which may prove to be destabilising if it is not done with assistance.

Most of the people interviewed explained that they had been enslaved since birth: "as soon as I saw day," they say. So early attachments develop in a context where there is no freedom, quite often in addition to no family ties, insofar as the child was the result of rape or a brief relationship. The father is sometimes not identified and most of the time absent as a father to the child. In addition, many stories of women mention the early separation from their baby "given" to a third party.

In this context, a major point, which is characteristic of the status of slave, must be emphasised: The slave and their family is not a subject but an object, whose first duty is to satisfy the desire of someone else: the master.

Humans construct their identity through otherness: it's through the eyes of others, in a family, cultural and social context, that identity is forged. However, in the case of slavery it is otherness – the slave as a distinct person – which is under attack, impeding this already complex process. People who were in slavery describe very few interactions with the families they serve and with the outside world. They also describe a lot of isolation and neglect, from the earliest age.

Negation of the other as an equal being is serious and destructive. Leaving slavery proves to be a long and mentally costly process insofar as significant changes to identity are required.



Trauma

Trauma may develop when the person suffers regular violence. It is also the consequence of exposure to shocking, brutal and sudden events, during which the person was afraid of dying.

Following the violence and shocking situations which created the trauma, the person's internal reality changed. Each traumatic experience is embedded. The difficulty with the most emotionally-charged memories is that they are sometimes part of a traumatic memory, and other memories can't be retrieved because of the shock endured.

Most of the time, after a traumatic event, the individual manages to re-discover balance and find strategies to cope with the stress and anxieties generated. Sometimes the symptoms remain in the long term, and then the person may suffer from Post-



Trauma and violence

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or threats against others and oneself against a group or community that causes or is likely to cause trauma, psychological harm, developmental problems or one death (World Health Organization).

Violence has different expressions

Physical, psychological, sexual, economic, verbal, etc.

The consequences are multiple

Injuries, shame, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, depression, headaches, etc.

The repetition of violence creates considerable damage especially when it has been perpetrated since childhood. Despite their repetition, they must not be trivialized.

Gender-based violence affects women and girls. They are often minimized especially in groups where the feminine gender is considered inferior to the masculine gender.

It is important to remember their forbidden.

Shame When the person tells you their story, they may be worried to see in your eyes that their shame was justified. Also have a caring attitude without judgment.

In interviews with victims

SECURE: Make sure the person feels safe and ask a few questions to find out if they feel safe, if there are threats to them.

DECUSSION: nothing justifies violence. Even though the person did this, it does not justify that she be subjected to violence.

remember the **PROHIBITED:** there are laws that prohibit violence and protect the person.

The trauma can develop when the person experiences regular abuse. It is also the consequence of exposure to a shocking, brutal, sudden event, during which the person may have been afraid of dying

Stress, stun, fear are constant in high traumatic stress situations. Stress is a transient bio-physiological reaction, it can be stimulating, life-saving by mobilizing the survival instinct. The symptoms of the trauma are many and can last in time: sleep disorders, headaches, depression, lack of confidence, suspicion, forgetfulness, flashback, etc.

Secondary trauma is about people who, like you, are assisting survivors of slavery and face daily grim narratives, sadness, despair. The risk is to be traumatized in turn. Exchange regularly with other members of the network to share and reflect together on the most difficult situations.

Forgetting, remembering

People who have experienced situations of violence often say they want to forget.

Following the violence, shocking situations that created trauma, the internal reality of the person was changed. Every lived experience is recorded. The difficulty of the most emotionally charged memories is that they are sometimes part of a traumatic memory, the other memories could not be mobilized because of the shock suffered.

Reassure the person of his right not to express himself if it is too painful, leave him time. However explain to him that to forget must first remember.

Identifying the trauma

The victims encountered have different symptoms which indicate psychological trauma.

Sadness, depression, lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem

Aggressiveness, withdrawal, feeling misunderstood

Sleep disorders, nightmares, mental distress, anxiety.

Relationship difficulties, avoiding relationships, indifference, limited affect

Memory problems, spatial-temporal problems

If these symptoms persist for several months the person may have post-traumatic stress disorder.

80% of people
encountered
suffer from
PTSD



Psychological redress and legal redress

Resilience is a concept borrowed from physics. It refers to the ability of the body to resist pressure and re-adopt its original structure. In psychology, resilience is defined by the ability to live, re-forge an identity and continue to exist despite the violence and traumatic events experienced. The violence suffered destroys the person physically, psychologically and also socially. It must be "repaired".

Psychosocial support takes time. It is important to develop a trusting relationship and not be intrusive. In this support system, the end goal is not to obtain evidence or to check the veracity of the comments of survivors of slavery. Above all, this is about offering a place to speak freely and help them find strategies to feel better and organise their lives.

It is also important to get redress, particularly by filing a complaint. Indeed, the criminal justice solution which may be found for the victim, but also as a third party, reminds us that a society must combat all forms of violence in it.



Interview techniques

The people you meet may not necessarily consider themselves to be victims, so you need to be careful about how you speak to them. Try to discuss questions about basic needs: accommodation, health, administrative, etc., which are needs that were neglected when they were in slavery.

Go to a quiet place, where confidentiality is guaranteed and where you know you will not be disturbed (with visits to the office, telephone calls, etc.)

Ensure that the person feels safe and trusts you

Question your own representations: of violence, slavery, what a victim is like, etc. Faced with the person, the discrepancy between what we imagine and the reality can lead us to reject them, doubt them or even judge them.

It is better to conduct the first interviews with someone else in order to avoid taking on the emotional burden of the interview alone and avoid an excessive emotional attachment to the

The assistance-based relationship sometimes leads to having expectations related to the assistance given. The person being helped can sometimes feel indebted and that they owe something for the assistance provided. It is important to think about the assistance-based relationship in order to avoid reproducing an unbalanced relationship system.

Use a monitoring form that you will fill in with the person to define their needs and that you will update at each interview. This will make it possible to track the development of the situation and report the progress made to the person, as well as the objectives already achieved and those to be achieved.



Testimonies and narrative

During the period of slavery these people were deprived of freedom of speech. This deprivation, in terms of the ability to express themselves, has an effect on narration ability. During interviews we can observe behaviours such as avoidance and very short answers to questions, as the person is not in the habit of expressing themselves.

Furthermore, by having to talk, providing details and specifics can be difficult insofar as we are having to bear witness in order to find out as much as possible to help them.

This situation can be characterised by oversights, revisions and adjustments by the person of their story. Accustomed to violence, they were able to minimise it and thus omit talking about events which would be essential for us.

It is important to offer several meetings spaced apart in order to get a sense of the person's life story.

Recording this story should preferably be done with someone else, not only to have two people listen to it, but also to avoid being too emotionally involved.



Testimony in the media is a tricky issue insofar as it is the person's representation of themselves, and how they perceive themselves, which is being given. By appearing publicly, they risk having to deal with how others view them, their speech and the representation that others might have of them, including doubts: Are they really in slavery? Why should I believe them? Do they have proof?

Before inviting someone to give evidence, it is important to prepare them well and ensure that they are in a sufficiently stable and safe situation to do so. If this is not the case, this exposure could have serious consequences: loss of self-esteem, shame, etc.

Storytelling

Telling is an important step for the survivors of slavery, which is why it is essential to create favorable conditions to welcome this story.

Ambivalence and relationship of influence

Sometimes the person does not realize what is happening and feels an attachment to his former masters that transpires in his speech. This ambivalence must be respected and not judged. It reveals the complexity of the tie-in relationship tinged with attachment. This relationship of hold remains characterized by an imbalanced relationship, the slave person being deprived of his fundamental rights. To get rid of this type of relationship takes time, it is important to let the adult make their own choices. It is important to be on standby with other imbalanced relationships the survivor might have.

Listen to the story

QUIET: Make sure that the room in which you do the interview is reserved and that there will be no passage.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Inform the person that you are bound by professional secrecy and that his information will not be released without his consent.

SECURITY: Make sure the person feels safe and ask a few questions to find out if they feel safe, if there are threats to them.

Have a welcoming attitude. Propose to drink, put the person at ease, plan time.

Address the issues of primary accommodation, health and administrative needs ... which are all needs that have been neglected. This is a starting point to build the relationship.

Do the interview with two (at least the first meetings) in order not to be caught in too many affects and to be able to exchange with your partner.

Victims and victimisation

The people you meet do not necessarily consider themselves victims. So you have to be vigilant about how to talk to them.

The victimization process

Being a victim means experiencing a destabilizing, shocking, violent, high intensity situation. This situation may have been exceptional or repeated chronically. Different phases characterize victimization:

- Shock, reaction to shock: fear, shock, impotence, guilt, physical reactions such as crying, tremors, etc.
- After the shock: attempts to do with, denial, flashback, anxiety, post traumatic stress.

It is important to let people do the same and realize that they are "victims of". By reminding them of their rights, the prohibitions of the law, the protections that could be effective. His state of distress can sometimes lead us to infantilize or make decisions in his place.

Reassure the person about the need for time to rebuild, this path is not linear. getting out of the violent situation is a first step.

Help the person to regain confidence in themselves, reassuring them and enhancing the path already taken.

Secondary victimization

It is characterized by the feeling that the person is not recognized as a victim or that the opposite has become a victim.

The person may be rejected because she is a victim. Social, administrative, legal responses may not be up to the task. Which can create a feeling of incomprehension, guilt, shame.

Tell - Tell stories

There are different methods and purposes of storytelling: telling your story for help, filing a complaint, testifying, etc. Just as there are different ways to tell: to make an abundant detailed narrative, to say only a few words, to speak in an unaffected monotone, to curl up, to put his hand in front of his mouth while talking ...

Storytelling is a narration that allows us to reintroduce temporality into history, to take on a role of actress.



Empower themselves

The survivors of slavery have been deprived of social networking for many years and often from generation to generation. In addition to the psychological problems we have mentioned above, the social, economic and cultural impacts are numerous and constitute considerable obstacles to finding a place in society.

Also, the rehabilitation of the survivors of slavery as a subject is based not only on their psychological reconstruction but also on the existence of concrete measures of recognition and inclusion of those who have been victims of slavery practices.



Social living conditions

Survivors of slavery have many challenges to rise to fit socially

Absence of civil status

Difficulties with mobility

Filiation / History / Anonymity

Dependency

Isolation and exclusion

Misconceptions about certain codes of living in society

Shame Impact on parenting

No schooling

Difficulties in planning for the future

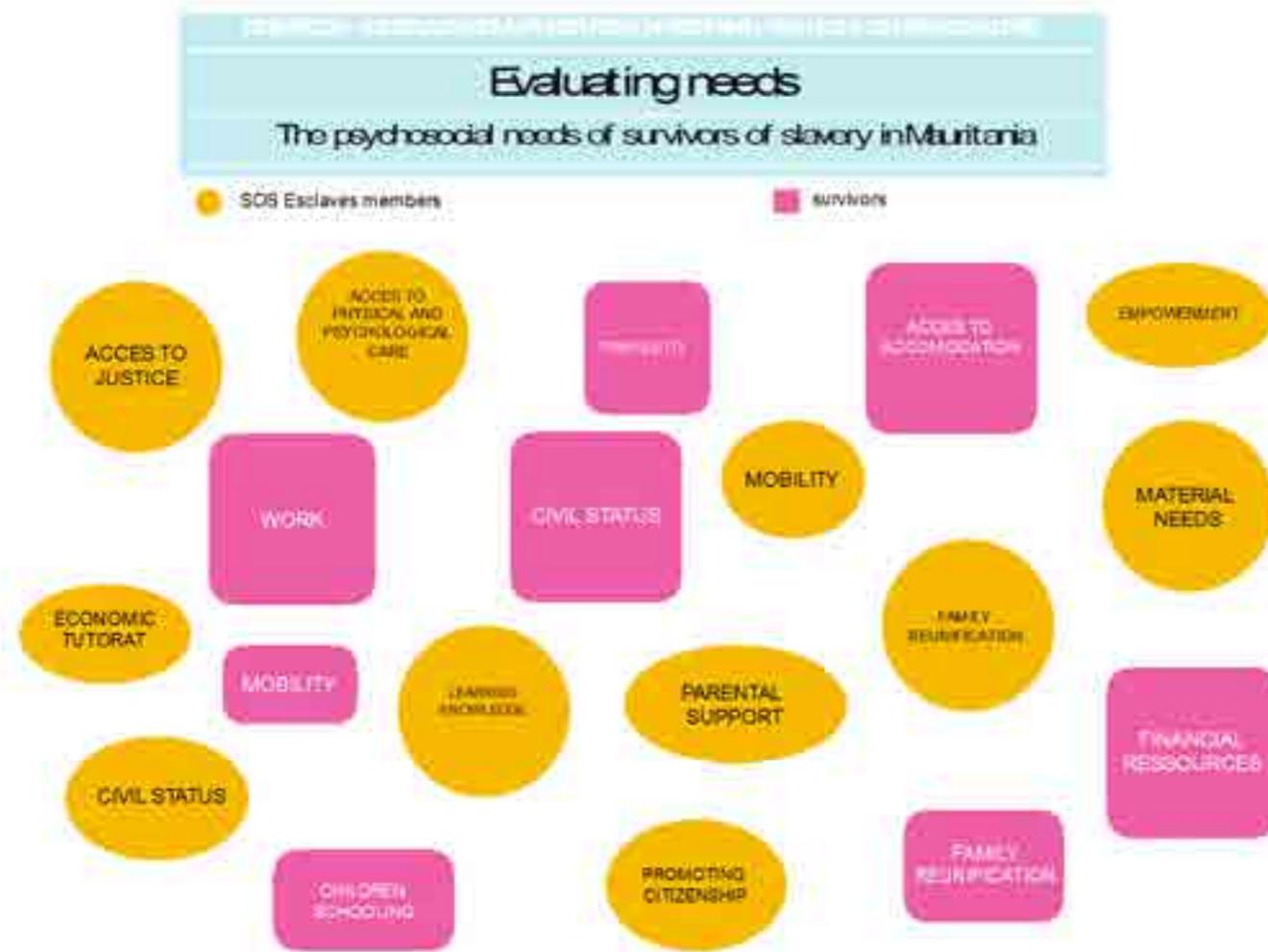
Vulnerability - Dependency

Absence of accommodation

No or few resources

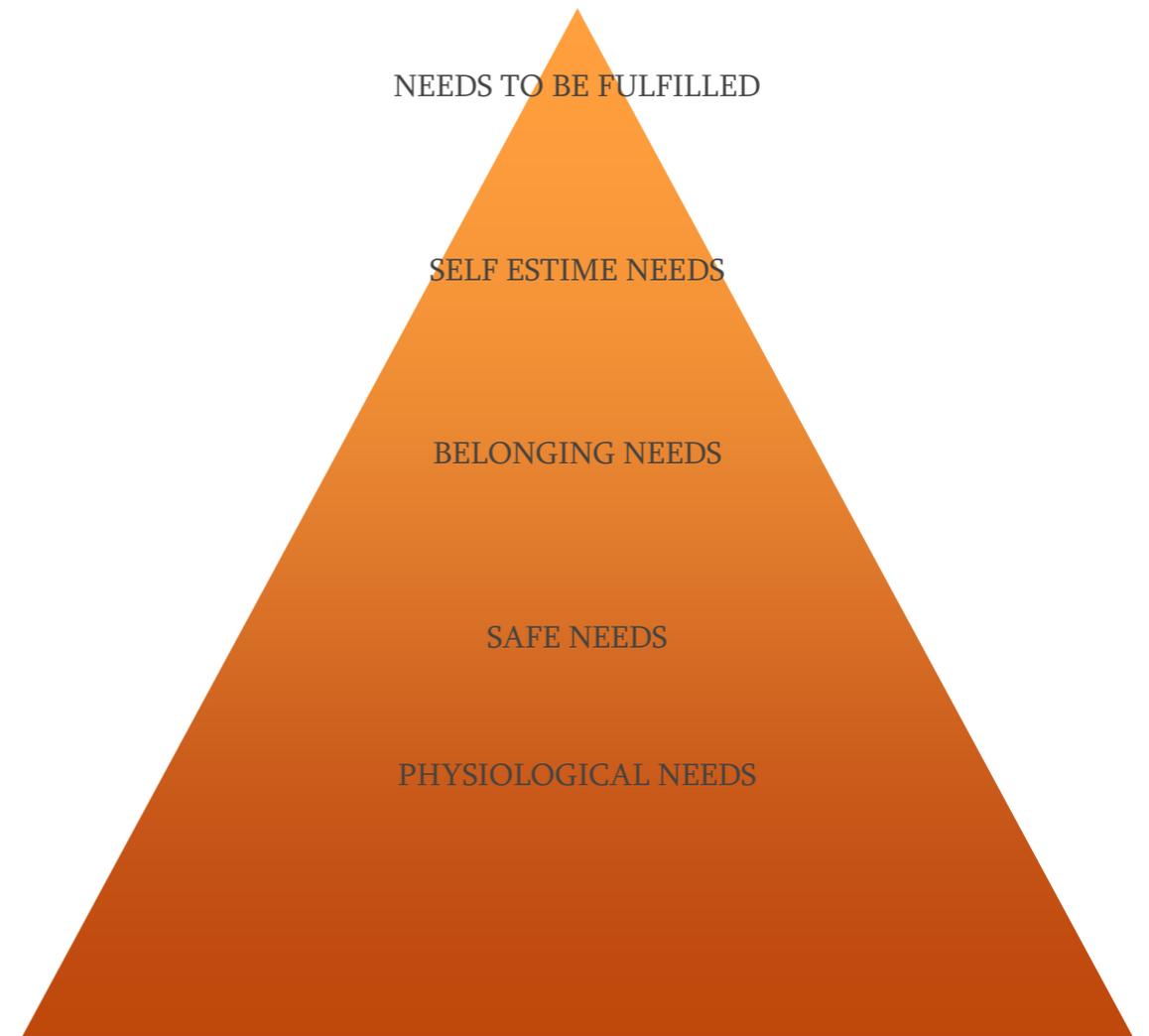


Evaluating needs



The needs defined by survivors of slavery are quite close to those identified by those assisting them. They are primarily concerned with satisfying physiological needs as defined by the Maslow pyramid. Associating the survivors of slavery with evaluating their needs and monitoring their satisfaction makes it possible to encourage a proactive dynamic and empowerment.

It appears that the needs most closely linked to personal fulfilment are not mentioned either by the survivors of slavery or by those assisting them. Their vulnerability and their social and economic precariousness require prioritising, especially as issues concerned with well-being were denied throughout all the years of slavery.



Promoting inclusion and integration

Being included in the social fabric contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the person. In fact, in addition to the autonomy acquired, they take a position in a society from which they were excluded up to that point. Survivors of slavery will have to meet other challenges related to discrimination. However, this social and economic integration, albeit fragile, will 'anchor' them and contribute to supporting them.

Offer training courses leading to a qualification providing knowledge which can be used in the short term in the employment market.

Promote basic formal education: reading, writing, mental maths.

Develop forum-type participatory spaces where people can meet to discuss their difficulties but also the solutions found to get over them.

Promote know-how and life skills.

Facilitate access to mobility with regular financial assistance.

Support IGAs and their collective management with a medium- to long-term plan.

Promote access to care by creating a mutual health insurance fund.



Recommendations

Take into account of the psychosocial needs of survivors of slavery.

Raise awareness of all those involved and deconstruct representations.

Participate in work to end against the oppression of women in particular.

Arrange time for multidisciplinary discussions between members of the association to provide mutual enlightenment and support regarding ongoing cases.

Practical support via network participatory training sessions two to three times a year run by legal advisers, lawyers, psychologists, and others who support slavery survivors.

Set up a discussion group for survivors and raise awareness of different themes such as violence.

Parental support via regular parent-child workshops run by midwives, psychologists, or any other people qualified in parenting and childhood issues.

Create a directory to facilitate access to care. Set up partnership agreements and create a mutual health insurance fund to cover care costs including psychological care.





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