



What is freedom?

Greater Seattle research briefing on a study to define “freedom from modern slavery”¹ by Juliana Semione

This study engaged UK and US participants from six locations over the question, “What is freedom from slavery?” One of these locations was the Greater Seattle (“Seattle”) area in Washington, where research took place in Winter 2018-2019. Participants were survivors of human trafficking and anti-trafficking professionals. This briefing is a summary of the findings from Seattle.

Key research findings

Among participants from Seattle, there is **no general consensus** on a definition of freedom. Rather, six definitions of freedom emerged, each of which are shared by a small number of participants. These are:

- Having the choices that trafficking once suppressed
- Having relationships that support your goals and vision for your life
- Living without fear and having stability
- Having free will and dignity
- Having your basic needs met and being personally resilient after trafficking
- Being personally resilient after trafficking and able to resist future harm

These distinct definitions represent a low level of agreement among Seattle participants; there is no general consensus on the meaning of freedom. Furthermore, it is clear from interviews that local anti-trafficking professionals believe that they understand freedom differently than their colleagues do. However, their beliefs about *how* their colleagues understand freedom were inaccurate. Taken together, the findings suggest that individuals and organizations within the local anti-trafficking community do not regularly or actively engage over the topic of freedom itself.

Why is this important?

Anti-slavery researchers have long focused on defining and measuring modern slavery. However, little attention has been paid to how we define or measure freedom. Anti-slavery efforts around the world work to identify victims and support them toward “freedom.” Many anti-slavery professionals and organizations say they do their daily work in the name of “freedom.” But what does this mean? What is freedom?

This study identifies patterns—definitions of freedom that are shared across groups of participants. It presents these patterns as working definitions of freedom,

grounded in the realities and perspectives of survivors and anti-slavery professionals.

The findings enable UK and US anti-slavery stakeholders to better understand one another; to initiate meaningful conversations around freedom; to better understand the substance of freedom; and to consider how we might begin to measure freedom in the future. This series of six research briefings is one output of the “What is freedom?” study. The briefings are designed to provide each research site with localized findings so that individuals and anti-slavery organizations can share in those same benefits at the community level.

Local Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1: Discuss these findings with your clients, your peers, or other participants.** The findings from Seattle show a low level of consensus around freedom. Are there strengths and/or challenges to having such a variety of definitions of freedom among the local anti-trafficking community? Discuss freedom with others and do so often. Does your definition differ from those of your peers and colleagues? How so, and why might that be? Is this important?
- **Recommendation 2: Share your thoughts on these findings.** Do these findings resonate with you? What do the findings mean to you? Do you have insights from your local work or experience that could provide further context for these findings? *Your reflections are very welcome. Contact information is above.*
- **Recommendation 3: Consider what these findings mean for you as an advocate or professional.** Do you think of your work primarily in terms of being *against trafficking*, or *for freedom*? Do you see new connections between freedom and the work of others? If you work with survivors, ask how these findings resonate with their views on freedom. If you are a survivor, consider starting a conversation about freedom with local service providers.
- **Recommendation 4: Imagine how you would measure freedom.** Is there value in measuring freedom for the local anti-trafficking community? If so, how might these findings help Seattle anti-trafficking professionals and survivors measure freedom or gauge the success of programs?

Research overview

This study utilized Q methodology to understand how individual participants define freedom and how their definitions compare or contrast to one another across sites and between countries. The aim of the study is to learn what definitions of “freedom” exist among

individuals in the anti-trafficking field—not to define freedom legally or philosophically.

To accomplish this, participants were given a deck of 49 cards, each displaying a different possible answer to the question, “What is freedom from slavery?”² They sorted these cards into three piles according to their level of agreement with the statements: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. Participants then sorted these cards onto a grid, which required them to rank the statements into smaller sets, further specifying their personal level of agreement with each card. This process is called “Q sorting.” Each participant was then interviewed. The manner in which every participant sorted the cards onto the grid was analyzed using KADE, software designed to show patterns and differences among Q sorts.

This study took place at six locations and included 73 participants. Of these, 30 were from UK sites and 43 were from US sites. At least 22 individuals from Seattle were invited to participate; 16 agreed to do so. Of these, two were direct victim service providers, six were law enforcement professionals, and eight were survivors. The six definitions of freedom to emerge from the Seattle-area research are described below. They are based on KADE results and interviews.

Having the choices that trafficking once suppressed

This definition of freedom is shared by both of the service provider participants and one survivor (18.75% of local participants). This view stands out from the other five definitions because of how highly it ranked the statement, “Freedom is simply the opposite of slavery.”

For participants whose Q sorts correlate strongly to this definition, slavery is an experience where choices are suppressed; freedom is the opposite experience, where choice is restored. The choices that are most pertinent under this definition of freedom are, “Having the right to choose where you live and where you work, “To be able to leave a place, a person, or a job without any fear of negative consequences,” and “Being able to do what you want and to go where you want, without anybody interfering or telling you no.”

Having relationships that support your goals and vision for your life

This definition of freedom is shared by two survivors and one law enforcement professional (18.75% of local participants). “The ability to achieve goals that matter to you” is the most important aspect of freedom for these participants. After this, they prioritize having relationships that support someone’s goals and vision for their life. This includes a survivor’s relationship to their trafficker, in the form of “access to justice” against them.

Living without fear and having stability

This definition of freedom is shared by two survivors (12.5% of local participants). They consider living without

fear to be the most important quality of freedom. This is related to the value they place on stability inasmuch as instability can foster fear rather than allowing an individual to be free from it. Stability includes “Being able to trust people and not being betrayed when you are kind to them,” “No longer having to make choices you don’t like just so that you can survive,” and “Having a place to call home.”

After living without fear and having stability, these participants value having an accurate self-perception and having the ability to make choices—including choices about inter-personal relationships.

Having free will and dignity

This definition of freedom is shared by two law enforcement professionals and one survivor (18.75% of local participants). This definition of freedom stands out from the others because of how highly it ranks the statement, “Having free will, or the ability to do things without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so.” For these participants, free will is the most important quality of freedom by far. Having free will is more important than having any one specific choice.

After free will, these participants place a high value on dignity. This includes an individual having an accurate and dignified view of themselves and of the world, as well as having their humanity “recognized by others.”

Having your basic needs met and being personally resilient after trafficking

One law enforcement professional and one survivor share this perspective (12.5% of local participants). They rank being able to “get the basic things you need to live a healthy and normal life” more highly than any other aspect of freedom. “Basic things” include “having a place to call home.” They also place a high value on personal resilience. This resilience is in reference to a survivor’s ability to never see themselves as a slave—despite being treated as one in the past—and “to enjoy being alive or to feel there is a reason to be alive.”

Being personally resilient after trafficking and able to resist future harm

Two law enforcement professionals share this definition (12.5% of local participants). Under this definition, a survivor is free when they are personally resilient and able to resist future harm. For these participants, the two go hand-in-hand. Personal resilience is different here than it is in the definition described above. Here, resilience is an internal experience that touches many areas of life and is characterized by “the ability to live a day without reference to the physical and psychological experience of trafficking.” It is also directly connected to a survivor’s ability to resist returning to their trafficker and to defend themselves “against people who try to limit your well-being, dominate you, or traffic you.”

¹ The term used to describe human trafficking in this study is “modern slavery.” This is because the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is located in England. “Modern slavery” in England is synonymous with what is meant by “human trafficking” in the US.

² A PDF file containing these cards (the “Q sample”) can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/y4cg3otg>