Ethical and Safety Protocol to Work with Trafficked Women

Psychological Health Impact of THB for sexual exploitation on female victims. Consequences for stakeholders. (PHIT)
Basic standards to conduct an interview with women who are experiencing or have experienced a situation of trafficking and with the stakeholders who work with them.

1. Do no harm ................................................................. 4

2. Know your subject and assess the risk ........................................... 5
   2.1 Risks ........................................................................... 5
   2.2 Stages of the interview process: risks and recommendations .......... 8

3. Prepare referral information ............................................................. 12

4. Adequately select and prepare interpreters and co-workers ...... 12

5. Ensure anonymity and confidentiality ............................................. 15

6. Get informed consent ..................................................................... 18

7. Listen and respect each woman’s assessment of her situation and risks to her safety ........................................................................... 19

8. Do not re-traumatize ......................................................................... 19

9. Be prepared for emergency intervention ........................................ 20

10. Put the information collected to good use ..................................... 21
1. Do no harm

- Do not carry out any interview that will make a woman’s situation worse in a shorter or longer term in relation to her mental health or safety.

- Know the condition of the girl/woman regarding the security risk and her own mental health (evaluation based on the information facilitated by her or by the NGO professionals).
  
  *For instance: it is no appropriate to interview a woman who is going through an emotional crisis. The woman has to feel that she has control over the interview situation.*

- Anticipate potential effects and consequences (remind facts, instability situations, the impact of her situation on the results obtained, offer maximum reliability...).

Questions that may be asked to assess the risk:
- Do you have any concerns about carrying out this interview with me?
- Do you think that talking with me could pose you any problems, for example with those who trafficked you, your family, your friends, or someone who assists you?
- Have you ever spoken with someone in (interviewer’s profession) before? How was that experience?
- Do you feel that this is a good place to discuss your experience? If not, is there a better time and/or place?

- It is important to speak clearly using a simple vocabulary and to systematically talk about her fears or doubts.

- It is the interviewers’ responsibility to make the decision that the interview will not take place if he/she anticipates potential negative outcomes.
2. Know your subject and assess the risk

- First of all, we have to improve our knowledge about the human trafficking phenomenon. There are different aspects that we have to know and to take into account. It is essential to consult experts and groups of professionals who work in that area, as well as specialized literature before interviewing trafficked women.
  
  *For instance: migration, refugee, asylum-seekers centres, immigration assistance, social or legal aid services for migrant or refugees, sex-workers groups and assistants, violence against women and human rights groups, torture and violence experts, law enforcement specialists, specific ethnic group, academic institutions or international organizations.*

- Beforehand and as part of the PHIT project, we will train the professionals who will conduct the interview in all the aspects that they should be aware of and with the tools that we have designed, in order to improve their capacity to interact with women while preserving their well-being, as well as their capacity to conduct an interview and to collect the information.

- On the other hand, it is essential to understand the range of risks associated with each stage of the interview process, from the initial contact to the public release of information.

- The best strategy to protect the woman’s well-being is to study the subject, the legal situation, how do professionals work with them and the experience of local organizations. Within the project, we will interview women who, at the moment, are not in a situation of trafficking, but who have been trafficked in the past.

2.1 Risks

Trafficked women suffer from various kinds of violence from employers, trafficking agents, pimps and sometimes law enforcement officials. They use physical, psychological, economical and sexual violence to intimidate them and to discourage them from contacting others. Sometimes they beat, rape, increase their debt or deprive them of sleep, food or amenities. Abuse and penalties also serve as warnings sent to other women.

*Reprisals against the women’s family or children*

Reprisals are not only made against those women, but also against their family and/or children, because it is easy for trafficking agents to obtain personal information about their relatives, friends and hometown.
We have to be aware that any action from us can threaten the interviewed woman but also her friends and relatives and may, as a consequence, prevent her from returning home or prevent her family from staying there. It is extremely common to use threats against a woman’s family, especially her children, to manipulate and control her.

Women are not only afraid for their families’ sake but they also worry about the reaction of their parents, husband or community, if they find out that she has worked as a prostitute or has been sexually abused.

For this reason it is also important to conduct the interview with an extreme discretion and to use the information with extreme care, ensuring confidentiality at all times, in order not to cause any irreparable damage to her family and relatives.

Various women also fear that their families will discover that they have not earned the expected income or that they have fled without repaying their debt, and that they will react with anger or reprobation.

**Foreign authorities and reprisal by home country authorities**

Many women travel illegally and have their identification document taken away by traffickers. In a lot of cases they are unsure about their legal status and are reluctant to speak with strangers in fear of arrest or deportation.

In many countries, prostitution is illegal and that is why they might also fear imprisonment. In some places, the authorities are complicit with traffickers, and use arrests as an opportunity to cheat women and steal their money, or put them in a situation of trafficking again.

In some countries, corrupt officials may be complicit in the trafficking process, and sometimes work in the embassies or consulates of destination countries.

**Betrayal by co-workers, co-residents or community members**

It is not safe to assume that women in the same situation or from the same community trust each another. Although they work or live together, some women may earn extra privileges from traffickers by disclosing damaging information about other women.

Similarly, women living in a shelter might have vendettas against one another and might use information in harmful ways. Some of them might be connected to traffickers and might pass vital information about other women. That is another reason why discretion is essential while conducting the interview.
Lies about age

Usually, minors are forced to lie about their age, often under the control of the trafficker. Interviewing minors brings up additional ethical considerations and in some countries, it entails additional legal obligations for the interviewer.

As part of our research project, we have decided to only interview adult women and no minors. If there is any suspicion that the interviewed woman is a minor, we must cancel the interview.

Loyalty to and dependence on agents, employers, pimp-boyfriends or others in the network

Systematic isolation and dependency are key components of the coercion used by perpetrators. In many cases, violent acts alternate with acts of kindness and mercy and this leads to the building of loyal relationship with agents or employers who may also be boyfriends, husbands or family members. This kind of relationship can be confusing and we have to be aware of this in order to understand the woman’s narrative of events, and her feelings in relation to their perpetrators.
2.2 Stages of the interview process: risks and recommendations

Each stage of the interview may present a risk. Those potential risks should be acknowledged and assessed, and appropriate security measures must be undertaken. It is essential to take into account the risk associated with THB in each case before the interview.

**Stage 1: make the initial contact**

Generally speaking, women who will be interviewed as part of the project will be staying in shelters or out of the traffickers’ control. But in case we decide to interview a woman who is working as a prostitute, we have to keep in mind that the simple fact of approaching her puts her at risk by raising suspicions about her loyalty. They are rarely unsupervised. And even though interviewed women are staying in a shelter we still have to be very discreet when conducting the interview.

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<td>o First of all we have to be sure that the interviewed woman is clearly out of a trafficking situation. In that case the NGO’s support is essential because NGO workers hold a lot of information about each woman and they have a global knowledge of their life history. The selection of participants will be based on various criteria that will be proposed to the NGO but it is the NGO who, at the end, will decide which woman is prepared to do the interview;</td>
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<td>o It is important to work with sensibility and to take into account the risks: if the woman feels safe, she will disclose more details about her experience;</td>
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<td>o We will not interview women who are in detention</td>
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<td>o In order to avoid putting a woman at risk of exposure, the interviewer may clearly say that the interview is about a neutral subject such as “health” to anyone who might ask the interviewer or the woman about it.</td>
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Stage 2: identify a time and a place to conduct the interview

When a woman in a situation of trafficking meets with an outsider, she may be watched, followed or overheard. Similarly, a woman living in a shelter or at home may have valid concerns that her coresidents, family, neighbours or others may overhear sensitive or stigmatizing information.

Recommendations:

- Interviews should be conducted in a secure and private setting and in total privacy. NGO or social support services are often among the safest options. Interviews should not be held in a location where some people may pass by or “drop in”, or where random interruptions may occur. This could make the respondent feel uncomfortable and nervous.

- Before and through the interview, the woman should be free to reschedule (or relocate) the interview to a time (or place) that she considers to be safer or more convenient for her.

- Tight schedules are not practical or realistic and may lead interviewers to take risks. Similarly, interviews should not be too long nor emotionally draining. The more at ease the woman feels, the more likely she will share valuable information.

- It is a good idea to clarify at the start of the interview at what time the woman needs to leave and how flexible her time is (if the interview can last a bit longer or if she has to leave on time).

- It is essential to make sure that the extension of the length of the interview do not pose her any problem.

- If necessary, we should explain to the respondent that we might need to have another meeting in order to finish the interview.
**Stage 3: conduct the interview**

Firstly, we may leave preconceived notions behind, and listen without any judgement.

If the interviewer has preconceived ideas or emotions related to some experiences and reactions, or in relation to the woman’s personality or character, he/she will certainly miss important information and overlook the unique nature of each woman’s experience.

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<td>o Keeping an open mind and having strong listening and interpreting skills is essential to conduct such interview.</td>
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<td>o It is very important to be able to detect when a woman feels unsafe</td>
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<td>o Events can change suddenly during the course of an interview. These changes may pose physical or psychological risks to a woman.</td>
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<td>o Even is the original conditions set for the interview were acceptable, a respondent may feel unsafe or ill at ease during the interview.</td>
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<td>o It is important to pick up on these clues, because the interview situations may have become dangerous and because a woman’s discomfort often means that she is not willing or able to be forthright.</td>
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**Æ Occurrences that can change the nature of an interview include:**

- Someone entering the room or walking by;
- Questions that make her suspicious or nervous of the interviewer’s intentions such as requests for specific names or addresses or questions about her family or her age
- Interviewer’s loss of confidence or show of signs of anxiety

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<td>Be prepared to change the subject of the conversation or to carry out an emergency break if the interview conditions become unsafe, if privacy is interrupted or if the woman or the interpreter indicate that there is a problem.</td>
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Stage 4: close the interview

Do it positively: it is essential not to leave a woman feeling ashamed and hopeless when the interview ends.

Trafficking can cause a wide range of strong emotional and psychological reactions. In some cases women might feel relieved to have talked about their experience, while others might feel worse about themselves, their situation and their future.

Recommendations:
Whenever possible, the interviewer should end in a positive way. The interviewer can remind the interviewee of how well she coped and how what she told will be used to help others.

Example of closing statement:
“Thank you very much for taking the time and having the strength to tell me about your experiences. Nobody deserves to be treated the way you have been treated and you are a very strong and courageous woman to have survived such abuses.”

Be careful: the interview might be repairing or re-victimizing
3. Prepare referral information

➤ Do not give any advice or make any promise that you cannot fulfil

➤ Identify available resources and support services. An interview is a good opportunity for the woman to obtain information if she asks for it.

- Have some information in the interviewee’s mother tongue at your disposal and be prepared to provide it to her

- Interviewers have to know referral information and give it to the respondent if he/she detects that the woman would need further assistance and so that she knows which services are available.

- Information should be concise and clear. If it is safe and appropriate, this information should be detailed on written supports.

- The interviewer must ask the interviewee to confirm that she has understood the information and should ask if she has any questions.

4. Adequately select and prepare interpreters and co-workers

➤ Consider the risks and benefits of working with interpreters and others

Involving others such as interpreters or hiring interviewers to assist or to process confidential information poses a risk if they are not carefully informed beforehand. It is necessary to make sure that they are not involved with trafficking agents, and to assess whether they are fully prepared to work on such a sensitive subject.

If co-workers do not understand the dangers associated with breaches of confidentiality, sloppy interview practices or lax security, this may have serious consequences. Interpreters and co-workers who are not aware of the importance of posing questions and responding to a woman in a sensitive manner may not elicit full and honest responses and may cause her to feel hurt or insulted. Interpreters and interviewers who speak the same language should make the respondents feel more at ease and thus help to build trust. However it can also have the opposite effect. Women may not trust or may feel ashamed speaking in front of someone from their community or someone who has the same cultural background.

Some women feel more embarrassed to talk about stigmatization topics (e.g. sex work, sexual abuse…) that are proscribed in their culture in front of someone with the same culture and instilled with the same moral codes. We must take extreme care of the information that a woman discloses to the interpreter because unless an interpreter’s background and circle of contacts can be assessed, there is no certainty that this information will not be leaked in
wrong places. Interviews with trafficked women are often time-restricted, for her own safety and to preserve her emotional well-being.

Recommendations:

- Work with an interpreter who is not from her community, unless the respondent asks otherwise.
- Ask the respondent privately if she has trusted friends or colleagues, and if she wants them to assist her during the interview.
- Do not accept unknown volunteer interpreters because they may be involved in the trafficking process or may have something to gain by participating in the interview.
- If available, cultural mediators might help during the interview.

**Consider the potential issues related to employing a male interpreter or interviewer**

In many cases trafficking respondents have been physically or sexually abused by men and may mistrust them or feel uncomfortable or embarrassed to disclose personal details to a man.

When it is impossible to safely contact a woman in prostitution outside of her place of work, sometimes it can be useful for a man to make the initial approach, provided the woman is immediately fully informed of the reason of the approach.

In some cases a woman might prefer to speak to a man believing that another woman will be more judgemental and more condemning than a man, or because the trafficked woman has been abused or exploited by a woman. Whenever possible the respondent should be asked if she has a preference.

**Consider the physical safety and psychological well-being of co-workers and interviewers**

Interviews with trafficked women can also take an emotional toll on interviewers. Emotional exhaustion or anxiety is a common response to listening to respondents’ personal histories of abuse and trauma.

Interviewers might be unprepared to deal with these feelings of distress and might need support in dealing with them. We have to take care of the people who work in the project and organize individual meetings to debrief what happened if we can detect that it is necessary.

Interviewers might feel helpless or conversely might wish to adopt a role of “saviour”. In the first place the interviewer might avoid offering any help, believing that the woman’s problems
are too huge and the his/her resources too insignificant while in a second place, the interviewer might make unrealistic promises.

Recommendations:
- If at any time before or during the interview the respondent feels the selected location is unsafe, the interview should not take place or should be terminated until a safe location can be identified. If it is possible to reschedule the interview it is often best to choose a different venue.
- If the woman has sensitive information and may cause danger to the interviewer (e.g. details about the perpetrators, corruption of officials...), the interviewer should, in a tactful manner, dissuade the woman from communicating it while suggesting the appropriate individuals or office to whom this information should be given or sent.

Interviewers and interpreters will receive special training and background information about:
- Dynamics of trafficking in women
- The risks and safety and emergency procedures
- Basic introduction to issues regarding physical, sexual and psychological abuse, coercion and torture
- Basic understanding of gender and ethnic discrimination and inequality
- Issues and concepts related to the labour sector that is the subject of the interview, such as sex work and prostitution, domestic services, factory labour, etc.
- Local terminology appropriate to the subject
- Questionnaires that we use for the project
- Interview methodology

What generally leads to victim-blaming attitudes are often part of the culture at large and can affect an interviewer’s ability to get full disclosure from the respondent and can also impact the way the responses are received and interpreted.

Consequently interviewers must confront their own biases, fears and stereotypes regarding women who are:
- migrants
- sexually abused
- sex workers
- poor or socially and economically disadvantaged

Interviewers must acknowledge their capabilities and limitations in order to be able to assist women who have been trafficked
- weight the risks and benefits associated with employing interpreters, co-workers
- develop adequate methods for screening and training
5. Ensure anonymity and confidentiality

Recommendations:

- Begin the interview by explaining the precautions being taken to protect the woman’s identity and to keep her personal details strictly confidential. Explain the content of the Informed Consent Form to her in details. Remember that if she does not agree to sign the form, the interview cannot be carried out. Ask her if she feels that these precautions are adequate.

- Use a different name during the interview.

- The interview will be audio-recorded: no names should be used, only identifying codes. Tapes should be kept in a restricted-access file, according to the security measures detailed in the Data Protection Protocol.

- Contents of individual interviews should only be discussed with people who are bound by the same duty of confidentiality within the project, and then only when necessary.

- Interview contents should never be discussed in public, particularly in places where they can be overheard.

- Details from one respondent should never be discussed with any other respondent in a way that would allow the respondent to be identified. Speaking generally about others in similar circumstances is sometimes useful, but should not crossover into personal and identifying information.

- Prior authorization must be given by the main researcher to publicly disseminate the information gathered during the interview, as stated in the Data Protection Protocol.

- In the written transcription, personal details should be sufficiently altered so that the respondent cannot be identified. For example publications should not include the names of a woman’s hometown, workplace or family name...

- Photographs or film footage are prohibited.

- It is necessary to create a database without any personal information and with identification codes for women who are interviewed. This database will also include interview tapes and/or the interview transcription, of the victims and of the stakeholders. All the information will be exclusively uploaded on the secured platform created for PHIT. This information must not be sent by email. Once uploaded on the platform, the information must be erased.
It is essential to preserve confidentiality in order to protect the respondent’s identity and confidentiality throughout the entire interview process. Confidentiality is essential to ensure women’s safety and the quality of the information they provide.

It is very important to ethically use the information. This information should be used to benefit women or to make some advances in the development of good policies and interventions for trafficked women.

Interviewers must be absolutely certain that any information released publicly is not misinterpreted, and does not fuel prejudices or stereotypes that incite public opinion against trafficked women. Interviewers and interpreters will have to sign a Declaration of confidentiality before conducting the interview. This signed Declaration must then be sent to the main researcher of the project.

Confidentiality for interviews and focus groups:
At all time the names of the participants to the interviews and to the focus groups will remain anonymous and will be cited in the analysis reports as codes or generic names linked to their professions but shall not be identifiable.

Authorization to record interviews and focus groups must be required beforehand in order to facilitate the use and analysis of data and information group.

The full commitment of the project team to the confidentiality of the collected information must be explained and stressed to the interviewees and to the focus groups participants, in order to avoid any confusion and concern about the information they provide.

Interviewers’ support and training
Various documents will be handed out to the interviewers and to the focus groups moderators:

- Tools, guidance and instructions to carry out interviews
- Questionnaires related to the victims’ mental health
- Form for the collection of demographic information
- Informed consent form
- Form for the collection of information within focus groups
- List of topics to be discussed during focus groups
- Guidance for experts interviews

Before conducting the interviews and focus groups, interviewers must attend a previous training given by the main researchers of the project. This training will allow interviewers to become familiar with the research tools of the project which will serve to collect the information. Interview techniques, guidance and recommendations will also be presented to them as part of the training.
Regarding focus groups, the coordinator will be in charge of moderating the discussion and distributing speaking times evenly so that all the participants are able to equally take part to the discussions.

All the contributions are valuable, which is why the moderator shall keep an approach as neutral as possible at all times to ensure the quality of the discussion and debate. The objective of the focus group is not to evaluate the work of professionals but to collect their opinion and experience while working with women who have been trafficked. It must be stressed that the discussion topic is the mental health of trafficked women, and not whether a treatment or the work of other professionals is/was appropriate or not.

It is important to explain and clarify all the doubts that arise related to the project before any interview or group discussion. Significant shortcomings exist in the field of THB and this should be the starting point to generate a positive approach to improve and overcome those shortcomings.

➔ Protection of databases and security codes:

The databases will be gathered and anonymized and each case study will have a code so that it cannot be associated with the identity of the participant.

Two files will be created and kept under the responsibility of the project’s director, Markus González Beilfuss: in one of them will appear the identification codes and the name and ID number of the women, and in the other file will appear the identification code and the characteristics/information collected on those women. Both files should be separated at all times and never kept in the same (virtual and physical) place.

The file linking identification codes to the real identity of the participants will be kept on an external hard drive, protected by a password and separated from the other files related to the project. In the reports about the results of the investigation, only identification codes will appear, and if some extracts of the narrative interviews are used, all the information that could allow the formal identification of the participant will be anonymized.

All the digitalized data will be saved on an external hard drive, and kept at the University of Barcelona.

Once finalized the study, the file where the personal data of the women appear will be destroyed (identification codes and women names) and only the information that refers to extracts or parts of the questionnaires will be kept. The University of Barcelona will create a highly-secured platform, where all the information from the interviews with women and with the focus groups will be uploaded. The access to this platform will be restricted and all the information will be encrypted.
6. Get informed consent

Because the interviews can be both psychologically challenging and emotionally distressing, and because they cannot be retracted once given, it is essential that the interviewer clearly explains:

- The reason of the interview
- The different topics to be discussed
- The potential risk and benefits involved in participating
- The personal and possibly upsetting nature of the questions that may be asked

If the interviewed woman has a full understanding of the intentions of the interviewer and of the purpose of the questions, she is less likely to think that the information she provides will be used against her or will cause her harm.

It is best if the initial request for an interview comes from someone she trusts.

It is necessary to prepare clear statement that describes the subject and purpose of the interview and the best option is to give them some information in their own language.

Discuss risks in a systematic way, talk about potential benefits (e.g. the opportunity to talk about her experience, to relate her problems or needs, to help other women) and what she expects from the interview.

This is why we have to work appropriately to request her consent. We have to make certain that each respondent clearly understands the content and purpose of the interview. We must stress that she has the right not to answer questions, to terminate the interview and to put restrictions on how information is used.

To guarantee an informed consent from the interviewed women, we have prepared a document to be used for the interviews conducted as part of the project PHIT. In addition to that, if it’s possible we will prepare the information in the women’s first language to ensure that she understands all the interview process.

Reminder: in the project PHIT, we do not pay for the interviews
When possible offer to provide feedback to those who work on the project (e.g. newspaper article, program leaflet, research findings...)
7. Listen and respect each woman’s assessment of her situation and risks to her safety

Offer advice or assistance: with good intentions, an interviewer may think he/she knows what is best for the woman and decide to make recommendations, take action or push her to take action that he/she believes will improve her situation. But when this is not prepared beforehand, it can be harmful.

In project PHIT the objective of the interviews is to collect information about women, their health and their life story. It is not to offer therapeutic or counselling services and we have to be careful with the message we give to them.

First we should offer the woman some time and space to think about what we are asking from her. Then, if she has some doubts that we cannot resolve at that moment, because they are not related to the project, we can offer to postpone those aspects for when the interview is over. If it is not possible to wait until the end of the interview, then it is best to stop the interview and resume it another day.

We must respect a woman’s choices regarding her situation: even women in the most abysmal circumstances may choose to refuse help from others. A woman’s consent is essential before any action is taken on her behalf.

It is necessary to understand that each woman will have different concerns and views, and we must accept and respect these.

8. Do not re-traumatize

➤ It is very important not to ask questions intending to provoke emotionally-charged answers.

Asking woman to talk about experiences that were frightening, humiliating and painful can cause extreme anxiety. Many women feel ashamed of what they have done or what has happened to them. For this reason questions that will evidently cause distress or reveal unnecessary details to understand her experience should be excluded. In that sense, questions that insinuate negative judgements about a woman’s decisions should not be asked (e.g: do you think you are an immoral person? What would your parents think of what you did?)

➤ In some cases we must be prepared to respond to a woman’s distress and to highlight her strengths.

It is important to understand that many women will experience some level of stress or discomfort when talking about particular issues. If the woman becomes very distressed or overwhelmed it is best to ask whether she prefers to carry on, change the subject or finish the interview. The interviewer should react to distress by offering to have a break.

Visual and oral responses should be empathic, non-judgemental and supportive.

And interviewer should show concern and remind the woman of her strength and capacity for having survived such difficult events.

It is always up to the respondent whether to proceed or not.
Be aware of the fact that, for many women who are away from home, talking about family especially speaking about their children, may be upsetting.

9. Be prepared for emergency intervention

Before, during or after the interview, reminding some facts or feelings that the woman has experienced may entail answers and consequences that could affect her emotional well-being, or provoke in some cases emotional reactions. It is important to know how to manage those reactions.

That is why we must agree on various strategies that would allow us to contain, reassure, and redirect the situation, and offer recommendations to the woman if she feels anxious or nervous again in relation to the interviews and to her participation to the project.

The first strategy to implement is to clarify all the information related to the project and answer all her doubts related to her participation and to the confidentiality and safety of all the information provided to the project team.

On the other hand, we should know how to handle a situation of anxiety with breathing exercises, relaxation if necessary, or by changing the topic. It is absolutely essential to know how to recognize the symptoms to decide whether to stop the interview and to be able to identify if there are some topics which are too overwhelming. In that case, it is best not to mention them (if there is an impact on her, we will always discard the obtaining of information). Also, because of the exhaustion that can cause the interview, in some cases it is better to stop the interview and to resume it a few days later.

We can discuss with the interviewee which is the best option, whether to postpone the interview or whether there are some topics that she does not want to talk about, to give her the liberty to express herself at ease. In various cases, the key element is not whether to talk about a topic in particular or not but how to address the topic.

Remember that the trafficking process can have various consequences on their psychological well-being. In a lot of cases, those women have not been through the recuperation or reintegration process of what has happened to them. For that reason, mentioning or recovering topics may have negative effects on their psychological well-being.

We may have to be able to resolve issues related to basic attention and emergency assistance in case of anxiety attack.

A woman’s distress may occur during an interview, but can also emerge before or after. For that reason we have to give them some guidance if they feel anxious after the interview or before the next interview. If we talk with them about it, we may be able to normalize the symptoms.

During the training for the interviewers, we will explain to them the various symptoms of anxiety attacks and how to manage these (psychological crisis intervention).
10. Put the information collected to good use

It is very important to use information ethically. This information should be used in order to benefit women or to make some advances in the development of good policies and interventions for trafficked women.

Interviewers must be absolutely sure that any information released publicly is not misinterpreted, and does not fuel prejudices or stereotypes that incite public opinion against trafficked women.

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