



BRIEFING DOCUMENT

Learnings from Project TESFA





ABOUT HOPE FOR JUSTICE

Hope for Justice is an international human rights-based anti-slavery organisation, implementing programmes in Ethiopia, Uganda, the UK and the USA.

We exist to bring freedom from modern slavery and human trafficking. For us, freedom means people living free from exploitation, and free from the fear of being exploited. It means survivors having the power, agency and opportunity to make choices about their own future, living in dignity. It means safer communities in which

vulnerability to human trafficking is transformed into resilience. It means improving the response, partnering with other agencies and civil society, while standing with survivors to create a world in which everyone can live free from slavery.

Since Hope for Justice's work began, we have reached 1,200,000+ children across all areas of our anti-trafficking work, globally. Last year, we reached 155,137 people through our training and our anti-trafficking programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Hope for Justice's Project Tesfa uses a whole-of-community approach to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery across ten districts in the Wolaita and Hadiya zones of southern and central Ethiopia. Implemented over three phases since 2017, the project has sought to raise awareness of modern slavery in schools and communities, combat harmful social norms, improve financial resilience of vulnerable households and work with government and community leadership to build sustainability.

This briefing document summarises the project's main learnings since inception, organised by the following themes:

1. Awareness-raising
2. Social norms
3. Women's empowerment
4. School engagement
5. Youth engagement

These learnings have been developed using qualitative and quantitative data gathered from a variety of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) methods, including focus group discussions with programme participants and stakeholders from government and the wider community, external evaluations of each programme phase and regular data collection. A first draft of this document was also shared with stakeholder focus groups during two day-long validation workshops in Wolaita and Hadiya.¹ Their feedback has been integrated into the final version of this briefing.



¹ A total of 84 stakeholders were consulted during the two validation workshops, which took place on 3 and 4 February 2026. Stakeholders included survivors and representatives from Self-help Groups (SHGs), Community-based Organisations (CBOs), Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) and youth groups. Representatives from local government also attended, including the Education Office, the Office of Women and Children's Affairs and the Co-operative Office.

CONTEXT

Ethiopia suffers from some of the highest rates of human trafficking² in the world, with estimates of over 700,000 people trapped in modern slavery every year.ⁱ Challenging economic conditions exacerbate the situation: lower income households have gained little from the nation's healthy GDP growth in recent years,ⁱⁱ with poverty levels reaching 43 percent in 2025, compared to 33 percent in 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ As large transit hubs, the country's southerly Wolaita and Hadiya zones are hotspots for human trafficking,^{iv} a pattern consistently reflected in evidence from Hope for Justice's own child protection programming in the country. In

Wolaita, high rates of food insecurity and poverty are common among victims of child trafficking,^v and with economies that are heavily dependent on agriculture,^{vi} both zones are disproportionately affected by intensifying climate change. Nevertheless, vulnerability to human trafficking cannot be explained by economic hardship alone: harmful traditional practices that are prevalent in both zones, including child fostering, early marriage, and widespread views that overlook the risks of migration, further increase the risk of human trafficking among vulnerable populations.^{vii}

PROJECT TESFA: PROGRAMME INTERVENTIONS

Project Tesfa achieves its objectives by conducting awareness-raising, trainings and regular dialogues³ with a variety of local structures:

- Community-based Organisations (CBOs) and Community Faith-based Organisations (FBOs), which comprise community leaders from villages and towns across Hadiya and Wolaita.
- Child Well-being Clubs (CWCs), which are groups of school students that meet monthly to discuss a range of issues related to young people's education. Hope for Justice has also worked with Mini Media Clubs (MMCs) to support students to disseminate anti-trafficking messages among their peers.
- Self-help Groups (SHGs), established by Hope for Justice, which build social support networks, livelihoods skills and financial resilience among groups of women.
- Local and zonal government, including representatives from the Education Office, the Office of Women and Children Affairs, the Finance Office and the Co-operative Office.

Hope for Justice's long-standing presence as a trusted partner in Wolaita and Hadiya has enabled it to build strong relationships with these groups,



which have been highly receptive to Project Tesfa's interventions and proactively taken anti-slavery messages back to households and wider communities. A key component of this work has been close co-operation with government structures at all levels, crucial for long-term sustainability. This has enabled Project Tesfa to build a strong foundation of trust and ownership among duty-bearers, which has been essential in efforts to institutionalise anti-trafficking, via mechanisms such as government recognition and formalisation of SHGs, regional school club guidelines, and enhanced collaboration between government and civil society.

² The terms 'human trafficking' and 'modern slavery' are used interchangeably throughout this document. For the purposes of this briefing, they both refer to the umbrella term, 'MSHT' (Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking).

³ In the case of Self-help Groups (SHGs), Project Tesfa has also focussed on women's empowerment as a way to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery, via livelihoods training, income-generating activities and micro-finance. See section 4 for more.

THEMATIC LEARNINGS

1. AWARENESS-RAISING

Awareness-raising is one of the most common components of prevention programming around the world. In many cases, target communities have very little understanding of modern slavery prior to the start of project activities. As a result, awareness-raising activities seek to introduce Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) into the common lexicon, explaining foundational ideas concerning what the term means and how it is relevant to daily life. This type of activity can be distinguished from social norm change, discussed in the next section, which builds upon awareness of MSHT to shift the informal, unwritten rules that govern behaviour in a community (such as attitudes towards migration and children's rights).

Feedback from stakeholders and project participants has consistently highlighted how communities were unaware of the concept of modern slavery prior to Project Tesfa; in many cases, communities simply did not know about the risks of trafficking and the scale at which it takes place. By introducing the terminology into people's lexicon, Hope for Justice has succeeded in challenging hitherto widely held assumptions surrounding migration, modern slavery, child labour and other important topics. Feedback across all project interventions has praised Hope for Justice's efforts to increase awareness of the topic, including how to identify early warning signs and raise alerts among authority figures. This has led to a noticeable uptick in community members identifying and then reporting suspected cases of modern slavery to local authorities. Project participants have also been willing to proactively diffuse anti-trafficking messages to their wider communities, helping to further amplify the reach and impact of the project.

The phase three endline evaluation found that, as a result Project Tesfa's efforts, general awareness of modern slavery was high, though gaps existed in recognising less visible forms of exploitation, such as debt bondage and child domestic servitude. This suggests that tailoring awareness-raising to such topics could improve understanding in these areas.

Furthermore, Project Tesfa has also used drama-based approaches, including Forum Theatre and Participatory Video,⁴ to raise awareness among both citizens and duty-bearers in positions of authority. Messaging could be further strengthened by using methods such as real-life survivor stories, interactive and personalised information provision for migrants, counselling, pre-departure briefings, and information on working conditions in destination countries. Using local radio, television and billboards might also enable greater reach. Nevertheless, given that overall evidence on the impact of anti-trafficking interventions is limited,⁵ any strategy adopted should be accompanied by a solid monitoring and evaluation system that can gather evidence on the relative merits of each approach.

Though the availability of wider research is limited, some evidence suggests that, in isolation, even well-designed awareness-raising interventions only have marginal impacts on vulnerable communities and, while often improving knowledge, do not significantly change behaviour.^{viii} In consequence, awareness-raising should be combined with other interventions that seek to address the various economic, social and cultural foundations of exploitation. Hope for Justice's work with different segments of the community, via bodies such as women's Self-help Groups and school-based Child Wellbeing Clubs, has used awareness-raising as an entry point and trust-building measure, but then layered subsequent interventions on top, each seeking to address additional dimensions of this complex, multifaceted problem. This holistic approach has yielded positive results, explored further in the sections below.



⁴ Forum Theatre uses theatre to achieve social aims, encouraging audience interaction to explore different options for dealing with a problem or issue. Participatory video is an approach to video production and sharing in which community members actively participate in the planning, creation and dissemination of video content.

⁵ This is due to limited resources, expertise and data, bias in methodology, ethical considerations regarding the use of RCTs, attribution challenges in conducting impact assessments, political constraints, and short term project timescales. For more details, see Bryant and Landman's (2020) article: Bryant, K., & Landman, T. (2020). Combatting Human Trafficking since Palermo: What Do We Know about What Works? *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 6(2), 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1690097>

2. SOCIAL NORMS

Although a fundamental component of Project Tesfa since inception, it quickly became apparent that awareness-raising by itself could not combat some of the deeply entrenched attitudes and practices that contribute to modern slavery. These include widespread acceptance of child marriage, child domestic labour and gender discrimination. Tesfa worked closely with communities to understand these social norms and craft messages that were tailored to target populations in Wolaita and Hadiya. To this end, Hope for Justice's longstanding presence as a trusted partner has been crucial, enabling the cultivation of strong relationships and an environment of collaboration across a range of community stakeholders.

In 2025, Hope for Justice trained 686 community leaders on MSHT and related topics, with the aim of effecting behaviour change and challenging norms that increase vulnerability to trafficking. This has led to the introduction of by-laws, instigated and developed by traditional community structures, that establish social and sometimes financial penalties for those engaging in activities related to MSHT. Feedback has identified community structures and local traditional institutions as some of the most effective vehicles for sustaining positive social norms. Stakeholders have also provided examples of how increased vigilance among local leaders

has helped to prevent the use of unsafe migration routes among younger community members.

Among faith-based organisations, the dangers of MSHT have also become increasingly evident. Prior to the arrival of Project Tesfa, some religious leaders would bless individuals who planned to migrate, in the hope that doing so would protect them from danger. In other instances, local churches and religious leaders would provide sponsorship to migrants, with an informal agreement by which the migrant would remit money once they had reached their destination and secured employment.

However, as a result of training, community engagement and open dialogue facilitated by Hope for Justice, migration is increasingly viewed as a risk rather than an opportunity: many religious leaders now use sermons, prayers and counselling sessions to discourage unsafe migration and advise followers to stay safe, seek information and avoid traffickers. Stakeholders and project participants have described this as a powerful prevention tool within the community.

Project Tesfa has also provided training to Self-help Groups on positive parenting, which emphasises empathy, nurture, active listening and open communication in order to strengthen family structures and reduce vulnerability to MHST.



SHG members have stated that this training has significantly changed their approach to child-rearing. This includes encouraging children to attend school and emphasising the value of education, as well as stressing the dangers of MSHT and communicating positively about concerns and risks. By taking this approach, parents improve children's resilience and ultimately mitigate the risks of MSHT. Furthermore, stakeholder feedback has highlighted how, as a result of positive parenting, children are more confident, can communicate more effectively and perform better at school. Because of this, members of the wider community, themselves not direct participants in Project Tesfa, have started to adopt positive parenting techniques as well.

Child rights and protection is indeed a core component of positive parenting and Hope for Justice's broader messaging about modern slavery. Via engagement with local organisations, faith groups and government, Hope for Justice has seen progress across various arenas of community life. Families increasingly understand the harmful impact of early marriage on children's education, health and future opportunities, and communities are now more willing to delay marriage and support children to stay in school. Feedback from stakeholders has also described how local officials are more attuned to issues surrounding child rights and actively

collaborate with community representatives on ways to reduce MSHT. This has elicited a 'significant transformation' in the culture of collaboration between government offices, communities and civil society actors, in addition to greater cross-sectoral co-operation and intra-governmental co-ordination on addressing trafficking risks. Others have spoken of efforts to more closely align government activity with national child protection policies. This has included a renewed commitment to ensuring that child protection laws are consistently implemented and properly enforced, as well as work to include child protection into school curricula and community programmes.

Understanding social norms is essential for prevention interventions to have long-term, sustainable outcomes. Projects should work closely with communities to identify norms that increase vulnerability to MSHT, before testing approaches relevant to the context and seeking continuous feedback to adapt and improve programming. While building the trust necessary for sustainable community engagement can be a gradual process, the time invested enables interventions to achieve far-reaching and long-lasting impacts in the fight against MSHT.



3. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

A cornerstone of international development programming around the world, the Self-help Group model is a highly trusted and cost-effective intervention whose long-term sustainability is rooted in community ownership, mutual support and self-reliance.⁶ Project Tesfa's work with SHGs has aimed to boost women's empowerment by creating safe spaces for women to meet, build trust and develop strong support networks. In addition to building social capital, such groups engage in collective saving and internal lending to improve financial resilience and self-reliance, which in turn significantly reduces vulnerability and pursuit of high-risk activities, such as irregular migration, that can lead to modern slavery.

There are currently 448 active SHGs across Wolaita and Hadiya, all of which have become financially independent since receiving an initial injection of start-up funding from Hope for Justice. Over the last year, 8,278 women have regularly participated in meetings and other activities of their local SHG.⁶ Members frequently extol improvements to their confidence and self-esteem, financial independence and security, and sense of community and belonging. As a result, SHGs act as ideal platforms to conduct trainings and raise awareness of MSHT, with members empowered to take messages and learnings to their households and wider communities.

Feedback from members has highlighted how SHGs have introduced a culture of regular saving that was largely absent hitherto.⁷ Many women have also opened bank accounts in their own names to save independently. In addition to covering household needs such as school fees and medical bills, many loans have been used for income-generating activities (IGAs), including projects such as animal husbandry and vegetable patches. Women have pursued these projects both in groups and as individuals, and have often succeeded in making a healthy profit, sometimes three or four times their initial investments.

Members have consistently cited livelihoods training as an essential pre-requisite to success; not only does it give them the skills they need to run businesses, but it also gives them the

confidence to do so. Nevertheless, participants have sometimes flagged the difficulty of selling, largely due to stiff competition from wholesalers. Additionally, the phase three endline evaluation found that many SHG members struggle to generate sustainable, long-term income. Refining livelihoods training may help to mitigate these challenges, while strengthening linkages between SHGs could contribute to improved knowledge-sharing and wider support networks. While these measures may improve project outcomes, it must be remembered that SHGs can only relieve, not solve, the hardship caused by wider, structural economic challenges in Wolaita and Hadiya.



Outside of livelihoods, improved self-belief among members has been another valuable outcome of SHG participation. This is partly because Self-help Group membership is 100-percent female, providing women with spaces to express themselves and learn from each other as peers, before growing into roles in other spaces. Indeed, stakeholders have noted how women's participation and leadership in both the household and broader community has increased, whether through village committees, campaign groups or other local platforms. In one instance, an SHG successfully lobbied local government officials for permission to use nearby land for small-scale agriculture and a market, saving members a significant amount of time and money transporting their products on market days. Feedback has also described increasing recognition of the importance of shared responsibility between men and women in

⁶ Monthly average of total SHG membership between April 2025 – January 2026 across all Project Tesfa SHGs in Wolaita and Hadiya

⁷ Since inception, each SHG has saved an average of around 40,800 Ethiopian Birr (roughly 260 USD as of March 2026)

financial and social matters, both in the household and the wider community. As such, by empowering women to generate income independently and by boosting their social capital and self-belief, Self-help Groups have helped to challenge negative social norms surrounding gender. In some cases, this has enabled women to step in and prevent the potential exploitation of their children.

In order to boost long-term sustainability, Project Tesfa has worked with government partners to formally recognise Self-help Groups and has also established cluster-level associations comprised of SHG representatives from constituent localities. Meanwhile, stakeholder feedback has stressed that maintaining regular follow-up visits, engagement and monitoring will be key to ensuring that SHGs continue to get the support they need. Group members themselves have given overwhelmingly

positive accounts of their participation in the project, with requests for 'more of the same' from Hope for Justice, particularly with regard to livelihoods: more training for business success and more funding for larger IGA loans.

Project Tesfa's work with Self-help Groups has demonstrated that building the resilience and agency of women decreases the risk of MSHT within their households, particularly among children. Not only have SHG members bolstered their financial resilience through regular savings, loans and IGAs, they have also built the confidence and self-esteem necessary to proactively effect change within their communities and households. This impact has been possible because of the community ownership, mutual support and self-reliance that lie at the heart of Project Tesfa's SHG programming.



4. SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Engaging with schools has been an effective way to build upon and reinforce Project Tesfa's work at the household and community levels. Instead of viewing students as passive beneficiaries of training and lessons on MSHT, Tesfa has built buy-in and ownership by collaborating with them as agents of change in the fight against modern slavery. This has led to successful student-led activities that have sought to amplify anti-trafficking, including student drama, sports and dialogue with fellow classmates, as well as collaboration with teachers to identify and support students at risk of modern slavery. Students have also enthusiastically taken messages to their households and wider communities. These initiatives have invited interest from local government officials, civil society organisations and donors, who have keenly visited students to observe their activities first-hand.

Project Tesfa has primarily worked through Child Wellbeing Clubs to achieve this behaviour change. These groups, common across schools nationally, comprise roughly 30 pupils from the student body and meet monthly to discuss a range of issues relating to young people's education. In 2025, Hope for Justice reached a monthly average of 4,800 school students through its work with 200 CWCs in Wolaita and Hadiya.

Project Tesfa's phase three endline evaluation found that CWCs had been instrumental in boosting awareness of modern slavery among school students, increasing knowledge of reporting mechanisms, encouraging school attendance, and providing safe spaces for students. In particular, feedback from CWC members emphasises how the clubs have identified school attendance as one of the best ways to mitigate vulnerability to MSHT; students work together to identify those most at risk of trafficking, engaging with them personally to encourage school attendance and avoidance of high-risk behaviour such as migration and informal employment.





Several CWC members also recounted their efforts to talk to the wider community, such as elders or parents in high-risk households, noting the difficulties in being taken seriously as young people. Moreover, the phase three endline evaluation found that economic considerations remain a powerful reason for pulling students out of school, observing that a substantial portion of community members continue to believe that children should start working at 15. Stakeholder feedback has also emphasised varying degrees of interest in MSHT across school leadership and Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs), meaning that the issue is not always given the attention it deserves. Meanwhile, teachers and principals often lack the specific training needed to effectively lead sensitive discussions on protection and trafficking.

Despite these challenges, many community stakeholders have enthusiastically observed the proactive engagement of students on MSHT issues, noting their increased awareness of child rights and their greater tendency to report potential cases to authority figures. Furthermore, stakeholders have (anecdotally) linked lower school drop-out rates to student activism on MSHT. Feedback has also noted that knowledge and awareness of the topic has spread to neighbouring schools that are not part of Project Tesfa, through school cluster meetings, education fora and community gatherings.

CWC members consistently cited audio equipment, given to school-based Mini Media Clubs, as the most useful material provided by Hope for Justice. This has enabled CWCs to grab other students' attention and communicate messages more easily, though members in more remote schools highlighted that poor power supply created difficulties charging items such as large speakers and microphones. Meanwhile, sports equipment for activities such as handball was acknowledged as an effective tool to engage fellow students and talk to them about modern slavery. Furthermore, support from teachers, who help with co-ordination and provide guidance, was seen as essential, while extra support with school materials, which highly vulnerable students often lack, was identified as a way to boost CWCs' ability to encourage school attendance. Work has also been underway to embed MSHT into the regional educational curriculum, which will further boost sustainability.

Embedding MSHT into CWCs, a structure present in most schools across Ethiopia, has allowed Hope for Justice to avoid the time-consuming process of building entirely new student-based groups itself. It has also allowed Project Tesfa to directly engage students, ensure their buy-in and ownership, and complement the work done by the project at the household level.

5. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Aside from its work with school students via Child Wellbeing Clubs, Project Tesfa's efforts to engage young people have largely operated through indirect mechanisms. By raising awareness and understanding of MSHT among members of Community-based Organisations, Community Faith-based Organisations, Self-help Groups and local government, Hope for Justice has sought to influence wider social norms around unsafe migration, the importance of school attendance and positive parenting. Direct project participants have then diffused these messages to the larger community, via conversations with family members in the household, village elders, school meetings, religious gatherings, and so on. Young adults, specifically those who have left school and are now earning money, are necessarily exposed to these messages too.



Despite these efforts, feedback from survivors has highlighted how family members often pressure their younger relatives to migrate to provide financial support to the household. In some instances, particularly those involving females, older male family members and relatives make the decision and the associated arrangements on their behalf, without regard for the young person's autonomy or consent. In other cases, young adults independently decide to migrate and, anticipating a negative reaction from family and community, only divulge their plans at the last minute. 'Brokers' also play a key role in promising stable and well-paid employment; some survivors recounted how they were encouraged to keep their intentions secret so that the broker could maintain control over the migration process and prevent interference from concerned family members, peers and communities.

These dynamics paint a multi-faceted picture of how decisions to migrate are made: in some cases, older family members push migration onto unwilling young adults, whereas in other cases young adults hide their intentions to migrate from the disapproval of families, communities and peers. In all cases, brokers play an important role in making unrealistic promises about working conditions and compensation in destination countries. This points to the continued importance of awareness-raising and training in helping people understand the dangers of irregular migration and the realities of the conditions they are likely to face, as well as the methods brokers use to recruit individuals and deceive families. Running awareness-raising activities at bus stations and other transportation hubs, where unsafe migration often begins, may also be an effective way to directly reach young adults. Furthermore, given the roles that many different actors play in a young person's decision to migrate, working holistically with different segments of the community to disseminate anti-trafficking messaging continues to be essential.

Although economic hardship is a powerful driver of migration, stakeholder feedback has highlighted how Self-help Groups are not as effective among young people as they are among mothers, with the former often struggling to adopt the slow, disciplined savings routine that is so central to the micro-finance model. This suggests that further research would be required to successfully adapt the SHG model to a younger demographic. In addition, Project Tesfa's research has suggested that facilitating spaces for wider peer engagement, perhaps via youth clubs and other social events, may help to combat push factors that can lead to trafficking, such as family instability, as well as to identify and engage others who are at risk. Such initiatives could also act as platforms to mobilise young adults as leaders and catalysts of change, while encouraging young people to hold duty-bearers to account on issues of pertinence to MSHT.

Furthermore, feedback from survivors has recommended exploring ways to more directly connect survivors with young adults. This includes forming survivor groups to train others on the

dangers of unsafe migration, teach young people their rights and disseminate anti-trafficking messages. Hope for Justice's research has also suggested that social norms and attitudes of particular significance among young adults, including issues surrounding identity, purpose and peer recognition, may play an important role in the decision to migrate. Deeper engagement with young people would help to develop a more nuanced picture of these widely held beliefs and build interventions that are tailored to the lives and experiences of this segment of the population.

Although Project Tesfa's work within schools, households and community structures has largely involved young adults through indirect mechanisms, it is important to reflect on a more tailored and targeted approach to directly engage this demographic, which is highly vulnerable to MSHT. While Hope for Justice's own findings and research have identified potential ways to work with young adults, more work is needed to craft and test interventions that can achieve meaningful outcomes among this segment of the community.



NOTES

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