



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCES

How coronavirus impacts human trafficking



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MAY 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Cover photo: A young child in Kabul. The COVID-19 pandemic will deprive many children of one or both parents and/or caregivers, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. © *Andrés Vanegas Canosa*  
Illustration: Claudio Landi and Paulina Rosol-Barras

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# SUMMARY

The coronavirus is not only claiming hundreds of thousands of lives,<sup>1</sup> but is also causing a global economic crisis that is expected to rival or exceed that of any recession in the past 150 years.<sup>2</sup> Although decisive action and containment measures are helping flatten the curve of infection,<sup>3</sup> such measures inevitably deepen and lengthen the economic recession.<sup>4</sup> In the worst-case scenario, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that up to 25 million people will lose their jobs worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

Poverty, lack of social or economic opportunity and limited labour protections are the main root causes<sup>6</sup> and drivers<sup>7</sup> that render people vulnerable or cause them to fall victim to human trafficking. This unprecedented crisis will likely exacerbate all of those factors and result in developments (see Figure 1) that must be noted by anti-human-trafficking communities and stakeholders.

**FIGURE 1** Impact of the coronavirus on human trafficking



As we have seen from previous economic crises and epidemics (such as SARS and Ebola), accurate, consistent and timely information is essential in order to fight not only the coronavirus but also the consequences it has on human-trafficking situations.<sup>8</sup> In researching this brief, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has spoken to its Network of Experts and Resilience Fund grantees who are directly fighting human trafficking in the field, and used inputs provided by our various anti-trafficking networks, contacts and projects, including the Alliance 8.7's Communications, Engagement and Advocacy Group,<sup>9</sup> Freedom Collaborative COVID-19 Response platform<sup>10</sup> and

the Human Trafficking Foundation Google group.<sup>11</sup> The brief has also drawn on the initial findings of the COVID-19 Impact survey conducted by the Tech Against Trafficking initiative – a coalition of global tech companies, human-trafficking survivors, civil-society organizations and international institutions in which GI-TOC serves as the research lead.<sup>12</sup>

This brief aims to contribute to global anti-trafficking efforts aimed at mitigating the effects of the pandemic on human-trafficking situations and actors, not only by providing timely, comprehensive overview and transparent information, but also by suggesting holistic and multi-stakeholder responses and interventions.



## THE CORONAVIRUS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, trafficking for sexual exploitation was the most detected form of human trafficking. According to the 2018 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 59 per cent of all victims of trafficking were victims of sexual exploitation, 34 per cent were victims of forced labour and 7 per cent were victims of trafficking for other purposes.<sup>13</sup>

According to the ILO, of the 40.3 million estimated victims currently in modern slavery worldwide, 24.9 million are in forced labour and 15.4 million are in forced marriage.<sup>14</sup> In terms of geographical and demographical concentrations, while trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriage overwhelmingly target women and girls, men and boys account for the majority of victims of forced labour in sectors such as construction, mining and manufacturing.<sup>15</sup> Trafficking for sexual exploitation is most detected in the Americas, whereas trafficking for forced labour is most reported in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

Given the confinement measures and economic hardships that the coronavirus pandemic has brought about, some trafficking forms – most notably those involving the commercial sexual exploitation of children and the exploitation of those in domestic servitude – are reportedly increasing.<sup>17</sup> The economic crisis is also hitting low-skilled workers, undocumented migrant workers and workers in the informal economies hard, particularly those in developing countries with low or no labour and social protections, thus making them even more vulnerable to human trafficking and labour exploitation.

Signage displaying a campaign against human trafficking is seen at Knight Center Metrorail station in downtown Miami, January 2020. © Eva Marie Uzcatagui/ AFP via Getty Images

## A ray of hope or a dim light?

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, a charity received a plea for help. The victim, Lan, was a Vietnamese girl who had been in a forced marriage with an abusive Chinese man in Hunan, China, for more than four years. 'It was the coronavirus that gave her the opportunity to call for help,' wrote Michael Brosowski, founder of Blue Dragon, an organization supporting children in crisis and victims of human trafficking in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> With Hunan under lockdown and Lan constrained at home, her husband did not see the need to keep a close eye on her. Lan stole a mobile phone and contacted her family in Vietnam. Blue Dragon became aware of her situation and contacted her.

But although the pandemic enabled Lan to make contact with the outside world, the lockdown meant that she could not escape her situation. Finally, Lan

decided that she could no longer stand the increased violence and beating from her husband, and decided to end her own life. She asked the charity to send her family a final message. The following day, after countless calls and messages, Blue Dragon confirmed that she was still alive, albeit weak and traumatized. They are now waiting for the pandemic to ebb in order to initiate their rescue plan.<sup>19</sup>

Lan's case is not unique. The coronavirus pandemic has placed the rescue of thousands of human-trafficking victims in limbo and intensified their exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

The virus has also pushed many in the most vulnerable groups – children, women and girls, undocumented migrants, low-skilled and domestic workers – closer to the clutches of human trafficking.<sup>21</sup>

This section explores the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on existing trafficking victims and survivors (according to each trafficking type), as well as examining how the pandemic might drive an increase in the number of potential trafficking victims among vulnerable and newly vulnerable groups.

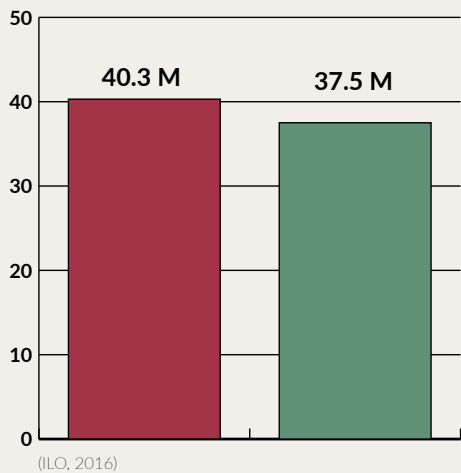
Although the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' might arguably be used interchangeably in human-trafficking discourse, for the purpose of this policy brief, 'victims' refer to both 'unidentified' and 'identified' persons who are currently still under any form of exploitation, while 'survivors' refer to previously trafficked persons who have been identified, rescued and are currently not in an exploitative situation. This distinction helps assess the varied implications of the coronavirus pandemic on victims and survivors more accurately.

## Sexual exploitation and forced marriage

### Impact of coronavirus on existing victims and survivors

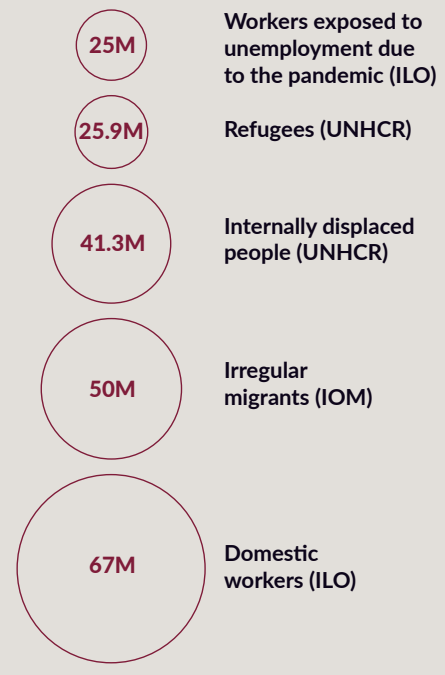
In some cases, the lockdown measures introduced by countries worldwide have helped NGOs and law-enforcement agencies identify victims of sexual exploitation and forced marriage, as with Lan's story (see above). In the case of 29 suspected Kenyan human-trafficking victims found trapped with their traffickers in April, the lockdown measures arguably helped facilitate the victims' rescue from exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

Such cases, however, are the exception. In regard to victims of sexual exploitation and forced marriage, one of the most reported impacts of the pandemic has been the victims'

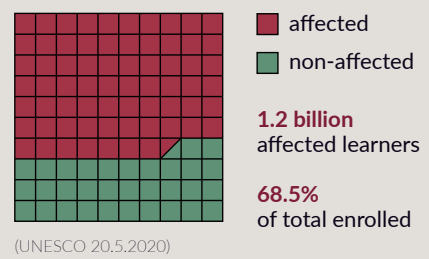


**1 in 4** victims are children  
**71%** are women and girls  
**4 million** are in state-imposed forced labour

### Vulnerable groups:



### Covid-19 impact on education globally:



**FIGURE 2** The demographics of modern slavery

NOTE: Estimates by UN agencies are indicated.

inability to seek help or escape their perpetrators and exploitative situations.<sup>23</sup> Being confined with their perpetrators, victims have also reportedly been subject to heightened violence and abuse.<sup>24</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic has also been negatively impacting survivors of sexual exploitation and forced marriage, who are (i) experiencing delayed support in the criminal-justice process; (ii) finding it more difficult to access protection and rehabilitation services; (iii) at higher risk of being re-trafficked due to reduced livelihoods and economic opportunities; and (iv) suffering psychological trauma due to the lockdown measures triggering memories of their previous experience in exploitation and captivity, as was reported in the case of several young female survivors in Bengal, India.<sup>25</sup>



Based on the initial results of Tech Against Trafficking initiative's COVID-19 Impact survey,<sup>26</sup> two-thirds of surveyed survivors indicated that they were receiving less support, with services disrupted and/or cancelled. With many community schemes (including women's groups) halted, several anti-human-trafficking organizations have raised concern that many survivors might now be isolated and find it harder to re-integrate, while others might be left without a shelter after their brief government-mandated support ended.<sup>27</sup> Survivors may also find their repatriation process interrupted by the lockdown measures. A victim assisting a charity in Bangladesh reported that, due to the travel restrictions introduced in India at the end of March 2020, six Bangladeshi women who were rescued from four years of sexual exploitation from a brothel are now unable to return home and have been left in limbo, as their travel permits expired before the restrictions were lifted.<sup>28</sup>

Among the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation, especially online sexual exploitation, children have been the hardest-hit group during lockdown. Before the outbreak, the amount of online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) being identified globally had already been increasing exponentially, from more than one million reports of CSEM in 2014 to 18.4 million reports in 2018 (reports which contained more than 45 million online photos and videos of children being sexually abused) – the 2018 figure was more than double what was found in 2017.<sup>29</sup>

### **Increased risk of exploitation for existing and newly vulnerable groups**

The groups whose vulnerability to sexual exploitation has been exacerbated and intensified by the coronavirus pandemic and its social and economic consequences include women and girls; children and adults from disadvantaged, marginalized communities; and refugees and migrants.

Prior to the pandemic, women and girls were already disproportionately targeted by traffickers, accounting for 71 and 72 per cent of estimated<sup>34</sup> and detected victims of trafficking in persons globally.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, one in four estimated and detected victims of trafficking were children. The disproportionate impact of human trafficking on women and girls will increase during and after the pandemic. As shown by the

During the coronavirus pandemic, Europol reported a further increase in the demand for and distribution of online CSEM in many parts of Europe, as more predators and potential perpetrators are confined at home. On 27 March, the Swedish National Police reported seeing an increase in the sharing of online CSEM following the introduction of lockdown measures.<sup>30</sup> This was reported just three weeks after the launch of the 'Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse', a joint initiative announced by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, and six major tech firms.<sup>31</sup> Spain and Denmark have also reported an increase in the number of reports about CSEM online, and of attempts to access illicit websites and forums containing CSEM. Spain also reported a 25 per cent increase in peer-to-peer downloads of CSEM over the last two weeks of March 2020.<sup>32</sup> Due to the increased demand for CSEM, existing child victims might be exposed to greater frequencies of violence and exploitation, especially when the abusers are their own caregivers and when home is not a safe place for them.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, child survivors of sexual exploitation, like adult survivors, might find their access to protection, legal and rehabilitation services reduced or cut off due to containment measures. Furthermore, given the increased sharing and distribution of CSEM, child survivors would more likely find their previous abuse materials being circulated and distributed on the internet at a faster pace and higher volume, thus being left further traumatized.

financial crises of 1997–1998 and 2008–2009, women and girls are among the hardest-hit groups during and after economic shocks.<sup>36</sup> Women tend to self-sacrifice, forgo essential medicine and put their own lives and health at risk, such as by engaging in illegal sex work.<sup>37</sup>

Polaris, the NGO operating the US national human-trafficking hotline, has reported an emerging form of sexual exploitation during the pandemic in which landlords force their tenants (often women) for sex when the tenant's ability to pay rent is reduced.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, girls from poor and rural areas have been seen to be the first to drop out of school and sent off to a forced marriage to alleviate the family's hardship, especially in



Displaced Syrian children watch as their camp is disinfected during a COVID-19-containment campaign, April 2020.

© Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images

cases where school closures mean there are no more government-subsidized meals for children.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, the surge in domestic violence reported worldwide during the coronavirus crisis has escalated women and girls' vulnerabilities.<sup>40</sup> Refuge, the UK's largest domestic-abuse charity, reported a 120 per cent increase in calls to its helpline in a single day in April.<sup>41</sup> As domestic violence is among the well-known, demonstrated push factors in sex trafficking,<sup>42</sup> women and girls are more likely to be subjected to double victimization should they be sexually exploited and trafficked by their own intimate partners/potential traffickers or 'pimps' (a phenomenon termed 'intimate-partner trafficking'),<sup>43</sup> with whom they are currently quarantined.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, children and women living in overcrowded camps for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are not only facing tremendous health risks (given the impossibility of practising physical distancing in such places), but are also increasingly subject to sexual exploitation by gangs operating in the camps and reception centres, who are taking advantage of the reduced security, disruption of protection and provision services and increased

chaos caused by the coronavirus and associated confinement measures. Such exploitation has been observed in IDP camps in Haiti,<sup>45</sup> Mali and Niger.<sup>46</sup>

Traffickers are also increasingly exploiting children's online vulnerabilities and increased digital presence during the lockdown. As of 9 April 2020, the pandemic had led to the closure of schools in 194 countries around the world, affecting more than 90 per cent of the world's pupils and students.<sup>47</sup> As children abruptly shift towards online learning, social media and gaming platforms to connect with peers, they are increasingly exposed to digital risks and criminal exploitation. This risk is particularly acute for younger children, who may have limited preparation and/or prior knowledge of the online tools.<sup>48</sup> Europol and the FBI have issued warnings to parents and teachers about increased risks of online child exploitation, with an FBI spokesperson outlining a likely narrative of exploitation, stating that 'offenders may make casual contact with children online, gain their trust, and introduce sexual conversation that increases in egregiousness over time'.<sup>49</sup>

To illustrate how quickly a child can be approached and groomed by online predators, Bark (an internet-

*Due to anti-contagion movement restrictions, some migrants in transit will be forced into immobility, unable to continue on their journeys or return home.*

monitoring app for parents) conducted an experiment in which one of its staff, a 37-year-old mother, used photo manipulation and the help of graphic designers to pose as an 11-year-old girl online. Within minutes of her opening accounts on social-media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and Kik, online sexual predators were sending invites and messages.<sup>50</sup>

This situation is worse in families where (i) parents are under great stress due to the shift to working from home – they might be more than happy to allow their child to entertain themselves online in their own room;<sup>51</sup> and (ii) parents have lost income and jobs due to the physical-distancing measures and closures of businesses and economic activities. In this latter case, parents – especially in poor and marginalized communities – may livestream sexual abuse of their children for payment.<sup>52</sup> This activity had been much reported in South East Asian countries even before the pandemic, especially in the Philippines, where some parents may even not perceive online child sexual exploitation (CSE) as doing significant harm to their children, especially when there are no physical interactions involved. On 6 and 22 April 2020, two people were arrested in Cebu and Luzon for the cybersex trafficking of eight minors – including their own children and cousin – aged between three and fourteen.<sup>53</sup> The resources required for this illicit activity are minimal – in order to commit the crime, one needs only an internet connection, a smartphone with a camera and microphone and a platform to receive payment. Advances in technology have lowered the barriers to enter the exploitation industry, making it easier than ever to access, download, produce and share CSEM online. Given that sexual grooming of children usually takes time (as traffickers need to build trust and an emotional connection with the victims<sup>54</sup>), children who are groomed during the quarantine measures are likely to remain victims long after the pandemic is over.

Irregular migrants are another category who have historically been vulnerable to exploitation, including in contexts that constitute trafficking.<sup>55</sup> This exploitation can take the form of sexual abuse or forced sex work, especially involving women and girls, and can be perpetrated either by the smuggling networks they engaged to facilitate their journey or by separate trafficking groups.

The coronavirus pandemic may increase the vulnerability of many irregular migrants to trafficking. Due to movement restrictions, some migrants in transit will be forced into immobility, unable to continue on their journeys or return home. Historically, migrant populations forced into such immobility while on the migrant trail – either as a result of increased law-enforcement efforts, unaffordable smuggler prices or otherwise – have been found to be at high risk of trafficking.<sup>56</sup> Research also shows that migrants who are forced to earn along their journeys as part of the smuggling arrangement are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including at the hands of trafficking networks.<sup>57</sup> These kinds of ‘travel now, pay later’ schemes can result in forced labour or sexual exploitation.<sup>58</sup> Many migrants embarked on the migrant trail or forced into immobility during pandemic will run out of funds and may be forced to resort to such schemes to survive, raising the likelihood of exploitation.



Where migrants continue on their journeys, they will be increasingly reliant on smugglers to facilitate their journey through environments that are increasingly hostile to migration. This enhanced dependency, and decreased ability to rely on any state organs for support, compounds their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of their smugglers.

**The COVID-19 pandemic may significantly increase children's vulnerability to trafficking, especially in crowded, unprotected places, such as refugee, migrant and IDP camps.**

© Pixabay

## Labour exploitation

### Impact of coronavirus on existing victims and survivors

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, trafficked workers were trapped in exploitative recruitment and work situations, faced restrictions on movements (including not being able to terminate their working relationship) and were forced to consent to often hazardous working conditions. The lockdown measures and economic hardship entailed by the pandemic are likely to exacerbate the severity of these strictures for victims of forced labour.

The ILO framework for measuring forced labour includes two types of indicators – those that reflect involuntariness (including coercive or bonded labour), and those that indicate a penalty or threat of penalty – both of which have been intensified by the crisis.<sup>59</sup>

However, as economies worldwide experience sharp contractions during the coronavirus pandemic, some forms of forced labour (such as informal employment of bonded labourers in the formal sectors of construction and agriculture in the Global North) may be temporarily put on hold. This will result in increased financial burdens and heightened risks of falling deeper into debt bondage as victims' income dries up, especially given the high interest rates attached to their recruitment debt. For those victims who are trapped with their traffickers, the situation is even more desperate.



**Migrant workers harvest cucumbers in Mount Dora, US, amid the COVID-19 crisis. The federal government designated farm workers as essential.** © Paul Hennessy / Echoes Wire/Barcroft Media via Getty Images

Not only are they unable to pay off what they ‘owe’ – a financial burden that will only increase with traffickers’ provision of accommodation and food, and the imposition of fees – but they also face increased violence and the risk of other forms of exploitation (including sexual abuse) as their traffickers try to compensate for lost revenues.

Victims of labour exploitation are also exposed to a higher probability of increased abuse and reduced chance of being identified and rescued during the pandemic, especially in sectors that are hard to access or dangerous, for instance in areas of illegal logging, illegal mining and illegal fishing, due to decreased labour inspections and enforcement of laws on labour trafficking, which were already lax for victims in exploitative situations prior to the pandemic.<sup>60</sup>

In the case of state-imposed forced labour, victims (particularly those of ethnic minorities) have been especially hard hit during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the ILO estimated that 4 million people were in state-imposed forced labour in 2016.<sup>61</sup> In Xinjiang, China, more than a million Uighurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities have reportedly been placed in ‘re-education camps’ by the Chinese authorities since 2017, many of whom were reported to be in forced labour, producing goods and products for multinationals such as Nike, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Nokia and Mercedes-Benz.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese government was accused of forcing Uighurs into organ trafficking,<sup>63</sup> a case that was heard by the UN Human Rights Council in September 2019.<sup>64</sup> Due to pandemic-driven worker shortages, the Chinese government was also accused of transferring 30 000 Uighur labourers from Xinjiang across the country to keep factories running and open.<sup>65</sup> Many Uighurs were also shown in video footage being left to starve and freeze as the authorities enhanced lockdown measures.<sup>66</sup> Uighurs living abroad expressed concerns about the potential for mass outbreaks of infection and increased deaths of their fellow people in such overcrowded detention camps.<sup>67</sup> With countries around the world preoccupied with containing the spread of the coronavirus,

many worry that less attention is being paid to the dire conditions in which many Uighurs victims are living.<sup>68</sup>

The risks have also risen for survivors of labour exploitation, who are more likely to be exposed to revictimization when they do not have access to healthcare, psychological assistance and safe

accommodation (all of which have reportedly been reduced or limited during the pandemic).<sup>69</sup> Some survivors have also reported to be facing delayed support in the criminal-justice process. The evaporation of livelihoods can also place survivors at greater risk of re-trafficking.

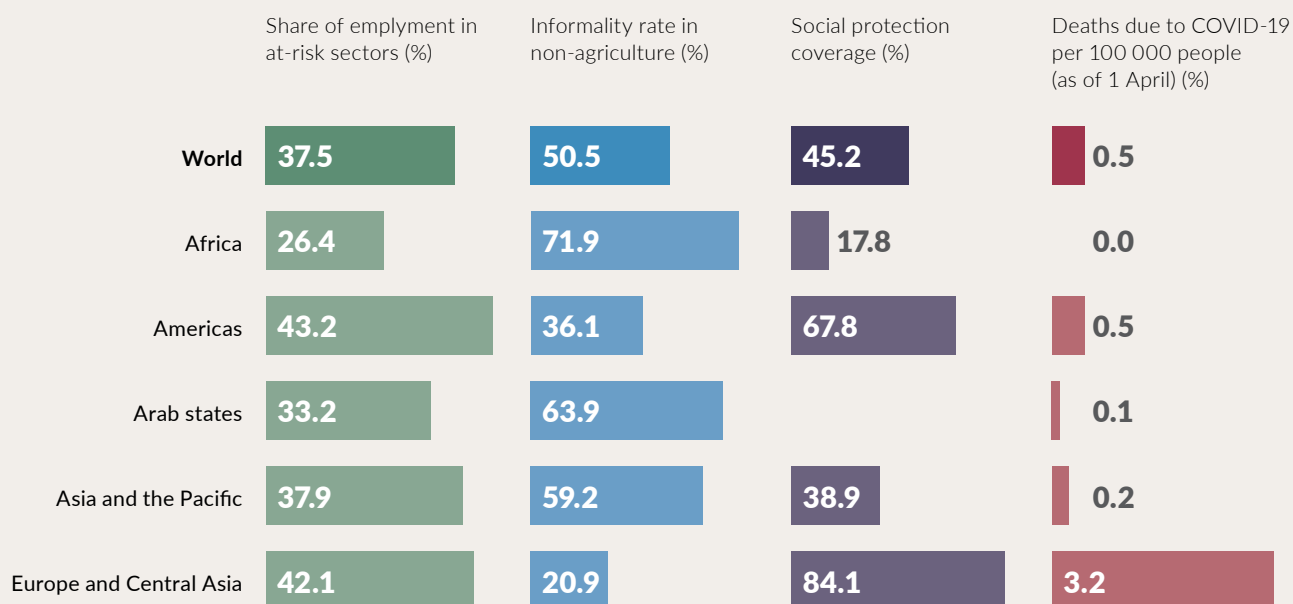
### Increased risk of exploitation for existing and newly vulnerable groups

The coronavirus pandemic may render formal and informal workers, and marginalized communities and groups vulnerable to trafficking by fuelling the main drivers behind labour trafficking, namely poverty, oppression, absence of human rights, lack of social or economic opportunity, and dangers from conflict or instability.<sup>70</sup>

According to the latest ILO figures, full or partial lockdown measures are now affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, representing around 81 per cent of the world's workforce.<sup>71</sup> Millions of low-skilled formal workers are now vulnerable to income loss and layoffs with no (or limited) savings to survive the hard times in the near future and no or limited access to government support for workers and industry. NGOs

have reported that workers are increasingly taking loans from their employers to cover basic needs, thus making them more vulnerable to bonded labour.

The situation is even more grave in the informal sector, where workers have limited or almost no access to labour and protection rights, welfare or social safety nets. Currently, there are some two billion workers in the informal sector, primarily living in developing countries.<sup>72</sup> Vulnerability of workers, which may be both induced and enhanced by the virus, is particularly acute in the Global South, which accounts for 93 per cent of the world's informal employment.<sup>73</sup> In India, about 80 per cent of the 470 million workers are in the informal sector.



**FIGURE 3** Workers at risk, informality and social protection

SOURCE: International Labour Organization, ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, updated estimates and analysis, 7 April 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_740877.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_740877.pdf).

*Women have been particularly susceptible to the impact of the pandemic-induced economic crisis.*

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of both the formal and informal sectors. The severe economic contraction brought about by lockdown measures has led to plunging demand in the global marketplace, resulting in a raft of closures, cancellations and layoffs. Bangladesh relies on the clothing industry for more than 80 per cent of its exports and has approximately 4 000 factories; of this number, 58 per cent have shut down most or all of their operations. Out of the industry's 4 million workers (most of whom are women), more than 1 million have lost their jobs or been temporarily suspended from work as a result of order cancellations.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, hundreds of workers at a Chinese-owned garment factory in Vientiane, Laos, were reported to have had their wages for March 2020 withheld.<sup>75</sup> In India, 100 million internal migrant workers have been reportedly affected by the Indian authorities' imposed lockdown, thousands of whom have been found stranded in cramped work hostels with no income, raising concerns about the possibility of infection.<sup>76</sup> Migrant workers who were preparing for departure, either to travel home or to the workplace, are likely to have already paid recruitment fees or travel costs, placing them at risk of debt bondage, especially given the unplanned increases of costs due to immobility.

Women have been particularly susceptible to the impact of the pandemic-induced economic crisis, given that they account for the majority of workers in the informal sector, especially in the Global South.<sup>77</sup> In some regions, up to 95 per cent of female workers are working in the informal sector without job security, health insurance, or other safety or financial measures to respond to a crisis.<sup>78</sup> In addition, women often need to work longer hours and days in order to compete in the informal markets.<sup>79</sup> The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on these workers: in Kenya and Ethiopia, for example, some 60 000 casual female workers have been laid off due to the plummeting demand for flowers.<sup>80</sup>

The pandemic will also have a long-lasting impact on children. It will leave many children without parents or other caregivers, significantly increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. This situation is likely to be especially prevalent in countries with weak social and healthcare systems, as well as in crowded, unprotected places, such as refugee, migrant and IDP camps.

Child workers are also particularly vulnerable. In 2017, the ILO estimated that there were 218 million children between the ages of five and 17 in employment worldwide.<sup>81</sup> Some 108 million work in the agriculture sector. Some of these child workers might be temporarily withdrawn from labour owing to lockdown situations, but the issue of child labour may also grow more acute in several scenarios. Firstly, there may be increased participation of children in agricultural activities, as due to lockdowns restrictions, families may have to expedite their harvesting and selling activities, leading to an increased number of children having to work alongside their families. Given the seasonal nature of agriculture, such work cannot be deferred. Secondly, as child labour and other forms of exploitation (such as forced begging and selling goods on the streets) are closely associated with financial shocks experienced by a family (such as loss of employment and/or illness), the coronavirus is likely to lead to increased rates of labour exploitation among children in the short, medium and long term.<sup>82</sup> Lastly, school enrolment is also expected to fall as older children drop out of school to care for younger siblings.<sup>83</sup>



**A boy begs from commuters in Manila. Child exploitation, including forced begging, is closely associated with financial shocks experienced by a family.** *Noel Celis/AFP via Getty Images*

Domestic workers are another vulnerable group. According to the ILO, there are 67 million domestic workers worldwide, three-quarters of whom lack formal healthcare, sick-leave provision, unemployment insurance and a host of other workplace benefits. Domestic workers are often excluded from the protection of labour laws or are treated less favourably than other wage workers, making them vulnerable to labour (and sometimes sexual) exploitation.<sup>84</sup> In the current situation, they have been exposed to heightened exploitation and abuse, with their workload increasing tremendously as all members of a household are now always at home.<sup>85</sup>

According to an April 2020 IST Research survey of 6 000 migrant workers in the Gulf states, migrant domestic workers are 36 per cent more likely to be confined to their workplace, and were 240 per cent more likely to be forced to work on rest days than any other migrant workers.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, domestic workers, carers and au pairs are at heightened risk of losing their jobs, as many families fear contagion.<sup>87</sup> Over 50 per cent of migrant domestic

workers reported bearing new debts as a result of the pandemic – a much higher proportion than other migrant job types. Since most domestic workers live with the families for whom they work, losing their job might mean being homeless. Coupled with having no income and little or no savings, they are further pushed to the edge of financial crisis.

Legal and informal sex workers around the world are also particularly vulnerable to human trafficking during lockdown. Since sex workers frequently live in brothels and other places where they work, the closures of bars, nightclubs and brothels mean they have lost not only their livelihoods but also their accommodation, exposing them to greater exploitative situations and higher risks of infection.<sup>88</sup> Streetlight, a charity supporting sex workers in the UK, has reported that suicide attempts among sex workers have increased, especially in cases where drug use is involved.<sup>89</sup> On a positive note, some sex workers in Amsterdam have reportedly set up a crowdfunding initiative to raise support for their peers.<sup>90</sup> The International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe has also issued a call for





During a prison riot in April 2020, inmates of the Devoto Penitentiary in Buenos Aires demanded that authorities take measures to protect them against COVID-19. Prisoners are a vulnerable category for labour exploitation.

© Marcos Brindicci/Getty Images

action, urging European governments to include sex workers in their coronavirus responses and protection policies, particularly in regard to income and housing support, and access to healthcare services.<sup>91</sup>

Prisoners are another vulnerable category for labour exploitation. Female inmates in Hong Kong and prisoners in the US have reportedly been forced to work long hours, including night shifts, to produce face masks.<sup>92</sup> The Hong Kong inmates were concerned about their health and low pay after having to work shifts ranging from six to ten hours, six days a week, while being paid about HK\$800 a month. To put that into context, Hong Kong's minimum wage is HK\$37.5 per hour, which, if applied, would see the inmates earn their monthly HK\$800 stipend in approximately three days.<sup>93</sup> According to the ILO guidelines, although the use of prison labour is not forced labour per se, prison workers should be hired only on a voluntary basis, and have the same right to decent work conditions as free workers, together with comparable wages.<sup>94</sup>

Such situations are not limited to prisons. In South Africa, police rescued 14 workers who were locked in a Durban factory and forced to produce masks as demand rose during the outbreak.<sup>95</sup> In Brazil, restrictions on internal migration and international travel have resulted in a shortage of workers, especially in the coffee sector, fuelling a need for local and inexperienced workers, which could lead to the exploitation of new workers.

The pandemic has also seen undocumented and migrant workers driven into a more precarious and clandestine existence. Marginalized migrant workers trapped in crowded, unsafe dormitories and unable to leave the host country face increased discrimination and greater risk of becoming infected, as has been reported in Singapore<sup>96</sup> and the Gulf states.<sup>97</sup> In addition, some workers are reluctant to access public services for fear of deportation, and so may avoid reporting symptoms or visiting urgent care, although it was also reported that some Muslim migrants in India were refused hospital admission during the pandemic.<sup>98</sup> Some migrant workers were also reported to be forced to continue to work despite being sick.<sup>99</sup>



Irregular migrants who are currently in transit, forced into immobility and/or facing increased smuggling costs due to delayed or prolonged journeys are also increasingly susceptible to labour exploitation.<sup>100</sup> As the socio-economic crises caused by the coronavirus further widen the inequities and inequalities not only within jurisdictions, but also across countries and regions, irregular migration flows are expected to increase in the medium to long term.<sup>101</sup> This has implications for trafficking both on the journey and at the destination country. Some victim-service providers in the Philippines and Thailand have forecasted that when quarantine measures are lifted, they can expect 'a huge increase in migration and exploitation at an international level of people going from poor countries to rich countries – the poor need money and the rich need a cheap work force to restart their businesses'.<sup>102</sup> As the pandemic exacerbates financial stress and desperation, more people will be forced to move irregularly, and irregular migrants are likely to experience increased human-trafficking risks and be more vulnerable to forced labour both during and at the end of their journey.

In general, given the coronavirus's impact on the existing and newly vulnerable groups to labour exploitation, as well as the reported financial burden shifts from businesses towards workers,<sup>103</sup> there is likely to be an increasing shift towards informality in both formal and informal sectors in the medium term. This increase in informality is expected to be amplified and maintained in the long term – structural changes caused by abrupt shocks tend to persist long after the shocks or crises are over.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the post-pandemic landscape looks set to be characterized by a larger population that is vulnerable to labour exploitation and a spike in demand for their services, creating a perfect storm for traffickers to take advantage of.

**Health officials screen migrant workers arriving from Malaysia in Medan, Indonesia, 10 April 2020.**  
© Jefa Images/Barcroft Media via Getty Images

## Trafficking in conflict and humanitarian-emergency contexts

*The coronavirus is likely to increase both the number of displaced people in states affected by conflict and their vulnerability to trafficking.*

Conflicts and humanitarian emergencies have been shown to increase the vulnerabilities of local populations to trafficking.<sup>105</sup> In addition, conflicts have been found to introduce new forms of trafficking (e.g. child soldiering), as well as new actors who undertake exploitation, such as the troubling cases of sexual exploitation by peacekeeping personnel.<sup>106</sup> The impact of the coronavirus on a range of crisis-hit states is likely to amplify these trafficking risks.<sup>107</sup> The virus is causing widespread disruption to existing state and community support structures, which means that more people are unable to meet their basic needs, receive only limited state support and are poorly protected by the rule of law. Such people may find themselves at the mercy of traffickers as they try to find ways to survive.

Research has shown that people displaced by conflicts and humanitarian disasters are highly vulnerable to trafficking on their journeys, and even more so when in living in temporary camps, which traffickers are known to target.<sup>108</sup> The coronavirus is likely to worsen this situation, increasing both the number of displaced people in states affected by conflict and humanitarian crises, and their vulnerability to trafficking. Some commentators expect that recruitment by non-state armed groups of migrants in camps and in transit will become easier as a result of the increasingly desperate situations faced by migrants, pointing to potential increases in recruitment by Islamic State in Syria, Islamic State and the al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM across the Sahel, and Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon.<sup>109</sup> Although it is unclear whether this has yet materialized, the risk is likely to increase in tandem with the length and severity of the pandemic, as well as the number of people living in temporary camps.

Food scarcity is one of the main drivers for displacement in contexts of conflict and humanitarian emergency, and this driver is likely to become even more pronounced during the pandemic, given that global movement restrictions and border closures are predicted to have severe impacts on international food supply chains.<sup>110</sup> The impact of such disruptions will fall disproportionately on countries where a significant share of foodstuffs is imported, including some of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>111</sup> The Saudi blockade of Yemen – a country that imports over 85 per cent of its food and medicine – provides a grim example of the widespread displacement and famine such disruptions can cause,<sup>112</sup> and of the increased vulnerability to trafficking of those displaced.<sup>113</sup> According to the head of the United Nations Refugee Agency, 80 per cent of the Yemeni people currently need urgent humanitarian support – five years of conflict destroyed half of the country's health facilities while lifeline programmes and critical aid are being depleted due to the pandemic.<sup>114</sup>



# SEX TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

## HOW CRIMINAL NETWORKS ARE ADAPTING

Similar to other organized-crime groups, human-trafficking networks are adept at exploiting humanitarian crises. They are likely to quickly adjust their operations and modus operandi to capitalize on the social and economic impact of the pandemic and/or make up the lost revenues entailed by economic inactivity, business closures and lockdown measures.

There is evidence that such shifts have already taken place. Traffickers in the Amazon in Brazil have been seen changing their patterns during lockdown, sending their child victims of sexual exploitation to the perpetrators' private quarters and/or specific locations instead of the usual places where the children are exploited.<sup>115</sup> This will inevitably make it harder for frontline organizations to identify and rescue children.

On the dark web, cybersex-trafficking groups have reportedly discussed in closed forums how they can best exploit the hundreds of millions of children and teenagers who are now online for much of the day as a result of school closures.<sup>116</sup> Coupled with the surge in the supply of potential targets and victims, criminal groups are also sensing a huge opportunity to recruit those with latent child sexual exploitation interests. As most private forums containing CSEM require members to participate in the production, uploading, sharing and dissemination of illicit materials (e.g. Dreamboard, a members-only group, requires continuing contributions of CSEM as a condition of membership), an increase in membership means new materials for the group to share and download. This creates a vicious spiral of increasing supply and demand for CSEM. In the long run, these new predators, who had

**A human-trafficking-awareness campaign in Manila draws attention to the scourge of commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines.**  
© Jay Directo/AFP via Getty Images

*Criminal groups have long used the aftermath of humanitarian emergencies to build greater leverage with local governments.*

begun to contact online criminal organizations during the lockdown, might become permanent members and remain active long after the pandemic and its emergency measures have ended.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, organized-crime groups that engage in both human trafficking and other crime types, such as drug trafficking, have been taking advantage of reduced policing and enforcement. For example, criminal groups engaged in illegal cannabis farming in the UK have capitalized on the fact that law-enforcement capacity has been in large part diverted to coronavirus-related tasks to increase production and meet the record demand for cannabis under lockdown.<sup>118</sup>

Research shows that cannabis farms in the UK rely heavily on exploitative labour practices and bonded labour, often of Vietnamese irregular migrants. As production ramps up, so does the severity of exploitation and possibly the number of people exploited.<sup>119</sup> But criminals have also found ways to make money in the face of more stringent enforcement measures, and have reportedly increased the price of facilitating the illegal movement of migrants and trafficked people as countries tighten their border security to limit contagion.<sup>120</sup>

Some criminal groups that may have experienced a decline in profits due to the closure of business in certain sectors (such as construction and textiles) have been reported to deploy their victims to other sectors that are seeing heightened demand, such as agriculture, or change their exploitation forms, for example, from child labour to the livestreaming of child sexual exploitation online.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, criminal groups have long used the aftermath of humanitarian emergencies to strengthen their ties in communities and build greater leverage with local governments.<sup>122</sup> Traffickers are reportedly providing vulnerable groups (such as unemployed workers and highly indebted victims) with 'life-saving' alternatives to their lost incomes in the shape of informal employment, bonded labour, sex work or work in criminal industries themselves, for example in smuggling drugs.<sup>123</sup>

Emergency loans provided by traffickers to their victims will tie trafficked workers even more closely to their perpetrators, making them extremely vulnerable to debt bondage in the short term. This is particularly acute in impoverished areas and in the Global South, where failed or fragile states are not capable of providing basic needs, support, protection or social safety nets to those most affected by the coronavirus.



# TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN THE TRADITIONAL RESPONSES

Volunteers prepare food parcels as the COVID-19 pandemic casts a spotlight on the usually invisible poor people of Geneva. © Fabrice Coffrini/AFP via Getty Images

## Civil-society organizations

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, NGOs and frontline organizations have been faced with the issue of donor funding and the changes that the pandemic has brought to their normal operations. This concern was raised by one-third of civil-society participants in the Tech Against Trafficking's COVID-19 Impact survey.<sup>124</sup>

Many frontline organizations and professionals – such as labour inspectors, social workers, healthcare staff and NGOs – have been unable to maintain their anti-trafficking activities. Some have even cancelled victim-support services, despite the reported increase in calls to trafficking hotlines for victims and tipsters during the pandemic.<sup>125</sup> Similar detrimental impacts are reported by organizations providing housing or legal assistance as they struggle to continue their services and support for those in need. Shelters are often not part of national support structures and policies, and may therefore not be included in the government support and health programmes designed to tackle the challenge of the virus. La Strada International, a European anti-human-trafficking NGO, reports that some shelter capacities are at their limit or have had to close owing to COVID-19 infections.<sup>126</sup>

*Other organizations have switched to working remotely and now offer online and telephone counselling and legal aid.*

Many European organizations, such as Unseen UK, which runs victim helplines, safe-houses and outreach services for victims and survivors, have reportedly lost huge amounts of funding, to the point where they may be forced to halt their services.<sup>127</sup> Organizations in India and the Philippines that run shelters for vulnerable children and provide support for vulnerable communities and street children report that they are facing logistical challenges because of the lockdown and are unable to provide support on the ground.<sup>128</sup>

Blue Dragon, the NGO assisting Vietnamese victims of forced marriage mentioned above, rescued on average one woman every three days from China in 2019, but had to halt their operations owing to travel and lockdown restrictions. 'It is very difficult to do rescue, we cannot get victims out of China because they cannot travel within China,' said Caitlin Wyndham of Blue Dragon Children's Foundation.<sup>129</sup> Other NGOs and care centres reported that, due to the current situation, they had either entirely lost contact with some assisted women, as reported by the Phnom Penh-based anti-trafficking charity Chab Dai,<sup>130</sup> or had to ask other survivors to get in touch with those who did not have access to mobile phones (a situation reported by a care centre in Mumbai, India).<sup>131</sup> In general, widespread technological illiteracy and limited capacities among victims and survivors have become a growing concern for many frontline organizations during the pandemic, as attested by many civil-society participants in the Tech Against Trafficking's COVID-19 Impact survey.<sup>132</sup> Research institutions that provide data analysis and forecast trends are also likely to face shortages of funding and delays or cancellations to research projects as donors and foundations switch their attention to coronavirus-related priorities.<sup>133</sup>

Despite the logistical challenges, some frontline NGOs and victim service providers are still finding ways to distribute food and hygiene equipment. Other organizations, such as Sanctuary for Families, a New York-based service provider supporting sex-trafficking survivors, have switched to working remotely and now offer online and telephone counselling and legal aid. They help victims file temporary orders of protection by email and assist with legal representation by phone or Skype.<sup>134</sup>

More than two-thirds of the civil-society participants in the Tech Against Trafficking's COVID-19 Impact survey predicted that there would be an overall increase in human-trafficking cases after the brunt of the pandemic had subsided. It is therefore encouraging to see that, despite the reported loss in funding and financial support, many NGOs have initiated innovative responses, such as creating online platforms for group collaboration and interaction: examples include the Freedom Collaborative COVID-19 Response Facebook Group,<sup>135</sup> Human Trafficking Foundation Google group and resources list,<sup>136</sup> and online resource centres consolidating guidance on how to manage the uncertainty of the crisis.<sup>137</sup> Verité, a US-based non-profit organization supporting workers worldwide, has also compiled useful lists of coronavirus-related resources and recommendations for businesses and government.<sup>138</sup> NGOs have also published official statements requesting governments to step up measures surrounding the protection of trafficking victims and survivors (e.g. NGO Stop the Traffik Kenya's statement on COVID-19).<sup>139</sup>



Migrant workers dry polyester materials in a textile factory in Pathum Thani province, Thailand. The rapid changes underway in the global supply chain have put workers at risk. © Lillian Suwanrumpha/AFP via Getty Images

## The private sector

Corporations in the Global South are likely to have more limited access to government support than their counterparts in the Global North, where governments have been providing economic stimulus support. This lack of support may be particularly acute in the hospitality and travel sectors, where workers and employees in hotels and recreational centres are furloughed – effectively put on unpaid leave.<sup>140</sup>

But while the economic recession is undoubtedly hitting the private sector hard, the role of businesses in driving both formal and informal workers' vulnerabilities should also not be overlooked. As seen in previous financial crises, businesses tend to shift their financial distress and burdens during an economic downturn towards workers and vulnerable groups.<sup>141</sup> By cutting wages and working hours, reducing benefits, as well as cancelling orders, businesses contribute significantly to increasing employees' vulnerability, rendering them more prone to exploitative situations. In April 2020, the ILO estimated that in the second quarter of 2020, global working hours would decline by 6.7 per cent

– equivalent to 195 million full-time workers – with the retail, accommodation, food services and manufacturing sectors being particularly affected.<sup>142</sup>

Workers are also at risk from the rapid changes currently underway in the global supply chain. In order to meet demand, multinational corporations are having to quickly switch suppliers from those that have ceased production under lockdown to others that are still operating. The speed with which these changes are effected may potentially put due-diligence processes (which often involve quality controls that scrutinize ethical and environmental supplier codes of conduct) at risk.<sup>143</sup> These new business relationships may see an increased incidence of unlawful working conditions and/or commodities being produced under exploitative conditions.

Given that governments around the world are spending a significant portion of their countries' GDPs in bailout packages for businesses,<sup>144</sup> it is key that the private sector not only respect their workers' employment, ongoing contracts and agreements, but also step up their risk assessment and protection



measures of the most vulnerable high-risk worker groups. In March 2020, 286 investors, whose combined assets are worth more than US\$8.2 trillion, issued a joint statement requesting that companies comply with health-and-safety measures, respect their employment contracts and provide paid leave for workers during the pandemic.<sup>145</sup> How businesses act during the pandemic will be assessed and remembered by their customers, employees, partners, stakeholders and the public long after the pandemic has passed, as was the case after the financial crisis in 2008.<sup>146</sup> For businesses looking to re-establish normal trading after the pandemic, there is therefore a strategic as well as moral imperative to respect and protect workers' rights and welfare.

Another worrying trend that has been observed is the decreased capacity of the private sector's cybersecurity and monitoring tools during the pandemic. This reduction in oversight has exacerbated a situation that was already suffering from serious shortfalls in monitoring and reporting before the pandemic. Anna Borgström, a Global Initiative Network expert and CEO at NetClean Technologies (a Swedish company providing technical solutions to stop CSEM) has said that prior to the pandemic, many hosting services and online platforms were not reporting to law-enforcement agencies, and were not using tech or putting efforts into detecting illicit CSE materials.<sup>147</sup> Drawing from the findings of the NetClean

Report 2019,<sup>148</sup> Borgström outlined the distribution pathways and major sharing platforms used by CSEM producers and consumers:

Most materials of CSE are distributed via peer-to-peer networks, which are stored in cloud applications such as Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive, etc. These materials are distributed via online social-media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, KIK, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. Livestreaming services such as Skype are also commonly used.

Even where companies do have significant resources invested in detecting CSEM, loopholes exist – in March 2020, *The Guardian* reported that Facebook had failed to identify 366 cases between January 2013 and December 2019 involving CSEM posted and shared on its platform.<sup>149</sup> These loopholes are increasing under the pandemic as giant tech companies, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, reportedly reduce their in-office human moderators and temporarily rely on monitoring algorithms to moderate content on their platforms.<sup>150</sup> This shift has appeared to lead to more mistakes and long delays in reviewing potentially harmful content.<sup>151</sup> This decreased cyber security and monitoring capacity, coupled with an increase in the digital presence of children online (discussed above) creates the perfect conditions for cybersex traffickers to operate.

## Law-enforcement agencies

In many countries, law-enforcement agencies have been mobilized to implement states of emergency or other restrictive measures to combat the contagion, which has limited their capacity to investigate human-trafficking cases.<sup>152</sup> Law-enforcement operations will experience delays and disruption, leading to a decline in the identification of severely exploited people in the workforce, especially in sectors that are difficult to access, such as illegal logging, mining and fishing. For example, Brazil's special mobile enforcement group, which conducts raids across the country on places suspected of using forced labour, has ceased operations over fears of infection.<sup>153</sup>

Judie Kaberia, a journalist and coordinator for the Wayamo Foundation, and Ioana Sandescu Bauer, director of eLiberare, reported that Kenyan and Romanian law-enforcement officials are not prioritizing human-trafficking investigations or prosecutions during the pandemic. 'Prior to COVID, Romania did not have [a] proactive human-trafficking identification process. During the pandemic, it is even harder to find police officers who are willing to conduct investigations into human-trafficking cases,' said Bauer.<sup>154</sup>



Some law-enforcement agencies have reportedly taken advantage of the pandemic to abuse and discriminate against vulnerable groups, particularly migrant workers. Hundreds of Nepali migrant workers were detained and illegally expelled by Qatari police in March 2020 after being told that they were merely being tested for the virus.<sup>155</sup>

On a positive note, some regional law-enforcement and policing agencies, such as Europol, have provided platforms for information exchange and coordinated investigations between EU member states, especially concerning online child sexual exploitation.<sup>156</sup> However, given the current challenges in coordinating targeted anti-trafficking operations, including the lack of funds and personnel, it is unknown to what extent victims and vulnerable communities can be assisted.

## Governments

The coronavirus pandemic has brought to light the gaps in certain governments' protection systems for victims and survivors of human trafficking and vulnerable groups, especially regarding health-protection measures. In other cases, government actions during the pandemic have reflected their discriminatory approach and systemic inequalities toward migrant workers. The UAE government, and in particular the Labour Ministry, has been criticized for its discriminatory policy, which allows businesses to 'restructure the contractual relationship' with their migrant workers, including permanently reducing wages and putting workers on unpaid leave as of 26 March 2020.<sup>157</sup> According to the passed resolution, these steps should be taken 'in agreement' with the non-citizen worker. However, given the unequal balance of power between employer and migrant worker in the UAE, these measures will further disadvantage migrant workers, treating them as 'completely dispensable', said

**Police control pedestrian movement as part of coronavirus-containment measures in Mexico City, May 2020.** © Hector Vivas/ Getty Images

Migrant Rights, an NGO advocating the rights of migrant workers in the Gulf states.<sup>158</sup>

Furthermore, there have been concerns that governments' economic-stimulus packages are favouring big companies with significant lobbying power and are not redistributive enough.<sup>159</sup> Learning from the 2008 financial crisis, government packages using public funds should target the general public and protect vulnerable and marginalized groups in order to effectively relieve adverse shocks and stabilize social and economic crises.<sup>160</sup>

On a positive note, some governments have been reported to be implementing decisive measures aimed at alleviating the immediate socio-economic impact on workers. Denmark has offered compensation of 75 per cent of wages to laid-off workers.<sup>161</sup> Countries such as Singapore, Ireland and South Korea have facilitated sick leave for self-employed people, while a Filipino social-security scheme has offered unemployment benefits to up to 60 000 workers who have lost their jobs in the pandemic. In Hong Kong and China, social-assistance benefits and other forms of cash transfers have been used to enhance income security and boost aggregate demand.<sup>162</sup> The US Congress approved

a coronavirus economic stimulus package and the National Domestic Workers Alliance had launched the US\$4 million fund to provide unemployment benefits to some workers.<sup>163</sup> The governments in Colombia<sup>164</sup> and Argentina<sup>165</sup> have also offered small cash payments to low-skilled and low-income workers. However, although these occasional payments might support vulnerable workers temporarily, they will not be able to relieve the long-term socio-economic impact of the pandemic, which will render workers vulnerable to exploitation.

On the question of direct support for human-trafficking victims, survivors and vulnerable groups, the UK government announced on 6 April 2020 that they would extend public-funded safe accommodation for current victims and survivors for a further three months.<sup>166</sup> The Australian Border Force has issued an information sheet on modern slavery and the coronavirus that provides guidance on how to reduce the risk of vulnerable workers becoming exposed to modern slavery as a result of the pandemic.<sup>167</sup> Finally, the Nepali embassy in Qatar is reportedly conducting surveys and collecting information on Nepali migrant workers, who are facing difficulties due to the coronavirus in the Gulf country.<sup>168</sup>

## Multilateral organizations and UN agencies

Many of the Tech Against Trafficking's COVID-19 Impact survey participants from multilateral organizations and UN agencies reported that the pandemic has limited their ability to conduct field research, training and capacity building, and has delayed scheduled anti-trafficking conferences and programmes.<sup>169</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) decided to postpone the 20th Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference, scheduled to take place on 30–31 March 2020, owing to the outbreak.

The UN special rapporteurs Felipe González Morales (on migrants) and Maria Grazia Giammarinaro (on trafficking in persons) have jointly urged governments to 'take steps towards the regularisation of undocumented migrants whenever necessary, in view of facilitating their access to health services

during the fight against the pandemic'.<sup>170</sup> UN experts have also urged that emergency declarations should 'not be used as a basis to target particular groups, minorities, or individuals. It should not function as a cover for repressive action under the guise of protecting health nor should it be used to silence the work of human rights defenders'.<sup>171</sup> On 3 April 2020, the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Valiant Richey, also issued a statement urging OSCE participating states 'to combat the exploitation of vulnerable people' during the coronavirus crisis.<sup>172</sup>

Several UN agencies and multilateral organizations are reportedly shifting their priorities towards strengthening support for assistance organizations that are closely working with vulnerable communities and victims during the pandemic. On 25 March

2020, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a US\$2 billion global humanitarian response plan, primarily focused on sanitation and health measures, to fight the virus in 51 countries in the Global South.<sup>173</sup>

Furthermore, the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking, managed by the UNODC, announced their support for 10 Asian and African NGOs on 9 April 2020, scaling up their humanitarian aid and efforts to support trafficking victims and survivors in vulnerable regions during the pandemic.<sup>174</sup> The World Food Programme announced that they would 'evaluate possible alternatives' to support children left without meals due to pandemic-induced school closures, without mentioning the budgetary scope of this response.<sup>175</sup>

The UN Global Compact, a UN initiative encouraging global businesses to adhere to sustainable and socially responsible practices, organized discussions and provided information to African enterprises on business responses to the coronavirus.<sup>176</sup> Similarly, the UN Development Programme issued self-assessment guidance to support businesses in assessing and managing the human-right risks and impacts of their operations on workers during the pandemic.<sup>177</sup>

The ILO office in Lebanon also issued a guidance brief, urging companies and families employing migrant workers to safeguard the rights and well-being of their employees during the crisis.<sup>178</sup> The International Organization for Migration has also started to publish a series of 'COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots'.<sup>179</sup> Available in English, French and Spanish, these aim to provide information and analyses on the implications of the pandemic on global mobility, migration and migrant workers.

Finally, the International Recruitment Integrity System, a global initiative promoting ethical recruitment worldwide, has published two sets of guidance for employers and labour recruiters respectively, urging them to uphold their social and ethical standards, specifically in regard to protecting migrant workers during the pandemic.<sup>180</sup>



**A homeless woman in Kolkata swings on a makeshift cradle during India's government-imposed nationwide lockdown, May 2020.** © Indranil Aditya/NurPhoto via Getty Images



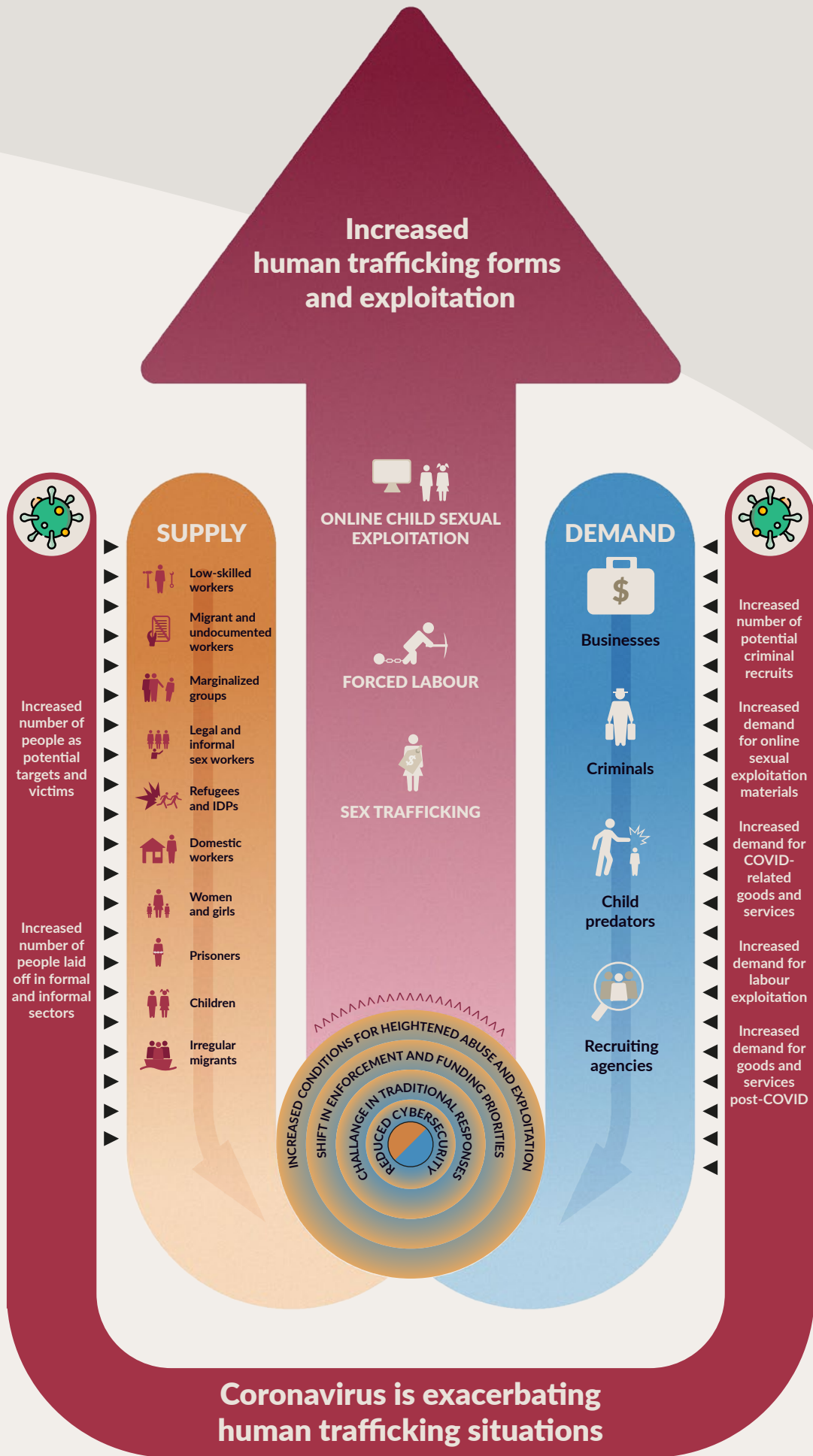
## HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND THE VIRUS: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A demonstrator in Lisbon protests the exploitation of sex workers. © Horacio Villalobos/Corbis via Getty Images

**T**he pandemic is likely to lead to an increase in human trafficking for both sexual and labour exploitation, as the 'supply' of potential victims from among vulnerable groups significantly increases. During the pandemic, increased demand for certain goods and services, such as medical equipment, further fuels the demand for labour exploitation, especially in areas with existing forced labour allegations and indicators. The coronavirus-induced economic crisis is reportedly incentivizing criminal enterprises to exploit victims so as to remain viable. Demand for labour exploitation is also expected to rise after the pandemic as production is quickly scaled up.

Coronavirus-related confinement measures have also created ideal conditions for heightened sexual abuse and exploitation. Online child sexual exploitation is, concerningly, a growing market, with not only a reported rise in demand for CSEM, but also an increased supply of potential criminal recruits. Finally, as front-line NGOs are struggling with financial and operational difficulties, governments and donors are shifting their agenda and funding priorities towards coronavirus responses, while law-enforcement agencies and the private sector have reportedly reduced their policing and monitoring capabilities, creating perfect exploitation opportunities for traffickers and criminal groups.

The supply-and-demand dynamics shown in the infographic on the following page are exacerbating pre-existing structural weaknesses and will catalyze systemic changes, which may favour criminals, illicit markets and activities if left



**FIGURE 4** Coronavirus-induced supply-demand dynamics



A placard in Madrid's Puerta del Sol forms part of a protest on International Day Against Child Slavery.

© Marcos del Mazo/  
LightRocket via Getty Images

unaddressed. To what extent these dynamics will influence long-term institutional capacities and responses remains to be seen. However, the decisions that anti-trafficking stakeholders are taking now will have a huge impact on how and to what extent criminals can advance and capitalize on the social and economic crises both during and after the pandemic.

It is therefore crucial that anti-trafficking stakeholders scale up their efforts and respond in a timely fashion to mitigate and address not only the near and immediate impacts, but also the long-term risks and long-lasting consequences that the crisis will bring for trafficking victims and vulnerable groups. Based on the analysis of the pandemic's implications for human-trafficking actors, as well as the emerging supply-and-demand dynamics and exploitative patterns entailed by the pandemic, we suggest the following public and private policy initiatives:

## SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Recommendations for governments:

- Dedicate more human and financial resources to bolster enforcement mechanisms, especially with increased online-enforcement presence, and criminal justice systems, including investigations, detection and prosecution of traffickers.
- Strengthen core services for child protection, and victim and survivor assistance, ensuring their continuing operations amid the pandemic lockdown measures.
- Conduct public campaigns to raise awareness of children's online vulnerabilities, especially among parents, schools and social-service providers.

- Enhance and publicize hotlines and reporting mechanisms. Recommended outreach activities include SMS campaigns, social-media campaigns and letterbox campaigns (including flyers in food boxes and health and other physical high-use goods) in vulnerable communities. Where hotlines do not exist, consider establishing discreet reporting mechanisms for people trapped in abuse.

Recommendations for the private sector:

- Strengthen and make transparent the safeguarding mechanisms of online services, tools and platforms, as well as improving existing cybersecurity measures through investing in human moderators and enhancing monitoring and policing algorithms in online platforms and services.
- Publicize the increased risk of CSEM to employees, encourage enhanced oversight of children's online activities and highlight ongoing monitoring of employees' online activity.
- Bolster child-safety referral procedures, including support services, child-friendly infographics, and information sheets and helplines.

## LABOUR TRAFFICKING

Recommendations for governments:

- Ensure vulnerable groups – such as low-skilled, domestic and sex workers, refugee and migrant populations and children in low-income countries – are included in the coronavirus response and post-coronavirus recovery plans, as they are now particularly marginalized by the pandemic and in many cases unable to access health services.
- Extend all protection and assistance programmes to trafficking survivors and migrants in vulnerable situations, especially to those whose programme-expiry date is approaching, so they can successfully reintegrate into local communities and societies.
- Grant everyone in their national territory, regardless of their legal status, full access to healthcare as an effective containment response to coronavirus emergency. Make clear that undocumented workers and others in the country irregularly will not be deported or punished when seeking health treatment (and prohibit such information sharing between health and immigration authorities).
- Ensure safe shelter and essential goods and services for trafficking victims and survivors and vulnerable individuals, including those in detention centres or informal camps.
- Focus labour inspection and oversight capacity on current high-risk areas and sectors, namely those reported to be facing increasing demands during the pandemic, such as medical-equipment manufacturing and agriculture.
- Strengthen public institutions' procurement regulations, ensuring the transparency of bidding processes.
- Support NGOs and frontline organizations financially, so that they can continue providing victims and survivors with timely assistance and legal and support services.
- Conduct context-specific, gender-sensitive assessments to identify new, increased, shared and differentiated risks for men and women. Bolster gender-sensitive budgeting, support and risk-mitigation measures.



- Support formal workers and enterprises to prevent the shift towards informality as they lose vital incomes and livelihoods. Government economic-stimulus packages should prioritize social enterprises, small and local businesses, and those with a record of committing to social and environmental due diligence, as well as a history of respecting and protecting workers' rights.

Recommendations for the private sector:

- Seek to mitigate the financial stress on workers. In unwanted cases of reducing or closing business activities, conduct initial assessments of the workers' vulnerabilities and ensure that impacted workers, especially low-skilled and migrant workers, are given appropriate severance payments.
- Comply with measures, guidelines and recommendations issued by the World Health Organization and local governments' health-and-safety plans to protect and prevent employees and workers from getting infected with the virus.
- Uphold social and ethical business practices and standards, and enhance assessment of regions and sectors at risk, especially those with existing high rates of forced and child labour.
- Conduct due diligence and continue effective monitoring of high-risk suppliers. Introduce coronavirus-related risks in standards and codes of conduct for suppliers.
- Respect the terms of purchasing contracts and pay suppliers for orders already in production or completed. Businesses should also develop alternative business-continuity strategies.
- Ensure that payments received from contracts and purchasing orders are first used to cover workers' salaries and benefits, as legally mandated. Compensation priorities should be given to laid-off low-skilled and migrant workers.
- Ensure laid-off workers are prioritized to be rehired at the same salary and benefit levels when business activities start to bounce back.
- Ensure that sick workers are not forced to work and that any overtime work is voluntary and properly compensated.
- Enhance grievance mechanisms, such as remote reporting channels, to encourage workers to report incidents of labour exploitation in the workplace. Regularly conduct worker interviews and group discussions to assess working conditions.
- Screen, inspect and diligently monitor intermediary recruiting agencies or labour brokers in use, especially when hiring new employees after the pandemic has passed.
- Ensure equal pay for female workers during and after the coronavirus pandemic.

## NOTES

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# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
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