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# Modern Slavery and COVID-19: Are we really all in the same (life)boat?

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## Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on victims of modern slavery and vulnerable workers is dire. The COVID-19 pandemic is far from an all-in-the-same-boat situation. Its impact on the poor is and will continue to be, far greater than on the rich. Modern slavery victims are in danger of infection through unsafe accommodation, at the mercy of 'employers' who no longer need their labour because of supply chain disruption, or in the case of domestic workers made invisible to the outside world through lockdowns and isolation. For survivors there's the prospect of shelters closing, support drying up, government offices shut. For refugees and migrant workers there are all the problems of crowded accommodation and lack of facilities as well as demonization and exclusion as 'virus spreaders'. For women in the sex industry the closure of brothels in the lockdown leaves many without an income, stigmatised by their work and excluded from support services. Children are falling victim to child labour or sexual predators and teenage girls are at risk of early marriage as struggling families strive to reduce the number of mouths to feed. Below we draw on the work of NGOs, global organisations and the media to illustrate some of the issues in this shifting landscape. Our aim is to help inform a debate on the systemic flaws in global supply of goods and services and what can be done about them.

## Introduction

*“The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency — but it is far more. It is an economic crisis. A social crisis. And a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis” (Guterres, 2020).*

What will be the impact of COVID-19 on Modern Slavery? With the situation changing every day we can only speculate on what the long-term impact will be because we don't know what the post-pandemic world will look like. What we do know is that its impact on the poor is and will continue to be, far greater than on the rich. The pandemic has revealed the economic and social fault lines in societies around the world. It has shown up deeply entrenched inequalities, inequalities that leave many communities living on the edge of society at the best of times. In the midst of a pandemic sweeping throughout the world these communities are likely to be forgotten, unable to take 'physical distance' measures, or pay for facemasks and hand sanitiser or even to access soap and water. They are the ones already making a precarious living and when they lose even that means of existence the traffickers and loan-sharks are waiting (Reliefweb, 2020).

Cockayne and Smith believe the impact will manifest in three main ways: greater risk for those who are already trapped in modern slavery; increased risk of vulnerable workers becoming trapped; and disruption of efforts underway in response to modern slavery (Cockayne & Smith, 2020). Below we use these three areas of impact as an organiser for our research on the impact of COVID-19 on modern slavery. We are well aware that for every example we have found there are many more we could have found. We have sought out expert opinion on what could be the on-going consequences for victims of modern slavery and vulnerable workers likely to become victims. Again, there will be many voices we have left out.

We are also well aware that the situation is constantly changing and things will have changed since we began writing. In some instances we have added to our original text some of the later responses made by governments in their efforts to forestall the worst of the impact. But to keep abreast of the pace of change we would each day have had to update the previous day's writing, hence there will be many gaps. Because of the rapidly changing pandemic landscape we refer mainly to reports from NGOs working in the field, international organisations, government websites, workers' networks and media reports from respected news outlets.

Our aim is to provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs on how COVID-19 is impacting vulnerable individuals and communities. We have compiled these examples and opinions to help inform what must become a global debate on the systemic flaws in global supply chains that have allowed modern slavery to flourish. It will take all of us working together to address these. Governments, businesses and industries throughout every supply chain, workers, unions and final consumers, we all have power to make changes. We hope that the information compiled below will help in seeing where changes can and should be made.

### **Risk to those already victims of modern slavery or recently freed**

Human trafficking is big business. Its victims are the poor and the vulnerable. The same can be said for bonded labour and forced labour, forced marriage and sexual exploitation. Whatever form modern slavery takes, this pandemic makes a bad situation far worse. For example Cockayne and Smith (2020) discuss concern for those living in conditions of modern slavery in the Gulf States. They identify an increased risk of disease that comes with crowded and unsanitary accommodation. This risk is compounded by lack of access to healthcare for victims. Similarly support groups in the UK are concerned that victims of trafficking who fall ill with COVID-19 are unlikely to seek medical care for fear of discovery. This fear is compounded by the inability to work while sick and so falling further into debt (Milne, 2020).

With many industry supply chains drying up because of retail lockdowns enterprises that feed into these supply chains are forced to close. There is therefore a question about what happens to this workforce if it happens to be made up of slave labour. It is unlikely that employers will pay their keep with no work to generate revenue. Amber Milne from the Thomson Reuters Foundation expresses this concern in relation to nail bar workers in debt bondage in Britain. With nail bars closed, she says, where are those workers now. Their debts won't go away and her concern is that they may end up being pushed into far riskier work (Milne, 2020).

The Global Fund to end Modern Slavery references reports that bonded labourers are among those currently walking hundreds of kilometres across India without food and water to reach their home villages after being turned out of their workplaces and accommodation (Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2020).

For victims of domestic servitude or sex-slavery COVID-19 lockdowns and enforced isolation or quarantine make it easier for their captors to hide their operations. Victims are even less visible and less likely to be identified and referred to protection schemes. For these victims, lockdowns can remove all chance of rescue (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

For survivors of modern slavery dependent on victim support provided by government or charity, there's concern over continuity of resources in a constrained economy and of victims falling back into slavery for want of an alternative (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020) (Smith & Cockayne, 2020). There are reports of shelters closing because of reported infections and concern too for victims being denied access to shelters because residents fear they will bring the virus with them (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

The Thomson Reuters Foundation in the UK reports a plea from NGOs that for the duration of the pandemic, recognised survivors of modern slavery be given access to welfare benefits and housing (Mohsin, 2020). Mohsin also asks that those receiving support under the Victim Care Contract, have their daily allowance increased to take

into account COVID-19 related price rises in food and health necessities. With little support these victims, together with migrant workers who have overstayed their visas and fear revealing themselves to authorities, are in great danger of being returned into the hands of traffickers.

A Reuters follow up article in May reports a 1.7 million pound emergency support package for modern slavery charities in Britain, with independent anti-slavery commissioner Sara Thornton, declaring her intention to push for long-term changes to victim support (Milne, 2020).

### **Increased risk of being exploited**

With economies crashing around the world there is a danger that as the year rolls on more and more people will find themselves without any means to provide for themselves or their families. A March 18 report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) said that almost 25 million jobs could be lost worldwide as a result of COVID-19, representing a worldwide income loss for workers of between USD 860 billion and USD 3.4 trillion by the end of 2020 (International Labour Organization, 2020) (Murray & Malik, 2020). By April 29<sup>th</sup> an ILO update reported that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy were already suffering ‘massive damage to their capacity to earn a living’ because of population lockdowns as well as working in hard-hit industries such as wholesale and retail, manufacturing, and accommodation and food services. This equates to an average drop in income of 60% globally, leaving the vast majority of these workers with no means to survive (International Labour Organization, 2020c).

Such job losses have a devastating effect on those already living on or below the poverty line. Research shows that poverty and financial crises are major drivers of modern slavery and even before the added danger of COVID-19 the growing casualisation of the labour force had left many workers vulnerable to exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2020b) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020) (UN News, 2020). The situation has been amplified beyond recognition over the past weeks with predictions of 20-25 million more people in working poverty post the pandemic and many more left without any work at all. UN Special Rapporteur, Tomoya Obokata, says that without protection from governments worldwide there will be a significant risk of workers falling victim to enslavement, especially for women and children and workers in the informal economy (UN News, 2020). In Britain the anti-slavery commissioner, Sara Thornton, has expressed similar concern: what happens after the lockdown when industries like hospitality suddenly need more workers. This, she says, is where traffickers ‘take their cut’. She cites a 2019 report from the Walk Free Foundation that found ‘75% of hospitality businesses were flouting anti-slavery legislation’ (Milne, 2020). If that were the case before this pandemic the scramble to reignite the hospitality sector post-pandemic could see a massive upsurge in debt bondage and trafficking.

### *Migrant workers*

Migrant workers face an additional set of difficulties. Their work is often in the informal economy, which means that when the work dries up they are not eligible for state aid. If they get sick they are not eligible for health services. Without work and with borders closed they have no way of returning home. Compounding these problems is the local attitude to migrant workers, which may sometimes be hostile. Migrant workers may be demonised as 'spreaders of infection' in politicisation of the disease and thus stigmatised and excluded from services. Similar situations could apply to millions of migrant workers in countries around the globe.

Seasonal agricultural workers in Turkey move between hazelnut farms, apple farms and vegetable farms throughout the nine-month growing and harvesting seasons. Classed as essential workers, these migrants, including internal migrants as well as migrants from outside Turkey, are exempt from movement restrictions within the country. However, their transportation between jobs is challenging in the best of times. Now overcrowding on unsafe vehicles poses the additional threat of contracting COVID-19. This threat is compounded by living conditions, with many living in tent settlements with shared washing facilities and reliant on charities such as EU Humanitarian Aid, for access to soap, health services and information about the virus (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). It has recently been reported that with the start of the planting season in April the Health Ministry released measures requiring seasonal workers to be tested for the virus before setting out on their journey, to wear masks when travelling and practice social distancing. In addition all interaction between the tent settlements and nearby villages must cease (Daily Sabah, 2020). Whether support to enforce these rules has been provided is unclear. With inter-State borders closed it is also unclear if migrant workers from outside the country will be able to return home after the harvest. Without work and with borders closed these migrant workers could find themselves with no means of support. Cockayne and Smith (2020) cite the case of Tajiks in Russia, who rely on seasonal work. Now unable to work and unable to return home, the workers are left open to exploitation.

The needs of many migrant workers in Thailand have been recognised by the Thai authorities in their emergency COVID-19 healthcare, labour, visa and financial support regulations. However, the Migrant Workers Rights Network (MWRN) based in Thailand has documented the stories of many who have fallen through the cracks. The most frequent problems raised by migrant workers included: termination of contracts, particularly for garment and textile workers and construction and real estate development workers; reduction of working hours and wages; and difficulties in accessing entitlements because of language barriers. The result of such problems often means insufficient funds to cover basic needs and the inability to send remittance home to families who rely on this for their own survival (MWRN, 2020).

Vulnerable Thai migrant workers and prison populations elsewhere are reported being used as cheap labour for manufacture in medical supply chains. At the other end of the

supply chain, shortages of medical supplies such as personal protective equipment have encouraged the relaxing of import restrictions. Cockayne and Smith (2020) cite the US Customs and Border Protection having allowed importation of rubber gloves from a supplier suspected of using forced labour. The Guardian reports a similar situation in Hong Kong where prison labour is being used to make face masks and hand gel with women prisoners in Lo Wu prison working round the clock to produce 2.5million masks a month (Grant, 2020). Not only is this of concern for the workers – normalising the use of forced labour and allowing the enforcers to profit with impunity – but also those who use these goods as well as the patients upon whom they are used are at risk associated with use of sub-standard medical supplies. In the UK the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre has raised the issue of 88.5 million medical gloves made in Malaysia by workers subject to 12 hour days, poor conditions and passport confiscation being purchased by the National Health Service (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020).

Freedom United refers to migrant domestic workers as one of the least protected groups of workers because employment laws do not extend to private homes. In some cases migrant domestic workers are reported to have lost their jobs because of physical distancing and home isolation policies. The Walk Free Foundation reports 70% of domestic workers in the USA out of work because of the pandemic (Minderoo Foundation, 2020). With no job and no way to return to their own country they are vulnerable to exploitation. Other domestic workers report a more intense workload because the employer is at home most of the day, a situation that also reduces any chance of escape. There is also the possibility of reduced or no pay because the employer is out of work (Freedom United, 2020). In all cases a precarious position is exacerbated further.

### *Refugees*

The UN Refugee Agency discusses the plight of the world's 70.8 million displaced people in the face of this pandemic. The agency cites overcrowding, hygiene and hand washing as well as overstretched medical facilities, as major problems when hundreds of people share one tap. In response the agency is distributing soap and increasing access to water; supporting governments with health-care responses and shelters; and providing fact-based information on prevention measures (UN Refugee Agency, 2020).

In April The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned that Rohingya refugees fleeing by boat were being prevented from docking in Malaysia (Siegfried, 2020). The report linked this to increased xenophobia, stirred by the pandemic, directed at Rohingya refugees living in the country. The warning corroborated media reports of at least three Rohingya refugee boats being forced to remain at sea for several months in the Bay of Bengal because Malaysia refused to allow them to dock and the Bangladeshi government had refused to allow them to return to their port of origin (Beech, 2020) (Galloway, 2020). The New York Times reported that on April 15 a Rohingya refugee boat had had to be rescued by the Bangladeshi Coast

Guard. On board were 400 malnourished, dehydrated refugees hidden in the hold by traffickers (Beech, 2020). It was reported by survivors that many refugees had died during the journey and been tossed overboard. A week later Amnesty International reported two fishing trawlers carrying around 500 people had been refused docking by Malaysia and were headed for Bangladesh (Amnesty International, 2020). At that time there were no reported cases of COVID-19 in Rohingya refugee camps (Hoque, 2020), however by early May the media were reporting COVID-19 cases in the camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh (SBS News, 2020). Amnesty International has asked Indonesia and Australia to discuss the plight of these refugees under the Bali Process framework set up in 2002 to address human trafficking and modern slavery in the Pacific region (Septiari, 2020).

### *Workers in hard hit industries*

COVID-19's effect on some areas of employment has the potential to exacerbate already precarious livelihoods. Take apparel supply chain workers: with major clothing stores closed in many parts of the world, workers in, for example, Bangladesh with over four million people employed in the apparel industry, are at great risk of losing their jobs (Smith & Cockayne, 2020). Boersma and Nolan (2020) suggest that 20,000 garment workers in Bangladesh face job losses because of disruption at both ends of the supply chain. Garment factories are being forced to close because of shortage of raw materials from their suppliers in China while at the same time news media and human rights groups report large retailers like Mosaic Brands in Australia cancelling orders, delaying payments by up to six months or demanding massive discounts on orders already fulfilled (Bainbridge & Vimonsuknopparat, 2020) (Bloomer & Khambay, 2020).

The Ethical Trading Initiative cites the case of garment workers in Myanmar (Banerji, 2020). Their struggle began in February 2020 when the supply of fabric from China began to dry up because of COVID-related factory closures. Then from the other end of the chain buyers began cancelling orders. Soon around 50,000 garment workers had lost their jobs. Likewise in Cambodia where around 60,000 workers are thought to have lost their jobs when brands failed to pay for orders that had already been or were in production (Banerji, 2020). For all these workers the situation was compounded by travel lockdowns and quarantine preventing them from finding an alternative way to earn a living. While these measures have so far saved both countries from high instances of COVID-19 infections they have pushed thousands of workers below the poverty line. Fortunately, some emergency funds have been flowing to the Cambodian and Myanmar Governments from the EU.

On another front, with many businesses shut down, including brothels, some have warned of the effect on sex workers. If sex work is pushed underground, workers may lose protections and become vulnerable to trafficking. For example, women working in a government-sanctioned brothel in Bangladesh were left without income with the sudden closure of their workplace. The coordinator of the rights group Mukti Mahila Samity, said that most of the brothel's workers lived hand-to-mouth and were left with

no way to support themselves and their families (Al Jazeera, 2020). Reshmi Chakraborty and Hema Ramaprasad writing in *The Guardian* (2020) report a similar situation in India where sex work is not illegal but activities like soliciting customers or maintaining a brothel are criminal offences. Thus, once total lockdown was declared in March workers were left without income and soon were without money for food or rent. Although the government was quick to provide relief for the poor, women working in the sex industry fell outside government relief programs. Some are now going into debt to survive and with interest rates as high as 12-25% per month this means years of indebtedness. This worry comes on top of the fear of an outbreak of COVID-19 and little access to sanitary living conditions (Chakraborty & Ramaprasad, 2020).

It seems the situation is similar around the world. In Europe over 100 NGOs have called for emergency support for sex workers, most of whom work in the informal economy, without state protection, stigmatised and often criminalised. They are deemed to be among the most marginalised of workers yet they are locked out of COVID-associated state benefits to which other workers have a right (Stevenson, 2020).

### *The plight of children*

A report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) voices concern for the fate of children caught up in the repercussions of this pandemic. The report warns that with schools closed in many parts of the world and family budgets cut, children may fall victim to child labour. School closures have meant that many children not only go without education but also without shelter and food, many are forced onto the streets to scavenge, beg or seek employment of some kind, risking infection and exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2020). For other children, spending increased time online may mean exposure to sexual predators. The Global Fund to End Modern Slavery is already reporting increases in online child sexual exploitation (Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2020).

The Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, based in Hanoi (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2020) cites teenage girls at higher risk of early marriage as children become detached from schools and as parents seek to reduce the number of mouths to feed. Education is a leading key to protection against modern slavery and child marriage. In Vietnam Blue Dragon (2020) workers report that schools and teachers are 'the cornerstones' of their trafficking prevention work. They say that 50 of the 165 students in extreme poverty from remote ethnic communities in Dien Bien and Ha Giang whose education they support, have not (as at May 7) returned to their boarding schools (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2020c). Nam Xuan Pham, Blue Dragon's project manager in the area, suggests that many more students are at risk of not returning to finish their education. The Malala Fund, drawing on data from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, estimates that there could be 10 million less secondary school-aged girls in education after the pandemic (Fry & Lei, 2020). Recognising the situation the ILO is working closely with boards of education and ministries to minimise the number of children

dropping out of the education system and into child labour (International Labour Organization, 2020d).

### **Disruption of the response effort**

Compounding the situation worldwide for those falling victim to modern slavery is the slow-down and in some cases the drying up, of government and philanthropic funding for anti-slavery measures. Cockayne and Smith (2020) report that in Brazil, for example, anti-slavery operations have ground to a halt. Tomoya Obokata, Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery appointed by the UN Human Rights Council to report on issues related to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, warns that identifying and assisting victims of contemporary forms of slavery will become ever more difficult as state budgets are shifted towards dealing with the pandemic (UN News, 2020). For example, victims who have been provided with temporary support services and immigration documents may find it impossible to return home because of border closures. Compounding their predicament they may then find it difficult to renew papers because of office closures and the shift online of many services. To deal with this issue the UN reports that some States have suspended fines for overstays and extended visas and medical cover for those awaiting decisions on their status (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

Human Rights Watch reported in April that COVID-19 lockdown measures imposed by the Bangladesh government had severely restricted humanitarian workers' access to refugee camps, putting Rohingya refugees at risk. While access was denied to stop the spread of the virus the severity of the lockdown meant that health workers had little access, leaving refugees vulnerable to rapid spread of the virus because of cramped living conditions and underlying health issues left untreated (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) had already built COVID-19 wards and isolation rooms in their field hospitals in Cox's Bazar in anticipation of the spread of the virus (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2020) however with health worker access to the camps restricted it's not certain how much use they will be.

Restricted movement has taken its toll in other ways too. For example the Hanoi based Blue Dragon Children's Foundation (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2020) reports that COVID-19 travel restrictions within China and across state borders have severely disrupted their rescue efforts. The organisation cites the case of 29 trafficked girls and women whom they are unable to rescue from China because movement within China and across the border is impossible. However, while rescue operations have been severely curtailed the organisation reports finding safe havens within China and maintaining telephone contact with victims (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2020b).

Restricted travel and redeployment of personnel are also impacting on law enforcement. While governments are diverting resources including police, to deal with COVID-19 related issues, there is a danger that other work such as investigations into people trafficking and modern slavery, are neglected. Such a vacuum can mean a lower

risk of detection and a field-day for criminal groups. International cooperation is made all the more difficult with borders closed and governments everywhere shifting attention towards health-related issues (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

#### *Disruption of the modern slavery business model*

However, these same curfews, border closures and internal lockdowns are also disrupting the underground businesses that provide goods and services into numerous supply chains. The plight of some supply chain workers has been mentioned above with some workers being turned out to fend for themselves while in other cases they have been redeployed to work on high demand medical supply production lines.

Stories have also emerged of some of the large drug cartels where supply chains of components needed for production have been severely disrupted. For example the flow of chemicals, known as precursors, from China necessary for drug manufacturing in Mexico, has all but dried up because of national lockdowns. Faced with this supply chain disruption some cartels have been looking for other ventures including people trafficking into modern slavery (Coyne, 2020). However, in the words of one expert “The demand for trafficked humans, in terms of indentured labour or modern slavery, in North America will likely be low for some time to come. And cartels attempting to move into human trafficking would face the same supply-chain problems as they do for illicit drugs.” (Coyne, 2020).

Time will tell what that means for people deemed supply chain commodities on a par with drugs.

#### **Concluding remarks**

The impact of COVID-19 on victims of modern slavery and vulnerable populations in danger of falling victim to modern slavery is dire. The COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the poor is and will continue to be, far greater than on the rich. Even where governments have included some vulnerable groups such as migrant workers in their emergency responses there are always those in the informal economy who are not counted, unable to take advantage of support that is available to others. Many current victims of modern slavery live in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions and lack all access to healthcare. In some cases they find themselves without even this precarious protection, thrown out of work and accommodation because supply chains have dried up. For workers in the informal economy or in hard hit industries, refugees, migrant workers, women and children, the massive shakeup of the world economy will have far reaching ripple effects.

What emerges at the other side of this pandemic, as the vast web of today’s modern-slavery-driven economy rearranges itself, will depend on how organised, ruthless and versatile are those individuals and criminal groups that feed into the slave labour market. It will also depend on how motivated businesses and governments are to take

advantage of this hiatus and tackle modern slavery peddlers in whatever form and wherever they operate. As final consumers it is also up to us to use our collective buying power to support government and business action by our willingness to pay prices that embody a living wage for all workers in every supply chain. If we are to pay more for goods and services we will need to have confidence that supply chains are transparent, our dollars are providing a living wage for all workers and that governments are serious about prosecuting perpetrators and supporting victims of modern slavery everywhere.

Australia's Modern Slavery Act came into force on 1 January 2019, making it a leader in the Indo-Pacific region in addressing modern slavery. Consolidating this position, in December 2019 the Dept of Home Affairs issued a consultation paper on a five-year *National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020-24* (Australian Government Dept of Home Affairs, 2020c). In March 2020 the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) issued a consultation paper *International Strategy on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery* seeking input from 'survivors, civil society, academia and business to help shape Australia's international efforts to eliminate human trafficking and modern slavery' (Australian Government Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). The paper outlines the need to address the drivers of modern slavery, assist Indo-Pacific region countries in strengthening legislation and supporting victims, address supply chain exploitation and raise modern slavery risks in international forums. The Modern Slavery Act and follow up work indicate a serious intent to tackle the problem of modern slavery. They represent a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding from which to address modern slavery in the aftermath of this pandemic.

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