

# Human Trafficking Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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*In this article we reveal the devastating impact COVID-19 can have on the most vulnerable people in communities at risk of exploitation. Research from previous crises shows how systemic stress on societies creates an evil opportunity for unscrupulous people to take advantage of families in dire need of assistance. Any crisis can be a harvest time for human traffickers. COVID-19 is set to create a boom season as economic desperation grows with the demand to satisfy the basest of human appetites. The people of God can easily interrupt cycles of abuse with a little awareness, sharing of basic resources and much loving intentionality.*

**C**OVID-19 has had a devastating impact on our world, creating a global health crisis unlike anything previously experienced. Millions have been severely affected with global lockdowns, public health restrictions, serious illness and the deaths of loved ones. Hospitals and medical systems throughout the world have been overwhelmed and inundated. We know this pandemic is a global health crisis.

## 1. Crisis Expanding

Economists are already signalling a global economic crisis will follow, the likes of which have not been experienced since the 1920's Great Depression. Global unemployment is expected to hit unprecedented levels. Businesses are already collapsing, and livelihoods are being lost. The latest UN Sustainability Development Goals Report estimates that "71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020, the first rise in global poverty since 1998."<sup>1</sup> We know this pandemic will cause a severe global economic crisis that will take a long time to recover from.

But of equal concern is the hidden global crisis that has been triggered by this pandemic: the crisis of human trafficking that is emerging as the spread continues.

For a long time, research has shown that people who experience the following are at particular risk of human trafficking:

- Trauma
- Conflict, violence, or other societal/health crises
- Discrimination
- Loss of income and livelihoods
- Family violence.

You will recognise these factors are accelerating in every nation of the world right now.

Data is already indicating that following COVID-19 there will be millions more men, women and children at risk of being trafficked than ever before. The health and economic catastrophes caused by the pandemic (as well as the racial violence sweeping the Western

world along with xenophobia elsewhere) are combining to create a devastatingly ideal environment for trafficking to flourish. There is going to be a tsunami of trafficking in the wake of this viral crisis and its associated economic and societal issues.

Although this forecast sounds bleak, the global missions community is powerfully positioned to act. We can protect those left vulnerable by this pandemic. To do so, we need to prioritise placing practical protective measures around the vulnerable and most at-risk in communities, particularly impoverished ones.

## 2. Trafficking Explained

Human trafficking is the illegal trade in people against their will for the purpose of exploitation. It includes forced labour, child labour, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, organ and baby trafficking, and it happens in every country in the world.

At its core, human trafficking is about the exploitation of vulnerability. Prior to the outbreak, an estimated 40 million vulnerable men, women and children had been trafficked into slavery—this statistic is going to increase dramatically over the months ahead.

## 3. Vulnerabilities Exposed

Advocacy group, Freedom United note, "It is clear that vulnerable migrants, including modern slavery victims and survivors, and those who do not have the legal right to remain in a country are being placed at greater risk of both the virus and its effects, as well as exploitation."<sup>2</sup>



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The most vulnerable in our world are being impacted in multiple ways; with unemployment, famine, and food scarcity adding to the stress created by illness and lock down. The loss of income and livelihoods will leave thousands of families in dire circumstances and dangerously exposed to false offers of work as they look for ways to survive.

Human traffickers prey on this vulnerability. They intentionally work in areas affected by disaster or crisis, and lure in desperate people with the promise of a better life. They specifically target people struggling with loss of income, poverty, displacement, or illness and promise them the chance to earn good money, an education, to find true love, and to help provide for their families. They trick, deceive, and sometimes force, susceptible people into situations of exploitation, abuse and slavery from which they cannot escape.

So, wherever there are vulnerable people there are human traffickers. In crises of any sort—whether conflicts, natural disasters, widespread violence or public health emergencies like COVID-19—vulnerability increases, which attracts human traffickers like vultures.

For example, the West Africa Ebola outbreak (2014-16) was followed by significant spikes in abuse, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, violence against children, child labour, and other forms of human trafficking<sup>3</sup>. We expect similar to emerge from the spread of COVID-19 and its resultant social impact; but on a much larger, global scale.

## 4. Trending Exploitation

Already the following trends are emerging from the impact of COVID-19 around the world (not just in impoverished communities either!)...

### Surging Online Sexual Exploitation.

Enforced lock-downs around the world have created a huge increase in the demand for online pornography. This in turn has driven the demand for sex trafficking of women and children to produce more content for pornographic sites, and a significant increase in online live streaming of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Many women previously trafficked into sexual exploitation in brothels have now been forced into performing live shows and producing content for online pornography. Lock-down has made it impossible for them to escape.

It has also created an environment where millions of children have had greater unsupervised internet access, leaving them exposed to increasing rates of online sexual exploitation and grooming by sexual predators.<sup>4</sup>

Already data is showing:

- Reports of child and sexual abuse have rapidly increased throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>
- Consumption of pornography has rocketed, especially the demand for child pornographic content.<sup>6</sup>
- Since lock-downs began, a 200% in posts on known child sex abuse forums that link to downloadable images and videos.<sup>7</sup>
- A surge in child sex offenders using social media to connect with young people, and an increase in child sex abuse material being downloaded.<sup>8</sup>
- Reports of child sexual exploitation have increased by (on average) 30% globally during the first major lock-down period.<sup>9</sup> Reports from the USA indicate an increase of 106%!
- Paedophiles are finding new ways of grooming and exploiting children online during lock-down.<sup>10</sup> Emotionally vulnerable children—in all countries—are at particular risk of this.

### Rising Rates of Violence.

Many countries in our world live with a daily reality of racial violence and social unrest, which will continue to escalate as a result of the uncertainty and fear that COVID-19 has brought to many. We have seen how racial tensions have heightened since the unjust deaths of black US Americans in police custody.

The pressures and stresses of Covid-19, lockdowns and restrictions of movement are also creating a huge increase in the amount of domestic violence being reported globally against women and children. World Vision predicts 85 million more girls and boys worldwide will be exposed to physical, sexual and emotional violence over the next 3 months<sup>11</sup>.

Exposure to violence of any sort is a significant risk factor for human trafficking.

### Escalating Forced Marriage and Child Labour Rates.

As COVID-19 infection rates accelerate around the world, it is becoming evident that the hardships caused by loss of income and livelihoods are resulting in an increase of families resorting to child labour and child marriage as a source of income.

Research has shown previously that financial stress is one of the root causes of child marriage. It is predicted that COVID-19 will cause an additional *13 million child marriages* over the next ten years, and at least *4 million more girls married within the next 2 years*.<sup>12</sup>

Forced marriage is already the second most prevalent form of human trafficking. School closures as a result of COVID-19 will also contribute to an increase in forced marriage, since early child marriage is associated with

education stopping among girls.<sup>13</sup> The massive global disruption to education caused by lock-down restrictions is also expected to drive child labour numbers up.<sup>14</sup>

### **Soaring Forced Labour and Debt Bondage.**

As economic hardship takes hold, it is predicted millions of men, women and children will fall prey to human traffickers promising work and decent jobs.<sup>15</sup>

Vulnerable individuals and families who have lost their jobs in informal economies are in urgent need of funds for household survival, but with few savings, and limited access to social protection, they will be at great risk of deeper indebtedness, which creates very real bondage.<sup>16</sup> This can result in exploitative money lenders providing credit in return for a family member, usually a child. This child will often spend the rest of their lives working off their family's debt.

### **Increasing Risk to Migrant Workers.**

Employment shortages resulting from COVID-19 will see a dramatic increase in the number of people migrating in search of work to help them and their families to survive. Prior to the pandemic, illegal migrants were already at particular risk of traffickers enticing them with attractive (fake) job offers. Traffickers will maximise the opportunities presented by COVID-19, and migrant workers will be at even greater risk of being trafficked than before.

## **5. Limiting Exposure**

This may seem overwhelming information, but the good news is that the global missions community can actually make a difference to this situation and help local churches (where they exist) to do the same. We have access to the skills and resources we need to meet the challenges COVID-19 is bringing.

There are three things we can do to prevent Covid-19's tsunami of trafficking from impacting our communities:

### **Build Relationships**

Get to know people who fit the risk profile of those susceptible to human trafficking in your local communities. Introduce them to members of local churches who can help surround them with caring, supportive friends. Isolated, unconnected individuals are at greatest risk of being trafficked. If you do not have someone looking out for you, who you can discuss things like job offers with, who you know cares about your wellbeing, it is very easy to fall victim to human trafficking.

Having a strong family or other supportive relationships with people looking after you is a key trafficking prevention strategy. Helping vulnerable people to

identify a safe person they can talk with, letting them know they are valued and loved as children of God, creating community and fellowship together; all play an important role in building resistance and resilience to human trafficking.

Supported by missions workers, the local church has a key role to play here, in both building relationships and caring for the vulnerable. We can provide resources that encourage and enable the church to do so.

### **Build Protection**

Establish practical protective measures around those at risk in your communities. People will continue to be at great risk of being trafficked until their basic needs are met. Desperation drives vulnerable people to accept offers they may not otherwise make, or to make decisions they do not want to. Ensuring basic needs are being met is a powerful protective step we can take to care for the vulnerable in our communities.

These practical protective measures may include:

- access to school
- providing healthcare
- ensuring enough to eat, providing meals or food parcels
- a safe place to live
- community and fellowship with others
- teaching job skills, training opportunities.

Many missions organisations are already engaged in many practical ministries; we need to understand that these ministries also serve a strong and valid protective layer of safety around vulnerable people. Missions that subscribe to a "whole of life" (integral or holistic) approach to missions are already in a prime position to put practical protective measures in place to keep people safe who otherwise might be at risk of human trafficking due to the health, economic and social fallout from COVID-19.

### **Build Awareness**

Teach trafficking awareness and safety to churches and wider communities. Our communities need to know this human trafficking is happening and that they may be at risk of false job offers and false offers of help. We need to be teaching awareness of:

- How traffickers operate
- What to do if you think someone is trying to traffic you
- How to migrate safely
- Keeping safe online.

**For Freedom** is SIM's global anti-trafficking ministry. We have resources and training available to help

safeguard your community. Visit the website noted in my author profile or email us for more information.

## 6. Start Extending

**Stay aware of what is happening in your communities**, and that increased domestic violence, abuse, trauma and human trafficking will be occurring. Find out who in your community is most at risk: who have lost their incomes and livelihoods? Who have lost family members due to COVID-19 or other illness? Who is struggling with family stress? What do they need? How can you support them? Who can you connect them with? They will be at great risk unless basic needs are being addressed.

**Connect with *For Freedom***, SIM International's global anti-trafficking ministry. The website and contact email address are noted in my author profile (on page 1). *For Freedom* can help by providing resources, support, strategic guidance or training in how to safeguard your community. We are a resource for you to call on at this time and would love to have a Zoom or email conversation with you.

Here is a sample of ways *For Freedom* can help you, ministries or churches extend awareness of the dangers of human trafficking in your ministry contexts and spheres of influence:

1. **Complete the online *For Freedom Basics* course.** It takes 45-60 minutes to complete and will give you a good understanding of what human trafficking is and how we can begin to respond.
2. **Help your local churches to reach out** to the vulnerable in their communities. Encourage them to see building relationships as a key means of sharing the love of Christ with those who need to know Him. *For Freedom* has access to excellent resources to help local churches to intentionally protect the vulnerable within their spheres of influence.
3. **Prevent trafficking and protect those at risk** with "Responding to the Vulnerable" resources available from *For Freedom* to help you teach your community how to stay safe. These resources include key protection messages about preventing trafficking, online safety, finding a safe adult, safe migration, not going with someone promising a great job, etc.
4. **Keep safe online.** Make sure children and young people in your families, teams and communities are safe online. Contact *For Freedom* and ask about their "Responding to the Next Generation" resources.

## Keep Extoling

A concluding comment from the Mission Commission.

A posture of protection toward the marginalised, disempowered and vulnerable is a Biblically-mandated responsibility of the privileged, empowered and supported ones in any given society. Old Testament prophets condemned the privileged and powerful for their negligence toward the vulnerable, and New Testament writers held followers of Christ to a high standard of caring for one another and doing good in wider society.

God is extolled (praised) when God's people do what is right, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). When we nurture our covenantal community in-Christ, our love for one another and embrace of others at risk of abuse, reveals a one-ness that is such a witness to the world that they will know and believe that the Father lovingly sent the Son (see John 17:18-25). This is the objective of missions. This is good news to communities suffering from want and oppressive systems. Building supportive communities of faith in Christ reveals to the world that "the time of the Lord's favour has come" (Luke 4:18-19).

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### Footnotes:

1. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/sustainable/sustainable-development-goals-report-2020.html> (or get the full SDG Report PDF here: (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>)
2. Freedom United, *Exposing the Hidden Victims of Covid-19*, May 2020, [www.freedomunited.org/covid-19/](http://www.freedomunited.org/covid-19/).
3. World Vision, *Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm*, [www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-perfect-storm](http://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-perfect-storm).

4. WeProtect Global Alliance, *Intelligence Brief: Impact of Covid-19 on Online Child Sexual Exploitation*, [www.weprotect.org/products](http://www.weprotect.org/products).
5. World Vision, *Aftershocks*.
6. Europol, *Catching The Virus; Cybercrime, Disinformation And The Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2020. [www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/catching-virus](http://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/catching-virus). This data is echoed by similar reports coming in from other parts of the world, including India, Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia.
7. WeProtect Global Alliance, *Intelligence Brief*. Specialist cybersecurity company Web-IQ reported this information.
8. Europol, *Catching The Virus*.
9. WeProtect Global Alliance, *Intelligence Brief*.
10. WeProtect Global Alliance, *Intelligence Brief*.
11. World Vision, *Intelligence Brief*. By September 2020, violence against children (which includes human trafficking) is estimated to increase by between 20-32%. This estimate is based on data on violence against children in the aftermath of previous health crises.
12. World Vision, *Aftershocks*.
13. Freedom United, *Exposing the Hidden Victims*.
14. International Labour Organisation (ILO), *Covid-19 Impact on Child Labour and Forced Labour*, [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms\\_745287.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_745287.pdf)
15. ILO, *Covid-19 Impact on Child Labour and Forced Labour*.
16. ILO, *Covid-19 Impact on Child Labour and Forced Labour*.