

*Exploitation on the Rise: Modern Slavery and COVID-19*

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The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports human trafficking in every country; however, these crimes are rarely discussed. Offenders target marginalized and low-income communities and individuals. With the assistance of the dark web and other shady methods, traffickers can anonymously prowl for and eventually purchase or steal victims (2020). Human trafficking (HT) is growing as an industry; all while tucked away in the shadows. Although fear and propaganda have overshadowed the dark reality of the crime, an ever-growing population responsible is partially to blame for the growing numbers of human trafficking victims. However, dark dealings, such as human exploitation, thrive when the world is in a state of turmoil.

In recent years gossip about traffickers abducting young girls from malls shed some light on modern slavery. However, misinformation has fuelled much of the understanding of human trafficking. Children are an especially vulnerable population; for obvious reasons, they are much easier to manipulate and capture, and under no circumstances can a child consent to labour or transport. Research conducted by the UNODC (2020), rates of human trafficking have risen consistently for the last 15 years, and the Global Report on Trafficking (2021) detected approximately 50,000 human trafficking victims in 2018 in more than 120 countries.

Traffickers are individuals who have access to a vulnerable population and will do anything to make money. The United Nations explains exploitation can take many forms, such as sexual, forced labour. Other forms are similar to slavery servitude. Also, the removal of organs for sale is a lucrative form of human trafficking that almost certainly results in death (UN, 1989, cited

by Rafferty, 2019). Vulnerable people are found in impoverished communities, and in some areas, child trafficking is a societal norm that allows for children's exploitation. In general low socioeconomic status, absence and abusive parenting contribute to child trafficking (UNODC, 2020, 87). Children are exploited for domestic servitude, textile, farm and factory labour, forced sex work, bride trafficking, and petty crime. (Zimmerman, 2017). Research on sex trafficking from 106 countries found approximately 25% of victims were girls and 3% were boys (n=14, 022) (UNODC, 2020, pg 35). The profile of victims of sex trafficking includes many of the same traits as victims of child labour. Victims are often of low socioeconomic status. Further, they may have developmental or behavioural needs. Further, victims may have dysfunctional families, a history of neglect or sexual or physical abuse by parents or guardians.

However, family involvement in exploitation can come in different forms. First, children can be born into modern slavery when one family member is disabled; other family members, including children, may be pushed into exploitative situations. The result is a generational cycle of entry into hazardous labour. Examples are children working alongside a family in palm oil plantations in Indonesia, mica mines in India, or tobacco farms in the United States (Zimmerman, 2017). Next, children are especially vulnerable to trafficking by family when they are expected to earn income for the family. There is a great deal of family involvement in child trafficking. Research from the Counter-Trafficking Data Collective found that family is four times more likely to be involved in the trafficking of children than adults. Trafficking by parents is much more common, with parents primarily trafficking for sexual exploitation as the most likely form of exploitation. Field studies out of West Africa found in cases of sexual exploitation, 35% of the time, parents were organizing the acts. Parents also traffick their children for sexual exploitation, forced marriage, child pornography, and street begging (UNODC, 2020, pg 91). A tiny percentage of traffickers are both boys and girls. About 1 percent of total persons convicted for trafficking are boys, with the same share recorded for girls (UNODC, 2020, pg 37). Important to consider how easily traffickers control children, which may suggest any child involvement is coerced.

The rise of the COVID-19 virus has resulted in new opportunities for traffickers. According to the UNODC, isolation, coupled with a massive rise in poverty and a sudden loss of social support systems, has resulted in an increased risk of human exploitation and trafficking, especially for those already at risk. In the West African countries previously mentioned where children work in various industries, there is an increased chance of trafficking due to increased exposure. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children tracked an increase of over 4 million online reports of exploitation from March to April 2020 (Cree et al., 2012). With a lack of resources, support and the tactics of traffickers, the exact number of

people victims is unknown. Yet, the global pandemic has fuelled trafficking rates. In developing countries, COVID-19 left families struggling to sustain themselves with less economic and social resources than ever before. The shutdowns left adults and children in abusive or neglectful environments with no escape, and the massive shutdowns placed many in a position where they were unable to afford necessities. Shutdowns led to the massive unemployment rate, which has left many people unable to pay their bills and in a snowball effect, with no work, families are at an increased risk of homelessness (Todres & Diaz, 2021).

Without an income and a risk of homelessness, women and children are at a higher risk of exploitation on the street, which is particularly dangerous during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, many trafficking victims could access health care only when experiencing severe sudden illness. Not only could survivors receive mental health services, but they could also be connected with other essential services, including legal services. However, these services are challenging to access during the pandemic (Todres & Diaz, 2021). Healthcare accessibility is a concern for trafficking victims, especially in cases of child exploitation.

Authors Todres & Diaz (2021) of COVID-19 and Human Trafficking—the Amplified Impact on Vulnerable Populations, recorded abuse rates have dropped due to a lack of outside contact. However, hospitals have reported an increase in reported cases of abuse. A combination of increased time on the streets and abuse can place vulnerable people at a greater risk of trafficking. Lastly, youths are at a greater risk of trafficking due to an increase in front of the computer. However, rates of trafficking in the west are much lower than in other parts of the world. In Canada and countries such as the US, UK and Australia, indigenous girls, homeless children and children in the welfare system are at a greater risk of trafficking than people not (Public Health Canada, 2021).

Further, child survivors should receive appropriate assistance and protection in the form of immediate support, including food, shelter, healthcare and social services delivered by a professional. Importantly, child trafficking victims are never to be criminalized, placed in detention or coerced in any way (Rafferty, 2019). Today, trafficking victims are often under-recorded and overlooked. This is primarily due to the emerging forms of cyber-based sexual violence and sexual exploitation of young people via live streaming. (Rafferty, 2019). Trafficking victims are difficult to identify as the signs are difficult to recognize. While the actual number is unknown, there is a need for a thorough approach to preventing and combating child trafficking (Rafferty, 2019). Research by Rafferty (2019) suggests steps toward recovery and reintegration help child survivors return to a safe world.

Recovery, especially, means child trafficking survivors will require extensive psychological and physical care. However, an emphasis on reintegration may be problematic as children may not be able to return to their home community. Specifically, children who experienced

abuse, and neglect, ran away, or were trafficked by their parents, will not feel safe to return to their home community, thereby making reintegration impossible.

The profile of child victims is changing. With increasing poverty and internet usage, some children do not wish to identify themselves as victims. In some cases, they do not consider themselves to be exploited. Furthermore, additional modes of exploitation such as organ removal and baby selling involve children often overlooked. Therefore, we must consider the diverse nature of child exploitation when searching for a solution.

Child exploitation is a complex issue impacting the globe. Following COVID-19, children are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to a lack of social and economic resources. Child labour and sex trafficking are amongst the highest forms of victimization experienced by exploited children. Comprehensive profiles and recent data about the current child trafficking domain will continue to shed light on a topic so often hidden in the shadows. For an issue such as child exploitation to diminish, the harsh reality must be made available. Through education and spreading awareness, we may save future child trafficking victims from a horrifying fate.

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