



carmelngo

THE CARMELITE NGO BULLETIN

2021 - Vol 14 - Number 1

Original English edition

Impact of COVID-19 on Human Trafficking

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"The desperation of many wanting to travel during the closure of borders created a viable and lucrative opportunity for the traffickers to exploit on the unsuspecting victim."

Human trafficking which refers to the process through which individuals are placed or maintained in an exploitative situation for economic gain, has become a global epidemic affecting 21 million victims worldwide, making it the most serious crime after drug trafficking. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Report (UNODC) (1). Pre-existing trafficking trends can however be exacerbated by crises. The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) is no exception; its impact is felt on human trafficking. The impact of COVID-19 has even been addressed in a Symposium on "Combating Human Trafficking: Action in a Time of Crisis." Sponsored by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See and held at the International Union of Superiors General in Rome, on October 14, 2020 (2).

The COVID-19 virus, originally identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, grew exponentially, with the virus epicentre shifting from China to all parts of the world, resulting in it being declared, a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Globally, as of 1 November 2020, it had infected more than 46.2 million people with more than 1.2 million recorded deaths and 30.9 million recovered. In Zimbabwe, the first case was recorded on March 20, 2020 and by 1 November 2020, 8 362 confirmed cases were recorded with 242 deaths and 7 834 recovered.

Giammarinaro opines that the COVID-19 pandemic has far-reaching, long-term negative impact on traffic-

ked persons (3). Todres and Diaz concur with this amplified impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations risking being trafficked (4). Given these views, this paper focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 on human trafficking. The implications of Covid-19 on human trafficking shall be highlighted and followed by possible strategies to mitigate the challenges.

COVID-19 increased vulnerability of those to be trafficked

To deal with the pandemic, countries implemented several WHO containment measures such as social distancing, curfews and mandatory lockdown restrictions to halt the spread of the virus and limit the number of fatalities. For instance, on March 21, 2020 Zimbabwe began a 21-day national lockdown in a bid to curtail the spread of the coronavirus - this meant the shutting down of all except essential activities and services such as health care and law enforcement. The lockdown was subsequently extended by an additional two weeks and on May 3, 2020; the lockdown was further extended by two more weeks, but with more relaxed provisions. On May 16, 2020, the relaxed lockdown measures are extended indefinitely with a proviso for government to review them fortnightly.

However, these lockdown measures increased the vulnerability of individuals with regards to human trafficking. Cardona, opines that the COVID-19 lockdowns

and restrictions impacted economic and living conditions of people (5). This has increased the number of vulnerable people around the world who may fall victim to human trafficking.

Increased economic hardship and unemployment

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) the Covid-19 pandemic would result in between 20.1 million and 35.0 million more people in working poverty than before the pandemic (6) and this is evidenced by the World Bank's announcement that the COVID-19 outbreak will render about 40-60 million people into extreme poverty thereby increasing chances of them being exposed to human trafficking (7). Thus, with the lockdown measures and the stay at home policies, many have been rendered jobless and poor leaving the people exposed to higher risk of exploitative employment or human trafficking. In many countries, informal workers, which represent the highest percentage of employed population, have been particularly affected (8). The workers who lose their jobs are left vulnerable to traffickers promising them better jobs in foreign countries, thereby luring them for trafficking (9). Capps supports this arguing that the economic impact of COVID-19, including widespread job loss, has left many people unable to pay rent heightening the vulnerability of the individuals to human trafficking (20).

Trafficking and exploitation of children

Furthermore, the closure of schools heightened the risk of online sexual exploitation, with children, spending more time online, School closures thus may also lead to an escalation of child trafficking cases as opined by UNICEF (11).

About 80% of children who die from child abuse are aged 4 and below.

About 35% of victims are 11 years old or younger.

Sexually exploited children and young people range in age from 4 to 19 with a peak age of 15.

About 75% of abuse occurs within a child's home and is from a familiar face

Family members abuse 30% of children.

As many as 60% of children are abused by people the family trusts.

90% of abused children know the abuser: perpetrators can be family members, teachers, neighbours, friends etc.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (12) states that school closures in 194 countries affected 90 percent of the world's students at the pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels, exposing the schoolchildren to being vulnerable for human trafficking.

In Zimbabwe, the closure of the schools and the paradigm shift to online learning increases the amount of time children are spending on the internet thereby making them more vulnerable to interacting with traffickers online. More than 60% of child abuse cases are never reported.

Only a third of abused children receive help

- Children and young people often disclose violence and abuse to their peers

- More than 60% of teen first pregnancies are preceded by experiences of molestation, rape or attempted rape.

- Both males and females who have been sexually abused are more likely to engage in prostitution.

- Sexually abused children who keep the abuse a secret or who "tell" and are not believed are at greater risk for psychological, emotional, social, and physical problems, often lasting into adulthood.

- One study showed that among male survivors, 50% have suicidal thoughts and more than 20% attempt suicide.

- Young girls who are sexually abused are more likely to develop eating disorders as adolescents.

- Anyone can abuse a child

In addition to this, the idleness of the school pupil's results in them being involved in sexy orgies and drugs, making them vulnerable to trafficking. The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of Primary and Secondary Education raising alarm over alleged wild sex orgies and drug abuse due to Covid-19 impact exacerbated by striking teachers evidence this (13). The children's exposure to such acts increases their chances of being taken advantage of by the human traffickers who would exploit on these areas. Due to COVID-19, less work and many people were affected failing to provide the basic needs. As a result, domestic violence increased to the extent that some lost life through fighting in homes, suicide, and trafficking.

However, perhaps on a positive note. The lockdown measures and closure of borders in a way reduced Zimbabwe's chances of being used by other countries as transit for human trafficking. The geographical location of the country makes it vulnerable to be used as a major- route in SADC for human trafficking, with most victims passing through the country on their way to South Africa (14). Thus the closure of borders in a way reduced the human trafficking statistics. Even then, the human traffickers may also take this as an opportunity to enhance their trade. With the borders officially closed, illegal entry points and routes are being used and it is in these routes that human traffickers take advantage of and thrive on.

The desperation of many wanting to travel during the closure of borders therefore creates a viable and lucrative opportunity for the traffickers to exploit on the unsuspecting victims.

COVID-19 worsen conditions for trafficking Victims

Human trafficking which violates Article 3 on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedom from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment is exacerbated by COVID -19. Besides increasing the numbers of those vulnerable to trafficking, COVID-19 also worsen conditions for the victims of those already being trafficked. Todres and Diaz claim that protecting against exposure to the virus in human trafficking is limited hence putting the victims at risk (15).

For instance, despite the stay-at-home orders, victims of human trafficking exposed to sexual exploitation continued rendering the so-called services putting their health and safety in jeopardy. Mutsaka, as cited in the AP News highlighted that the sex traders were still on the streets despite lockdown measures and the curfews (16). Some of these sex workers are underaged girls forced into the trade being victims of human trafficking. (Europe PMC) (17). Given this assertion, these trafficked sex workers are vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. Cardona sums this up saying that traffickers do not care about the health of who they exploit – their only concern is money. Poverty was one of the driving force to restrict victims of trafficking and to expose the through inhuman degradation. Over 3.3 million cases of child abuse are reported daily worldwide. Globally more than five children die daily because of severe/extreme child abuse. 33% of girls in Zimbabwe experience sexual violence before their 18th birthday. (NBSLEA) 2011. Statistics show that about 100 girls are sexually abused each day and this makes the rate of those girls who leave homes for security reasons be deceived in the process by relatives or by traffickers. Stories are recorded in Zimbabwe where the safety of children was at stake. Some children have recently been killed by close relatives for reasons associated to trafficking where some children were killed for body parts (often referred to as organ harvesting) Child sexual exploitation is when people use the power they have over young people to sexually abuse them. Their power may result from a difference in age, gender, intellect, strength, money or other resources. The lockdown has contributed to the youths to be sexually exploited.

People often think of child sexual exploitation in terms of serious organized crime, but it also covers abuse in relationships and may involve informal exchanges of sex for something a child wants or needs, such as accommodation, gifts, food or attention. Some children are "groomed" through "boyfriends" who then force the child or young person into having sex with friends or associates. Child Sexual abuse covers online bullying and the misuse of sexual images – such as on the internet or by mobile phone. Part of the challenge of tackling child sexual exploitation is that the children and young people involved may not understand that non-consensual sex (sex they have not agreed to) or forced sex – including oral sex – is rape. Children may not understand that being shown sexual images is abuse. Due to COVID -19 most students did not have enough reading material that led to the development of unwanted behaviour at home and at school.

Even the victims of labour trafficking may be forced to continue working in increased hours in hazardous conditions, increasing their potential exposure to the virus. In forced labour and commercial sex settings, those who are trafficked may have little access to or choice of whether to wear masks or to insist that others nearby do. And social distancing may be difficult, if not impossible, in these settings. For example, those trafficked from the rural areas to work as domestic workers or as farmworkers within Zimbabwe are most likely to be

exposed to the virus since the traffickers may not give them adequate protective equipment. In such environments, social distancing measures are likely to be ignored and above all lockdown conditions decrease the likelihood of current victims being identified or being able to escape their traffickers.

Todres and Diaz opine that the COVID-19 pandemic has created circumstances that may inhibit identification of those who are trafficked and those who survive trafficking, and make it harder to deliver comprehensive services to support survivors (18). The travel bans and lockdown trapped people in conflict zones and exploitative situations.

COVID-19 Impact on trafficking victims

The 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report on Zimbabwe which stated that 87 potential trafficking victims were identified and assisted in 2017 and a total of 14 female victims were repatriated (13 from Kuwait and one from South Africa) Such victims thus get social support, However, the outbreak of Covid-19 resulting in the lockdown measures has in a way impacted on the support being rendered on the trafficking victims.

Decreased Support for human trafficking survivors

The impact of COVID-19 on human trafficking is also seen in a diminished amount of support for human trafficking survivors. The diminishing support for the survivor has been noted with regards to decreased donations to anti-trafficking organizations due to economic hardships. Anti-trafficking organizations are struggling; donations have decreased, fundraising events have been cancelled, and the ability to provide direct services has been thwarted by the virus. All these have seen a decline in support services and operations that trafficking survivors used to get. The shutdowns associated with the pandemic have constrained the ability to deliver the comprehensive, integrated care that the human traffic survivors need. The lockdown measures also increased social isolation, which adversely affect the mental health recovery of survivors (19).

Disruption of supply chain

The COVID-19 outbreak is not only affecting people's mobility across and within countries, but disrupted production operations and the supply chain in various operations which include the support systems of the trafficking victims. The restrictions on transportation and movement of people during lockdowns led to logistical challenges in the distribution of food inputs to the centres hosting the survivors of human trafficking.

Disruption to prevention and response efforts

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the disruption to plans and strategies to prevent and respond to trafficking thereby weakening overall TiP responses and leading to increased risks. For example, TiP prevention activities such as public awareness campaigns or large-scale training activities by governments and non-governmental organisations have been disrupted leaving the victims still at risks.

Human trafficking court cases have also been pushed back in many areas, delaying justice for survivors. For instance, although the enactment of Trafficking in Person Act (Chapter 9:25) ushered in notable achievements as evidenced by the government prosecution of 14 trafficking cases in 2017 and the 42 prosecutions in 2016, the outbreak of COVID -19 and the government control measures of lockdowns in a way led to more closures thereby disrupting the prosecution of trafficking cases.

To sum it up, the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking survivors has disrupted their lives and support networks while increasing financial stress and food insecurity.



Mitigating measures

According to Herlinger (20), the symposium held in Rome on the how Covid-19 impacts human trafficking highlighted the need for change of "socioeconomic norms" globally and praised the work of Catholic sisters, saying their anti-trafficking work saves lives.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe has instituted a number of policy, institutional and operational measures to combat and contain the pandemic and reduce its negative impact, especially on the poor and vulnerable members of society. However, the government needs to align the Zimbabwe Trafficking in Persons National Plan of Action (NAPLAC. 21) with the United Nations global strategic framework to support countries' paths to social and economic recovery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Framework which is complementary to the Humanitarian Response Plan 2020 and support for the COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan should however incorporate the human trafficking component. Thus, in this environment, a multidisciplinary interventions approach is needed to resolve the pandemic. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), however, advocates for a human rights-, trauma-informed, and victim-centred approach in dealing with the pandemic. (22).

The Zimbabwean government also unveiled a monetary package of millions of dollars to fight the pandemic (23). However, the funding should also address human trafficking issues. Furthermore, Stein stated that the first step to change is awareness and it is important to continue the dialogue around COVID-19's impact on human trafficking (24).

Conclusion

The article addressed the impact of COVID -19 on the human trafficking. It was noted that the impact centred on the increase of those vulnerable to human trafficking, the victims and the support rendered to the survivors. The paper further focused briefly on the need to address these challenges.

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