



**British Institute of  
International and  
Comparative Law**

## Human Trafficking and COVID-19: What Next?

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COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of life. Anti-trafficking efforts are no exception. Earlier this summer BIICL hosted a [webinar](#) entitled 'Human Trafficking and COVID-19: What Next?'. The discussion, chaired by Silvia Scarpa, brought together leading anti-trafficking experts: Marika McAdam, Ryszard Piotrowicz, Parosha Chandran and Tomoya Obokata. Here are 5 take away points from the event:

### 1. COVID-19 risks increasing vulnerabilities to trafficking.

The pandemic risks exacerbating individuals' vulnerability to being trafficked and exploited, not only as a result of the pandemic and its impact, but also due to the legislation and practices responding to COVID-19.

Increased poverty levels and a lack of work opportunities may render people at heightened risk of being pushed into illegal economies where there is a higher frequency of exploitation and trafficking. Certain groups who are already vulnerable to exploitation be at further risk, such as vulnerable women, children, minorities, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, older workers and workers with disabilities.

Lockdown measures have also caused vulnerability factors to conflate. For example, with children having more time at home and increased consumers of sexual abuse images during lockdown, there is an increased risk of online exploitation.

Moreover, whilst it is unknown whether mobility restrictions have inhibited levels of trafficking, traffickers are very quick to adapt and take advantage of an increased demand for mobility and a lack of safe and affordable migratory routes. In the UK, this has manifested in the increased involvement of girls in county lines and in the exploitation of workers currently investigated in Leicester. With traffickers adapting to and exploiting changing situations, a shift of exploitation from being venue-based to online is noted.

### 2. Trafficked persons' access to protection has been impacted by the pandemic.

COVID-19 presents a sudden and unforeseen strain on protection and assistance for trafficked persons. In the short term, lockdown measures exacerbated the entrapment and concealment of

trafficked persons. Their exploitation continues, yet the routes to escape and channels for assistance, support and protection diminished.

State and civil society services have been disrupted. States have diverted resources away from anti-trafficking and anti-exploitation efforts, with COVID-19 becoming a more pressing priority. Service providers' and civil society's facilities have been disrupted, with practical challenges for shelters arising (especially relating to distancing measures and a lack of space) and funding becoming insufficient. Although in the longer term, states may increasingly rely on civil society providers to carry out state responsibilities, the immediate impact has seen a hampering of access to assistance and protection for individuals who are already in situations of exploitation.

There is also a lack of monitoring and evaluation of State practices, with the postponement of monitoring bodies' country visits, inevitably creating a gap in the monitoring process.

### 3. Initial state practices: promising, but too soon to tell their effectiveness.

Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic, some states seem to have learned from previous disaster responses (e.g. earthquakes or typhoons) and leveraged this knowledge to respond to this pandemic. Examples of the rapidity of state responses are somewhat of a silver lining. These responses include providing amnesties for work permits that have expired, residency status for people in irregular migration situations, and reducing health care barriers by providing health and social security access.

Whilst many countries have implemented responses, including social protection measures, the question remains as to whether these policies are reaching those in most need of protection. It may be too soon to assess such measures' effectiveness or prevalence.

### 4. Optimism or despair?

The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, disrupted access to protection, and impacted state responses. The long-term impact will be discovered in the months and years to come.

However, this may be something of a reckoning for the anti-trafficking movement. The likely contraction of funding will require responses to be more efficient and effective, thus providing a potential opportunity to focus on victim protection and to invest in strengthening direct services to those who need it.

There is some optimism that policymakers may build on the realisation that societies and economies are only as secure as their most vulnerable members. The extent to which countries of origin and destination depend on workers, including migrant workers, has been highlighted. With the risk of increased exploitation, there is an opportunity for policymakers to recognise and develop the need to invest in prevention and protection measures that are robust and can better withstand unpredictable challenges presented by future crises and budget cuts.

### 5. Moving Forward: Building a more resilient system

To learn from the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, and to build a more resilient system, the panel suggested that anti-trafficking efforts should be broadened.

At the international level, the various obligations across human trafficking, contemporary slavery, and forced labour laws, need to be harmonised. Whilst the Trafficking Protocol itself is not designed for a public health crisis, the broader set of international human rights obligations are non-derogable. Crises, including COVID-19, should not become excuses for failing to meet support and protection obligations.

Secondly, whilst the law is not the solution to all concerns and problems, the discussion emphasised that areas such as corporate liability, compensation, extraterritorial jurisdiction, and non-punishment provisions should be prioritised in constructing the way forward.

Finally, the anti-trafficking movement may benefit from taking a step back and broadening its approach. The pandemic has exacerbated vulnerabilities, triggered an increase in unemployment levels and caused more demand whilst decreasing opportunities. However, this needs to be understood and addressed in light of fundamental structural causes and socio-economic issues, most notably the grim reality that for too many people, they are relatively better off within trafficking situations than they were without them. Moving forward, a rights-based social justice approach is ever more urgent, to address the systemic issues that have long existed but have been clearly highlighted by the pandemic.

The full recording of the webinar can be found [here](#). This event is part of the '[Covid-19 impacts on efforts to combat human trafficking](#)' project currently being implemented by the British institute of International and Comparative Law as part of its '[Determinants of Anti-Trafficking Effort Project](#)', funded by the United States Department of State.