The Human Trafficking Continuum and COVID-19: Rights, Risks and Recommended Protective Actions

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is not simply a public health concern, but also a potential glocal crisis. It is a socio-economic and health challenge that threatens to exacerbate the disparities faced by victims of trafficking while also impacting the ability of countries to respond effectively. This pandemic will have both short- and long-term impacts on the socio-economic, psycho-emotional, behavioural, spiritual, cultural and academic lives of individuals, groups, communities and organisations. This paper builds on debates on the role of disasters in the human trafficking continuum. It looks at how disease outbreaks, specifically COVID-19,put individuals at risk of trafficking and impact service provision to those trafficked. The paper applies a rights-based approach in the discussions presented and gives select examples of protective measures that could be introduced and implemented in order to safeguard at-risk individuals and those trafficked.

Keywords: COVID-19; Human trafficking; Human rights; Vulnerability; Interventions

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Introduction

In December 2019, China reported pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan that were later confirmed by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020a) to be the novel Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV2), also referred to as COVID-19 or coronavirus. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of human life across the globe in 235 countries, including in African countries. Recently, Antonio Guteres, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, reported that the 25.2 million African refugees, asylum seekers, trafficked, stateless and internally displaced persons, are some of the most vulnerable to COVID-19 (UN News, 2020). Indeed, COVID-19 threatens to exacerbate the wide range of disparities faced by victims of trafficking (Armitage and Nellums, 2020; Interpol, 2020; Marx, 2020; The Elders, 2020) and migrants in mixed migration flows.

Migration can impact health and health can impact migration. Within the migration framework, COVID-19 has created risks and challenges to victims of trafficking and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of individuals and populations to trafficking. The abuse and exploitation that victims of trafficking are exposed to can affect their health and wellbeing at various stages of migration. This is made worse by the pandemic. A recent article by Marx (2020) supports this assertion by stating that “the pandemic creates opportunities for those involved in this hidden crime.”

A study by Worsnop (2019) addresses the linkages between disease outbreaks and human trafficking and highlights the potential means by which disease outbreaks could increase trafficking. This paper builds on these debates and introduces a rights-based discourse in these deliberations with a specific focus on COVID-19, though applicable to other pandemics or disasters. Human rights are crucial, and the human rights approach is

applied in this paper in order to reaffirm the values of humanity in times of COVID-19. Although development and social work is context-specific, "human rights is a universalistic discourse, based on ideas of a shared humanity and global citizenship" – idea(l)s that can be problematic and contested (Ife, 2008: 2, 4).

Migration, whether transnational or internal, can impact public health, social development and social welfare services. Given human movements within, in and out of a country, the health and socio-economic coverage of all persons, irrespective of their status, becomes a priority in emergency preparedness and in public health planning (Molobe, Odukoya, Isikekpei and Marsiglia, 2020), health insurance, social protection/security and social welfare coverage. It is against this backdrop, which is synonymous with trafficking risks and vulnerabilities, that this paper was conceptualised.

This paper looks at the impact of COVID-19 along the trafficking continuum. The rationale behind this is that the pandemic and the associated measures to flatten the curve have further exacerbated vulnerabilities, inequalities and access to basic human rights. The risk of exploitation has been amplified where there were pre-existing vulnerabilities and as individuals lose access to accommodation, livelihoods, safety nets and social networks (Global Initiative, 2020). The vulnerabilities and needs of victims of trafficking means that they often require a continuum of services and programmes (Warria and Chikadzi, 2008). However, not meeting these needs and the impact of COVID-19 can place victims at further risk and keep them engaged in exploitative activities longer (Interpol, 2020; OSCE, ODIHR and UNWOMEN, 2020; Trautrims, Schleper, Cakir and Gold, 2020; Warria, Nel and Triegaardt, 2014). The discussions are thus framed by a rights-based approach which places the victim at the

centre of the discussion and promotes and protects their human rights (OSCE et al., 2020).

This paper is based on a review of the literature on migration, human trafficking and COVID-19 and the intersections among these. Peer-reviewed manuscripts, news reports and reports commissioned by Human Rights Watch, WHO, UN, ILO, UNODC were reviewed. More than 80% of the publications reviewed and included in this paper were from 2019 and 2020. The initial web-based search for literature was conducted using the following key words: “Human Trafficking AND COVID-19”, “Migration and COVID-19”, “Trafficking AND Victims AND COVID-19”, “Trafficking AND COVID-19 and Protective Actions”, “Trafficking AND Root Analysis”, “Trafficking AND Human Rights AND COVID-19”. However, it should be noted that this list is not exhaustive of the key words used, but was included to indicate the depth of the search undertaken. The databases that were used for the search include but are not limited to Science Direct, Research Gate, Google Scholar and PubMed.

First, a brief overview of both human trafficking and COVID-19 is provided. Secondly, COVID-19-related vulnerabilities associated with the three main phases of trafficking (i.e. pre-, during and post-trafficking) are highlighted and looked at from within a human rights approach. Finally, the implications and recommendations for rights-based protective responses are presented.

Human trafficking and human rights-based approach

Human trafficking, also referred to as trafficking in persons (TIP),is the buying and selling of people for the purpose of exploitation. According to article 3(a) in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (also known

as the UN TIP Protocol or the Palermo Protocol), human trafficking refers to

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs

Article 3(b) indicates that the consent of a victim of trafficking to the planned exploitation is irrelevant where any of the means mentioned in 3(a)have been used. In relation to children, article 3(c) and (d) states that the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of any person under the age of 18 for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered TIP even if none of the means highlighted in 3(a) are included.

Trafficked persons are part of the migrant population in any country. According to a recent report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Walk Free Foundation (2017), globally, 40 million people are victims of trafficking, forced labour, forced marriage, slavery and slave-like practices. According to the 2020 US TIP Report, 105,787 victims of trafficking were identified worldwide in 2019. This is despite the general lack of conclusive statistics on trafficking worldwide as highlighted in various studies (Lucio, Rapp-McCall and Campion, 2020; van der Watt, 2020; Warria, 2014).Therefore, the above trafficking definition is meant to ensure consistency and consensus globally especially

when adopted into local trafficking legislation.

A rights-based approach is crucial in understanding human trafficking. Human trafficking is a multiple human rights violation, as a wide range of victims' rights such as freedom of association and movement, right to life, security, favourable work conditions and integrity are desecrated. The fundamental foundations of social work lie in the principles of social justice and human rights. The rights framework provides an ethical basis for practice and policy development (Warria, 2017), although research has also shown that rights-based interventions are often undermined by national criminal, labour and immigration concerns (Andreatta, 2015; Barner, Oketch and Camp, 2014; Botha and Warria, 2020; Warria, 2020).

Overview of COVID-19

Corona viruses come from a large family of viruses that can cause illness in people or animals– with COVID-19 caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2020a).The most common reported symptoms are fever, a dry cough, and tiredness. Other symptoms also reported in patients include muscle aches and pains, nasal congestion, headache, sore throat, diarrhoea, loss of taste or smell or a rash on skin or discoloration of fingers or toes. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually and sometimes disappear(WHO, 2020a). Some people who test positive for COVID-19 have very mild symptoms, and in most of cases they recover without requiring hospitalisation and treatment. A fifth of people who get COVID-19 become seriously ill and require hospital admission are older persons and those with underlying medical problems. However, it is important to note that anyone can catch COVID-19 and become seriously ill or even die.

According to Molobe et al. (2020: n.d), “in human-to-human transmissions, the indication is that human interaction in the social environment remains the main means of spread of any infection.”COVID-19 mostly spreads through human transmission through tiny droplets from an infected person's nose or mouth, when they cough, sneeze, or talk. These droplets have been found to be relatively heavy, not able to travel far and they quickly sink to the ground. These droplets can also land on objects and surfaces around the infected person, and other healthy people can become infected by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth soon thereafter.

To date,Africa has recorded 1,539,440 cases, including 37,103 confirmed deaths. This is against the following worldwide statistics: 37,109,851 cases and1,070,355 confirmed deaths. Although infection rates have dropped or stabilised in certain countries, other countries, especially in Europe, are seeing a second wave of infections. COVID-19 led to the adoption of cross-border closure measures worldwide as a means to effectively prevent and control its spread as per the recommendations of the WHO (Lee, Worsnop, Grepin and Kamradt-Scott, 2020), social distancing and washing of hands regularly with soap and clean water or with alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Other measures advocated for by the WHO with the goal of preventing the spread include self-isolating (i.e. separating people who are ill with symptoms of COVID-19 and may be infectious) and quarantining (i.e. restricting activities or separating people who are not ill themselves but have been exposed to COVID-19). The reported impact of COVID-19 has been widespread and includes but is not limited to travel restrictions, trade restrictions, border closures, health impact, and socio-economic consequences. This gives rise to concerns about all aspects of life, which will be looked at next in relation to the

risks associated with human trafficking.

Risks and vulnerabilities linked to COVID-19

Trafficking is complex, often not linear and never really black and white. Thus, the identified stages of trafficking will vary from author to author: e.g. Newman (2006) identifies the stages as recruitment, transportation and entry, delivery and marketing and exploitation while Odera and Malinowski (2011) write on identification, assistance provision and reintegration. However, for the purposes of this paper, the COVID-19 risks associated with trafficking will be discussed in pre-trafficking, trafficking and post-trafficking phases. This is because each phase ushers in different or overlapping vulnerabilities, and this demands a clear understanding and specific interventions.

i) Pre-trafficking vulnerabilities and at-risk populations

Poverty and livelihoods: Loss of employment often results in lack of financial means to make provision for basic necessities. Loss of livelihoods coupled by lack of social protection and social security aggravates poverty. Income losses and job cuts have a severe impact on everyone, but more so for those in the informal sector in the emerging and developing economies – mostly in Africa. For example, the livelihoods of cross-border traders, domestic workers, people in self-employment and waiters have been disrupted (Dafuleya, 2020). Poverty places individuals at risk of trafficking. High risks of poverty lead to desperation as individuals turn to high risk and/or exploitative employment or opportunities. Earlier this year, the ILO (2020) estimated that COVID-19 would cause 25 million job losses, while the World Bank (2020) estimates that 71 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty by the pandemic. This kind of globe cutting internationalv ulnerability will fuel the search for a means of survival –with trafficking offering false hopes, dreams and opportunities.

Marginalised communities: Health, socio-economic and financial inequity contribute to the increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Marginalised individuals in low-income communities, people living and working on the streets, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people (and their children) living in overcrowded, under-resourced camps are all atrisk of contracting COVID-19. According to Ghosh et al. (2020: 229), "these places will act as a fortified and enriched culture media for pathogen like SARS-CoV2." The basic preventative strategies are strained and virtually unattainable due to the characteristics of these environments – e.g. lacking water and sanitation facilities, inadequate access to healthcare facilities, and vulnerable people having pre-existing chronic illnesses and already engaging in high-risk activities for survival. Armitage and Nellums (2020: n.d) report that these existing equalities "are being compounded by the pandemic's widespread socio-economic impacts, representing an international crisis that disproportionately affects society's most vulnerable groups."

Migrants: Many migrants are reported to be stranded and stuck in transit in various countries. With the border closures as one of the WHO-recommended ways to prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19, many are unable to reach their destination or get back to countries/communities of origin (Sanchez and Achilli, 2020). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM,2020), in January this year 11,101 migrants arrived in Yemen from the Horn of Africa compared to only 1,725 in April and probably much less in the following months.

Migrants face increased stigma and abuse. This is because COVID-19 is being associated with people who travel and thus migrants specifically are seen as carriers of COVID-19 and further denigrated by politicians, media and even researchers (BBC, 2020). According to Lotfi et al. (2020), migrants may acquire and

transmit communicable and non-communicable diseases during migration and thus screening may help improve their health status and prevent spread of infections in resettlement. Such sentiments might hold particularly true for migrants abandoned by smugglers and traffickers. Their inability to continue their journeys or return home means they are at risk of contracting COVID-19 due to lack of opportunities and good living conditions. However, these sentiments might also be used to marginalise migrants further as stereotypes associated with othering those who are different finds a narrative in COVID-19. Austria has suspended asylum applications using COVID-19 as justification, and South Africa and the US are also using a similar justification to reduce in-country migration by building border fences with Zimbabwe and Mexico respectively, asylum seekers in Canada risk deportation, Malta has closed its ports and Italy is quarantining migrants in rescue boats(Dalexis and Cenat, 2020; Garrett, 2020; BBC, 2020). What is clear is that COVID-19 is also being used to politicise and securitize migration, but this will not stop irregular migration (Sanchez and Achilli, 2020).In other countries,migrant rights have been curtailed and reports show increased COVID-19-linked racism and xenophobia (Garrett, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). It is clear in the BBC (2020) report that "there is danger that COVID-19 will do long-term damage to migrant rights, as states continue to adopt inward-looking policies to try and keep out not only people seeking better economic opportunities … but also those fleeing political persecution." Increasing the risks of migrants is compounded by the fact that out of the 167 countries that have closed their borders to try to contain COVID-19, 57 of them have not made an exception for migrants seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2020).

Lockdown in migrant-receiving countries has not only destabilised migrants in the informal sector but has also impacted the flow of remittances to recipient countries (Dafuleya, 2020). These remittances, which alleviate poverty, increase expenditure

and reduce child labour, have dwindled. This loss impacts migrants' families' ability to spend on immediate needs and thus exposes them to higher risks of extreme poverty and food insecurity. A recent media report stated that many migrants in South Africa who have been participating in the social insurance schemes are having difficulties accessing and claiming benefits during the pandemic (Business Insider, 2020; Dafuleya, 2020).

Gender: Trafficking does not often happen in isolation but within a continuum of violence fuelled by inequalities (OCSE et al., 2020). It can also be a manifestation of violence influenced by gendered norms, patriarchy and entitlement, coercion and stereotypes linked to male domination and control.The gendered aspect or impact of the pandemic cannot be ruled out. Women generally earn less, save less and are more involved in the informal economy – thus increasing their vulnerability (Giammarinaro, 2020). Evidence from the Ebola outbreak shows that women and girls (and in certain less reported instances men) engaged in transactional or survival sex. Research by National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) (2017) also shows links and intersections between domestic violence and trafficking. Thus, the increased reports of domestic violence during the pandemic should be taken seriously, as they can continue to be a push factor– especially for women and girl victims.

Children and school risks: School closures threaten the right to education and other rights such as play, association, participation and development. School offers freedom, socialisation, interaction, normalcy and psychological comfort to children (Ghosh et al., 2020). With school closures, longer uncensored smart-phone and online time for children can put them at risk of meeting a perpetrator and being abused and exploited online. This is because many perpetrators are taking advantage of the suppressed cyber-security and there is less parental vigilance and

monitoring as parents try to manage other COVID-19 related stressors (Ghosh et al., 2020). In addition to this, Chopra (2020), Traurims et al. (2020) and Wagner and Hoang (2020) report an increased supply of potential trafficking criminals and demand for victims (especially children) based on the sudden demand for labour now and post pandemic due to specific production upsurges. According to Giammarinaro (2020) and OSCE et al. (2020), there is an increased demand for child pornographic material from bored perpetrators.

School is also a place where many children's nutritional needs are met; thus school closures will intensify food insecurity and raise the risk of exploitation, child marriages and child-labour-related activities. According to research by UNICEF and ILO (2020), child labour is linked with economic crisis. Prolonged or short irregular shutdowns and lack of adequate home-schooling resources interferes with a child's right to education. Without good-quality education, children's interest might diminish and place them at risk of dropping out. Furthermore, child abuse might increase in the home and out of boredom children might indulge in risky behaviours, thus all (in)directly giving rise to inequalities. Furthermore, children are rarely covered by social protection and thus a loss of caregiver livelihoods due to COVID-19 is bound to have an extended impact on them (Dafuleya, 2020)–with some parents deliberately allowing their children to be exploited in order to make ends meet (OSCE et al., 2020). Furthermore, safety nets, in the form of child protection practitioners, who protect children and youth, might not be easily available or accessible due to COVID-19 (Cohen and Bosk, 2020).

ii) Trafficking vulnerabilities

In a trafficking situation, victims of trafficking experience a range of human rights violations. This has been reported on in numerous studies (Botha and Warria, 2020; Odera and Malinowski, 2011;

Oketch, Morreau and Benson, 2011; van der Watt, 2020; Warria, 2016, 2020; Warria and Chikadzi, 2018). From an ecological perspective, these violations have consequences for the individual, their family, community and country as a whole. Trafficking also impacts individuals emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, economically and academically or occupationally, depending on their age, type of exploitation among other factors. Victims are forced to work in unregulated and unsafe environments and live in overcrowded areas, and their health and nutritional needs are often not adequately met. They are given alcohol and drugs and emotionally blackmailed in order to comply. They often do not have access to health and social care owing to restrictions placed by traffickers, the victims' lack of knowledge and of identity documents, and fear of repercussions by the police and immigration officials.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, victims of trafficking are at a greater risk of COVID-19 infection due to their pre-existing healthcare needs and their unhygienic working and living environments. According to Armitage and Nellums (2020: n.d), health systems worldwide have been restructured to prioritise COVID-19, thus "significantly reducing the availability of services, and inequitably transferring them online. This further prevents timely or confidential access to healthcare, increasing morbidity and mortality due to untreated acute and long-term conditions including communicable diseases, physical injuries, mental illness, substance misuse, and suicide attempts."

According to Wagner and Hoang (2020: 11), domestic workers often lack sick-leave provisions, unemployment insurance and other work-related benefits in their work contracts. Furthermore, women trafficked as domestic workers have minimal access to legal protection during COVID-19. They are mainly bound to their employers, who often are the holders of their travel and identity documents and work permits. Furthermore, during this

time, these domestic workers find themselves having to work more and for longer hours as entire families are forced to stay or work from home during lockdown. In certain situations, they might have added responsibilities of working during rest days, looking after family members who are COVID-19 positive and without proper protective clothing or access to adequate healthcare (HRW, 2020). In situations where victims of domestic servitude or labour are given a portion of their money earned, this arrangement might change depending on the profits or losses made by the exploiter. For example, individuals exploited as domestic workers could see delays in pay or not be paid at all. In situations where the victim is abused periodically, the abuse may increase with more numbers of family members being at home and for increased amounts of time.

Lack of financial resources, difficulties reaching vulnerable groups, suspension or postponed prevention and awareness activities have been mentioned as consequences of COVID-19. All these challenges hamper prevention, prosecution and protection initiatives to combat trafficking (OSCE et al., 2020).Moreover, governments worldwide are imposing strict physical and social distancing policies, while policing and other efforts to identify victims are undermined (Armitage and Nellums, 2020). This also means that COVID-19-related crime is getting much more attention than other forms of crime (Marx, 2020; OCSE et al., 2020). Furthermore, it also implies that the typical frontline practitioners and community persons who would have been instrumental in identifying victims are limited in their actions and in their contact with at-risk groups, especially during lockdown periods. The responsibility to identify victims of trafficking is implied in all legal instruments that emphasise victim protection and support. Victims remain invisible when they are not identified. Guideline 2 in the Recommended Principles and Guidelines document states that "failure to identify a trafficked person correctly is likely to result in a further denial of

that person's rights.” Incorrect identification also affects victims' ability to access the rights that they are entitled to. Furthermore, “failure to quickly and accurately identify victims of trafficking renders any rights granted to such persons illusory.”

A study by OCSE et al. (2020) reports that victims of trafficking are expected to continue making payments towards their growing debts (in relation to food, accommodation, etc.)to traffickers as part of their debt bondage. This growing debt is despite the impact of the pandemic on their exploitative activities. In instances where the family members of the victim are known, the traffickers have in the past hounded them for more cash. Service providers should also be aware of increase in victims seeking assistance, such as the case in Italy where victims sought help after they were abandoned by traffickers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

iii) Post-trafficking vulnerabilities

The needs of victims of trafficking vary after they have been rescued. This depends on whether they choose to be returned home, or are deported or accommodated in a shelter for a certain period of time and need assistance with the investigation into their circumstances and in the criminal proceedings against the alleged trafficker. What is clear, however, is that their rights and needs must be urgently prioritised – even in time of COVID-19. Post-identification, victims require reasonable protection from harm as part of the human rights approach. This basically entails the victim being moved from the place of exploitation to a place of safety, and having their medical needs attended to and further risks (with regard to intimidation or retaliation) assessed.

It is predicted that there will be a sharp rise in migration attempts linked to travel restrictions being lifted and made worse by poverty and struggling economies (BBC, 2020). Wanger and Hoang (2020) report similar findings indicating an increase in illegal and irregular migration, which then heightens trafficking

risks. In the absence of adequate facilities and services at shelters, victims have often implied that their lives as victims of trafficking were somewhat better (Warria, 2020). This, coupled with struggling economies, re-directed donor funds and unrestricted travel, could be push factors for victim re-entry into exploitative situations. A human rights approach requires that the provision of care and support is informed and not coercive. In the case of a victim deciding to go back to a trafficking situation, they should get information on the pros and cons so that they can make an informed decision. Thus, victims can refuse care and support and they should not be forced to accept or receive assistance.

Victims of trafficking who are in a country illegally are vulnerable due to their status. Various studies indicate that restrictive migration measures are adopted by countries to push people out or segregate them. These restrictions, including a ban on asylum procedures, have consequences for victims of trafficking, as a prolonged situation of irregularity exacerbates the risk of re-trafficking and/or further exploitation (Warria, 2016), as they are unable to access work opportunities or risk being excluded from participating meaningfully in the trafficker's prosecution case (UNHR, 2014). Lack of status regularisation also means that victims could be detained in immigration facilities and face deportation. Further forced returns to countries of origin are in themselves a violation of the presumed victims' rights, and such an action might put the victims at risk of infection, especially if a proper risk assessment has not been carried out jointly with the victim and/or if where they are being taken back to has high cases of COVID-19 or lacks access to healthcare.

Non-governmental organisations providing essential services to victims of trafficking indicate loss of grants and donations due to donors switching funding priorities (Wagner and Hoang, 2020). This reduced financial support hinders service provision to victims, especially as some of these are organisations that were

receiving minimal or no support from government prior to the pandemic (US TIP Report, 2019, 2020). Lack of funding means disruption in victim assistance and support services in that organisations scale down on the number of victims they can take in, assist and protect, or it might even mean closing and not re-opening. Without access to shelters, counselling will not take place and victims are at risk of homelessness, or re-trafficking and re-victimisation. This negates victims' right to safe accommodation where most if not all their needs will be met (UNHR, 2014).The net result is an increase in the number of vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking.

Infections (of victims and/or staff) within shelters might also mean closure for fogging, thus victims facing the risks identified previously. Lack of access to shelters means all other care and protection measures cannot be facilitated. In a report by Giammarinaro (2020: n.d.), lack of funding further affects "search and rescue operations, including the capacity of local NGOs to early identify and support victims and potential victims of trafficking in areas of large migratory influx…" In the cases of victims who are in the asylum process, court or immigration procedures being on hold means a lack of recognition and prolonged detention.

The disruption in the criminal justice system is also felt in this phase. This is evident in delayed and reduced police operations and investigations of human trafficking cases and cases being put on hold (Wagner and Hoang, 2020). This further results in increased exploitation and trafficking, adjusted modus operandi aligned to different COVID-19 lockdown levels or even alternatives in the purposes of exploitation. According to a recent OSCE et al. (2020) study, apart from economic insecurity, victims of trafficking fear traffickers who have been released early to limit the rate of COVID-19 infections in correctional facilities.

Implications and recommendations for rights-based protective actions

Mobility restrictions and resource diversion during COVID-19 constrain the work that psychosocial practitioners provide. Child protection services must be considered part of essential services and be fully funded and resourced. Studies on child protection during terrorist attacks (Warria, 2016) can also offer lessons on managing children's psychosocial wellbeing during health pandemics as well.Raising awareness aboutthe vulnerability of children to online sexual exploitation and abuse is recommended, especially for parents, children and in schools (Chopra, 2020, Giammarinaro, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). On the other hand, online support is an innovative way of ensuring that children are still connected to core protective services with established professional safety nets. And, while police might not be able to carry out their normal operations, they could assist this process by strengthening their presence online – as could the criminal justice system. Furthermore, hotlines could be publicised or social media and other mechanisms initiated where the more traditional methods of monitoring and reporting are not possible.

Human rights are discursive – i.e., “rights are constructed through human interaction and through ongoing dialogue about what should constitute a common or shared humanity.” Thus, because human rights are not static and will vary depending on context, varied voices and narratives should be heard and different issues given priority. Rights should be debated, redefined and always be open to challenge. A process of dialogue, discussion and exchange should seek to articulate such universal values even in times of a pandemic. Thus, changes in thinking, debates and responses should ensure that COVID-19 interventions and recovery plans also include those from vulnerable populations. This also means that protection and assistance is extended to trafficking victims and migrants too. As reiterated by Ife (2008: 26), “localisation is

of itself neither beneficial nor harmful and can promote or violate human rights." It is thus recommended that access to healthcare as a containment response is extended and granted to everyone – including children (Cohen and Bosk, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). Social protection and security benefits should be extended to everyone (Giammarinaro, 2020).

Countries should acknowledge the contribution of migrant workers who support the economies of countries of resettlement even in times of COVID-19 (Dalexis and Cenat, 2020; Giammarinaro, 2020; Peters, 2020; Trautrims et al., 2020), but they should not condone trafficking because of the benefits derived. In the absence of a global definition on migration health, disease spread can be minimised by the training of border officials in migration health (Igoye, 2020). Access to healthcare facilities and screening can lead to better care and management of existing illnesses. However, it should be noted that systemic and compulsory screening can be taxing on migrants and preclude entry into a particular country, negatively impact health and encourage discrimination and stigma and place an increased financial burden on national health system and social services. Furthermore, states should ensure adequate health protection, occupational health and safety measures and strengthen legal and social protection pathways for at-risk migrants and victims of trafficking who are already in the country.

Labour inspections and special crime policing should not be suspended; in fact, members should be trained to identify trafficking during pandemics and how it might manifest itself quite differently. In situations where victims are rescued and identified, access to justice is pertinent and this should still be prioritised. Countries should not detain, charge or prosecute victims for irregular work or irregular residence permits or involvement in criminal activities during this time, as this could well be a tactic of traffickers.

Worsnop (2019) highlights the “importance of integrating trafficking prevention into outbreak response” and calls for “a research agenda more fully examining the connection between trafficking and outbreaks.” For example, the development of culture-sensitive education materials should leverage technology to introduce campaigns that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to increase reach (Molobe et al., 2020). In relation to trafficking victims and other marginalised ethnic groups, this calls for understanding their cultural beliefs and values for prevention and health promotion aligned to COVID-19. Root cause analysis is thus required to tackle traffickers' exploitation of individuals in impoverished communities who are socio-economically and politically disempowered and systemically discriminated against. There is a need to conduct assessments that are context-specific and age- and gender-sensitive in order to identify recent, expanded risks in communities. These assessments can subsequently be used to develop risk-extenuation and protective measures.

Countries should provide immediate support for affected populations such as low interest rates, easy ways to send money across borders with no charges levied and other ways that would prevent migrants from seeking irregular or exploitative employment. This study supports the recommendations of UNICEF and ILO (2020) to create decent jobs for adults, which then has a positive protective ripple effect on children. Continued access to regularisation of status in a country as aligned to international human rights obligations could contribute towards recruitment into a decent form of employment. These efforts to regularise newly identified victims of trafficking should not place them in even more vulnerable situations, such as in crowded facilities.

According to Shandro et al. (2016), victims of trafficking have

been reported to occasionally receive medical attention for the illnesses, injuries and psychological consequences of abuse and exploitation, and emergency medical practitioners are in a unique position to recognise victims and intervene. The need for this is, if anything, heightened during a pandemic. However, this is feasible only if the restrictions linked to immigration status are eliminated, which would decrease the vulnerability and challenges faced by victims of trafficking and other vulnerable populations in accessing healthcare (Molobe et al., 2020). WHO (2020b) recommends that universal health coverage is made accessible and without hurdles. Furthermore, emergency health insurance coverage should be granted to non-citizens and undocumented persons as well such as in the UK – although other barriers exist (Wood and Devakumar, 2020).There is need for extending aid to organisations supporting victims in order to avoid protection gaps and risks of re-victimisation. For example, adequate alternative accommodation should be made available if the shelter has to close temporarily or completely, NGOs should be given economic relief packages for essential services for victims, and victims' asylum application/sshould be considered urgent and not put on hold.

Cross-border protection measures may be counter-productive especially when the individuals experiences are given less attention leading to increased socio-economic strain and poor health outcomes (Lee et al., 2020). From a research and practice perspective, studying the impact of COVID-19 across the different stages is crucial, and full explanations should be given to at-risk and presumed trafficking patients and clients despite the uncertainties. This information is required to facilitate evidence-based, real-time decisions by both practitioners and service users. Furthermore, smugglers and traffickers are known to adapt fast to changes related to closures, restrictions and regulations. With demands arising from migrants needing to be on the move for better possibilities, smugglers and traffickers are quick to adapt,

respond and fulfil this demand (Sanchez and Achilli, 2020). This calls for our interventions to be rights-based, fast and forward-thinking as well, rather than creating unnecessary risks and endangering migrants' wellbeing.

Conclusion

COVID-19poses serious questions and is testing individuals, families, communities and organisations rendering services to these populations. This paper showed that COVID-19 is amplifying the already existing inequalities and risks. It is shaping the way trafficking is perpetrated and policed, and how services are delivered. The challenge posed by COVID-19 is that a rights-based uniform response is required for all people in a country, as the coronavirus does not discriminate and infect certain populations only. The uniform rights-based response calls for inclusivity, upholding dignity and ensuring the safety of at-risk populations and victims of trafficking. Thus, attending to the psychosocial, economic and healthcare needs of all individuals in a country benefits all – including the vulnerable. Policies and practices must be rights-centred and tap into the root cause analysis approach for sustainability measures. The pandemic situation may look bleak, but it also enables us as practitioners to identify opportunities and values and embrace resilience amidst the disruptions and chaos. It also offers governments the opportunity to make communities more fair, just and inclusive. This is what will form socially just, equitable, sustainable and lasting solutions.

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