

2020 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief: Modern Slavery and human trafficking Draft (September 9, 2020)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the urgent need for G20 leaders to combat modern slavery on the local, national, and international levels. Now more than ever, countries need to develop, expand, and enforce comprehensive anti-trafficking measures, assist and protect victims. At the same time they must address the underlying economic and social causes of human trafficking. Such measures should be integral elements of the 2020 G20 Presidency Agenda that calls on its G20 members to “promote the equality of opportunities, especially for underserved groups,” including “encouraging equality jobs and social protection.”ⁱ

Of the estimated over 40 million people subjected to modern slavery (in every world region), 25 million are victims of forced labor and 15 million of forced marriage. Global demand for cheap goods and commercial sex fuels illegal trafficking rings, impeding economic growth for law-abiding businesses and curtailing legitimate employment opportunities for millions of people. Poverty, armed conflict, poor access to education and legal employment, and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis all heighten the risks that traffickers will target the vulnerable. Strong multilateral commitments promise action to address the issue, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, which calls for the eradication of modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030. Numerous challenges, however, remain to dismantle the economic, political, and social structures that allow modern slavery to flourish.

Religious leaders and faith organizations of different kinds are among the most prominent voices today speaking out against slavery and trafficking. With their ability to speak to the moral stakes of the issue and to collaborate across political, cultural, and geographic lines faith actors are well-positioned to shape societal attitudes toward trafficking, contribute to prevention efforts, and provide psychosocial, financial, and legal assistance to victims. By exchanging resources and expertise with faith actors, G20 countries can strengthen national and international responses to modern slavery.

This policy brief highlights the main issues surrounding modern slavery and human trafficking in the world today, with a focus on faith engagement on these issues. It draws on research from print and online sources from governmental, non-profit, and private sectors; most come from English language sources. Recommendations for G20 leaders as they engage during the 2020 G20 Summit in Saudi Arabia point to specific areas for action.

Many interlocking challenges

*With over 40 million people subjected to forced labor and/or forced marriage in the world today, modern slavery poses one of the largest and most urgent contemporary human rights issues. ILO statistics (2016) indicate that there are an average of 5.4 victims in every 1,000 people. This number more than doubles when considered over a five-year timeframe: between 2012 and 2017, 89 million people were subjected to either forced labor or forced marriage.*ⁱⁱ

Of the 40 million victims of modern slavery in 2016, 24.9 million were subjected to forced labor, defined by the ILO as work performed involuntarily and under the threat of a penalty; among these, nearly 4 million adults and 1 million children were working in the commercial sex industry.ⁱⁱⁱ Victims may be trafficked domestically or internationally by gangs and organized criminal networks, corporations, small business owners, labor brokers, employers of domestic servants, and victims' own families.^{iv} Some instances of forced labor begin as a voluntary arrangement but devolve into debt bondage, whereby workers are coerced into providing labor in order to pay off the cost of trafficking them. Debt bondage affects half of all victims of forced labor.^v

Modern slavery is a global phenomenon, with Africa, Asia, and the Middle East areas of particular concern. Gaps in data collection are significant, notably in the Middle East and the Americas, but statistics suggest that modern slavery is most prevalent in Africa, with 7.6 victims per 1,000 people, and in Asia and the Pacific, with 6.1 victims per thousand. Forced labor is most widespread in Asia and the Pacific (4 victims per 1,000 people) and forced marriage in Africa (4.8 victims per 1,000 people). More than 70% of victims of commercial sexual exploitation were living in Asia or the Pacific.^{vi} However, no region of the world is exempt from the reach of modern slavery, and traffickers continue to operate clandestinely in many places, where they benefit from a lack of awareness of the issue among everyday citizens.

A majority of victims are women and girls. ILO estimates that women and girls account for 71% of all victims of modern slavery, 99% of those who are in the commercial sex industry, 58% in other sectors of forced labor, and 84% of those subjected to forced marriage. Children are also among the most vulnerable targets of traffickers, comprising a quarter of all victims of modern slavery, more than a third of victims of forced marriage, and a fifth of victims of commercial sexual exploitation.^{vii}

Refugees and migrants are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. Whether fleeing conflict and persecution in countries such as Myanmar and Venezuela, or searching for new economic opportunities in the United States or European Union, the world's nearly 80 million forcibly displaced people are the frequent targets of traffickers who promise safe passage and employment prospects in order to force victims into unpaid, exploitative labor. Without legal residence status in their host countries, many migrants choose not to seek help from governments or law enforcement for fear of arrest.^{viii} In the Gulf States, where residence status is conditional upon the sponsorship of an employer, many documented migrants do not report abuses to state authorities for fear of deportation.^{ix}

The growing global demand for cheap goods and commercial sex fuels modern slavery, while the promise of high profits and low risk of prosecution and punishment emboldens traffickers to operate with impunity. Slavery is more lucrative today than at any other time in history, generating US\$150 billion annually.^x Sex trafficking accounts for half of all profits of human trafficking, with the average victim generating US\$36,000 a year.^{xi} Extreme poverty, violent conflict, and lack of access to education and legitimate employment make victims easy targets of traffickers and fuel rates of forced marriage.^{xii}

Modern slavery impedes global economic growth and individual economic opportunity. Forced labor not only reduces opportunities for legal employment, but it creates unfair competition for law-abiding businesses whose profit margins are considerably lower than those of enterprises relying on forced labor.^{xiii} Moreover, victims of modern slavery typically cannot send remittances back home, a major hindrance to economic growth in nations in poorer nations.^{xiv} Those who escape their conditions may face lifelong stigma and marginalization which, along with a lack of legal work history, can reduce their employment prospects, fueling poverty and hampering economic growth.

Heightened by the COVID-19 crises

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the plight of victims of modern slavery and heightened the risk of trafficking among vulnerable populations. Regulations intended to reduce the spread of the virus have had an adverse impact on victims of modern slavery. Travel restrictions have prevented people from returning home and have led migrants and refugees to take on even riskier methods of travel.^{xv} Lockdown and physical distancing measures have likewise heightened the risks of trafficking, exploitation, and abuse as victims are trapped in close quarters with perpetrators.^{xvi} Many trafficked people live in overcrowded, unsanitary accommodations in which they face a heightened risk of contracting and transmitting the virus.^{xvii} Law enforcement officials tasked with upholding public health measures have at times leveraged punitive measures against victims of modern slavery, especially sex workers, through arrest, deportation, and compulsory health examinations.^{xviii}

As governments divert law enforcement resources to enforcing lockdown measures and civil society organizations scale back their services in response to budget cuts, victims of modern slavery face greater obstacles to escape their circumstances, seek redress, and cope with the long-lasting trauma of their past experiences. NGOs have had to cut back their rescue missions, emergency shelters, in-person counselling services, legal assistance services, and other support structures for victims, with investigations and legal proceedings on hold in many places.^{xix}

The lockdown has put children in particular at a higher risk of forced labor, early marriage, and online sexual exploitation.^{xx} As millions of children are forced to stay home from school due to lockdown measures, they are increasingly vulnerable to online sexual predators at a time when demand for child pornography has increased by up to 30% in some EU countries due to the lockdown.^{xxi} More children are forced to beg in the streets for food and money, heightening their risk of exploitation.^{xxii}

The economic toll of the COVID-19 crisis on the global economy has also affected millions of forced laborers adversely, who were already working under exploitative circumstances. As businesses face pressures to increase their production in order to compete, their workers face a heightened risk of exploitation.^{xxiii} This is especially true in industries that produce healthcare products such as masks and hospital gear, where instances of forced labor had been documented well before the outbreak.^{xxiv} The slowdown of production in some industries has meant that forced laborers have been unable to work to repay “debts” to their traffickers.^{xxv} Millions of workers have been laid off and forced to search for alternate sources of employment, exposing many to the risk of human trafficking. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to sex

trafficking.^{xxvi} As COVID-related restrictions ease, there is likely to be an increase in the global occurrence of forced labor due to renewed demand for workers and even greater economic vulnerability among the world's poorest populations.^{xxvii}

The bottom line

Despite commitments by national governments and intergovernmental agencies to combat modern slavery and human trafficking, effective anti-slavery efforts can be seen as quite limited. The U.S. Department of State estimates that there were a mere 11,841 prosecutions and 9,548 convictions globally for trafficking-related crimes in 2019.^{xxviii} International treaties face major implementation challenges, and better coordination and cooperation among state governments and law enforcement agencies are urgently needed to prosecute perpetrators who operate internationally. Many countries still lack anti-trafficking laws or the means to enforce existing laws effectively.^{xxix} In some cases, public officials are themselves involved in the trafficking process or may refuse to intervene because of the potential political cost; furthermore, victims may be unwilling to cooperate with the criminal justice system for fear of retribution by their traffickers.^{xxx} Even in those countries that actively enforce anti-trafficking measures, these measures may address only a small part of the problem; some EU governments have focused primarily on dismantling criminal networks and prosecuting traffickers, with far fewer resources going toward identifying and assisting victims.^{xxxi}

The Global Response Thus Far

Numerous international protocols recognize the gravity of modern slavery, the close connections between trafficking and other human rights abuses, and the need for immediate, comprehensive action on this issue. Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for the eradication of forced labor, modern slavery, and human trafficking, with an end to all forms of child labor by 2025.^{xxxii} The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2000; its chief aims are to prevent trafficking, protect and support victims, and promote cooperation among member states to form a comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy. Implementation of the Protocol in member states remains a major challenge, however.^{xxxiii} Other UN treaties closely tied to the issue of trafficking include the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2000), the Protocol against Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000), and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016). The International Labour Organization adopted conventions against forced labor in 1930 and 1957, and against child labor in 1999.

Intergovernmental responses to modern slavery address numerous facets of the issue, with a focus on strengthening legal mechanisms, enforcing existing laws against trafficking, and providing assistance to victims. The European Commission's Anti-Trafficking Coordinator works to align policies and promote collaboration on the issue of trafficking across EU member states and with non-EU parties.^{xxxiv} The Coordinator has worked with member states to push for tougher legal measures against human trafficking, including the criminalization of individuals who knowingly use the services of a victim of human trafficking. The UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT) works with governments, academic institutions, civil

society, and the private sector to combat human trafficking transnationally, while the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children directly supports victims of trafficking through humanitarian, legal, and financial aid.^{xxxv} In 2016, the ILO and Ford Foundation launched Alliance 8.7, a partnership of over 200 governments, international and regional organizations, workers' and employers' groups, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and other stakeholders committed to strengthening coordination and collaboration to achieve SDG Target 8.7 against slavery and trafficking.^{xxxvi} Despite their considerable contributions, these and other efforts largely lack enforcement power, relying on the voluntary cooperation of member organizations and governments. Local civil society organizations in some countries have raised concerns that policymakers lack the political will to enforce anti-trafficking legislation and introduce new laws, representing a major obstacle to effective change.^{xxxvii}

Since the 2000s, several public-private partnerships and private funds have taken on the fight against modern slavery. Several groups have pioneered new approaches to the issue, such as by relying on modern technology to improve reporting mechanisms and focusing directly on the economic causes of trafficking. The Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), a private-public partnership established in 2016, works to end modern slavery by making it economically unprofitable; the Fund leads interventions to incentivize ethical business practices that do not rely on forced labor, raises awareness of the economic cost of modern slavery and the benefits of eliminating it, and helps victims find alternative forms of employment.^{xxxviii} Walk Free, an initiative of the Australia-based Minderoo Foundation, publishes the Global Slavery Index, which estimates prevalence of modern slavery around the world, highlights regions and sectors that are particularly affected, and profiles government responses in individual countries.^{xxxix} The Freedom Fund, a private donor fund established in 2013, finances local organizations that work to eradicate slavery in heavily affected sectors and countries.^{xl} Stop the Traffik, a UK-based organization founded in 2006, works with governments, law enforcement, civil society groups, and businesses to run social media campaigns that raise awareness of human trafficking; its STOP APP, released in 2016, enables users to report incidents of human trafficking they have experienced or witnessed. In 2018, Stop the Traffik launched the Traffik Analysis Hub, which combines data sets from governments, law enforcement, NGOs, and private sector groups in order to facilitate the exchange of information to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts.^{xli} The U.S.-based Polaris Project operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, which contributes data to the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, a joint effort of Polaris, the International Organization for Migration, and several other groups.

Religious Responses

Faith actors play vital roles in preventing modern slavery by shaping cultural attitudes toward the issue at different levels and tailoring their response to the local context. With their long tradition of providing education, healthcare, and social services, particularly to migrants, women, and other vulnerable populations, religious institutions help strengthen community structures that should serve as bulwarks against modern slavery. At the same time, faith leaders are often a trusted resource for victims of trafficking, who commonly confide in them as a first step in seeking help. Religious groups' intimate acquaintance with the root causes of trafficking within many local communities make them valuable stakeholders in policy discussions, while their

global networks put them in a strategic position to extend anti-trafficking borders across borders and cultures.^{xliii} Their moral authority and close relationships with community members enable them to shape cultural attitudes to condemn slavery and trafficking. In short, religious communities can be powerful advocates and natural allies in integrated, multisector approaches.

Over the past several decades, modern slavery has become an issue of increasing priority in religious communities, with prominent faith leaders actively denouncing trafficking, convening international gatherings and task forces on the issue, and coordinating anti-slavery efforts within their religious congregations. Pope Francis has made the issue of modern slavery central to his Pontificate, decrying trafficking as “a scourge that wounds the dignity of our weakest brothers and sisters.”^{xliiii} In December 2014, he hosted representatives from the Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian faiths at a meeting that culminated in the signing of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery.^{xliiv} Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, have likewise focused on modern slavery as a major human rights issue for the Orthodox and Anglican Churches, launching the Task Force on Modern Slavery at an ecumenical Forum in February 2017, which has since become an annual event.^{xliv} Numerous other religious groups have taken a strong stance against human trafficking, including the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Salvation Army.^{xlvi}

Numerous local, national, and international faith-inspired groups are dedicated to combatting the root causes of human trafficking, assisting victims, and raising awareness about the issue. International anti-trafficking networks include COATNET, which coordinates Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox anti-trafficking efforts in nearly 40 countries; the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST), an alliance of Christian organizations, which counts such churches as the Salvation Army among its members; and Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE), with members in over 31 European countries.^{xlvii} Talitha Kum, an organization of Catholic women religious, works to address the systemic causes of trafficking, protect vulnerable populations, and rehabilitate and reintegrate survivors in more than 90 countries.^{xlviii} These international networks are complemented by local and national efforts, including Chab Dai in Cambodia, the Clewer Initiative in the United Kingdom, and T’ruah in the United States.^{xlix} In addition, large transnational faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) such as Caritas, HIAS, Islamic Relief, Lutheran World Federation, and World Vision have anti-trafficking and victim assistance initiatives through their local branch offices, particularly in poorer nations.¹

Secular-religious partnerships bring religious voices into policy discussions and enable the exchange of resources and expertise among faith groups, civil society groups, governments, and private companies. The Santa Marta Group, established in 2014 by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, brings together Catholic leaders, law enforcement, and international organizations from over 35 countries to share best practices and develop a victim-centered approach to anti-trafficking efforts.^{li} Relationships fostered through initiatives such as these have led to on-the-ground collaboration between law enforcement officials and religious figures; in England, religious sisters have accompanied police officers on raids on brothels in order to win the trust of sex trafficking victims.^{lii} FIOs such as the International Justice Mission (IJM) work with governments to strengthen anti-trafficking legislation and improve enforcement

of existing laws. The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) addresses root causes of trafficking by working with companies to ensure that supply chains do not rely on forced labor.^{liii}

Looking Ahead: Recommendations

Effective responses to modern slavery must take into account the economic, social, cultural, and legal forces that cause and perpetuate the problem, while also addressing the specific regional, national, and local contexts in which trafficking and exploitation occur. Prosecution of traffickers is only one aspect of a comprehensive response, which also need to confront the underlying economic and social contexts in which modern slavery flourishes. The following proposals focus on feasible actions to address the most urgent dimensions of what should be seen as a global crisis.

- 1) *Give deliberate priority to victims of modern slavery in anti-trafficking efforts.* A comprehensive approach to modern slavery requires that victims' human rights be placed in the foreground of prevention and prosecution efforts. G20 countries should commit themselves explicitly to measures establishing, improving, and publicizing reporting mechanisms such as confidential hotlines, particularly in known target areas for recruiters. Training for law enforcement, public employees, and humanitarian aid workers on effective assistance to victims of modern slavery is feasible and important. G20 leaders should consider ongoing cooperative mechanisms involving engaged groups (national law enforcement agencies, intergovernmental agencies, NGOs, and international FIOs) to ensure continued action.
- 2) *Reinforce actions to eradicate modern slavery by focusing explicitly on global and national supply chains.* Forced labor is an all-too-common feature of global supply chains. G20 governments should review their public procurement processes so as to ensure, proactively, that these do not rely on forced labor. G20 leaders should advocate for and support the establishment of an independent, international agency that monitors supply chains and educates governments, businesses, and citizens on the issue. With par religious authorities, private sector, employers' and workers' organizations, and relevant civil society organizations as partners, governments should commit themselves publicly to improve accountability mechanisms that monitor supply chains and educate citizens to recognize and intervene in cases of forced labor.
- 3) *Bolster prevention efforts by addressing economic conditions, supporting vulnerable populations, and raising awareness of the issue.* As part of their COVID-19 response, G20 countries should commit themselves to support businesses that rely on legal and ethical labor in order to prevent shifts toward informal and/or forced labor, and develop appropriate mechanisms to ensure that such support materializes. Religious actors should be consulted and engaged in developing and implementing appropriate accountability mechanisms. National policies that extend rights to laborers in the informal economy can form part of strategies to curtail exploitation of workers. Awareness campaigns should aim to ensure that potential victims and bystanders can better recognize the causes and signs of exploitation.

Initiatives addressed to at-risk populations can serve as an important bulwark against trafficking.

- 4) *Strengthen anti-trafficking enforcement and collaborative efforts, especially for trafficking occurring on the internet.* Deliberate action, taken in collaboration with civil society groups, including religious actors, is needed to contain the worrying online spread of child pornography and to prosecute perpetrators. G20 leaders should call upon national governments to allocate funds to identify and prosecute traffickers and to introduce new laws that address the changing landscape of trafficking on the internet.
- 5) *Include victims of modern slavery in coronavirus response and recovery plans.* With heightened risks to vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 crisis, representatives need to be present in policy deliberations that aim to mitigate and recover from the crisis. All residents of G20 countries, regardless of legal status, should be assured proper access to healthcare. Undocumented individuals who seek treatment should not be penalized and/or deported. Regulatory mechanisms need to address any potential upsurge of forced labor following the pandemic. Pertinent labor issues should be integrated in pandemic preparedness plans both by individual governments and by the G20 overall.
- 6) *Strengthen data collection mechanisms.* A stronger statistical base is needed to grasp the scale of modern slavery on the local, regional, and global level, as well as the impact of anti-slavery initiatives. Databases such as the UN’s Human Trafficking Knowledge Portal, the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, and the Walk Free Foundation’s Global Slavery Index are critical to shaping anti-trafficking policy, especially with regards to vulnerable groups such as women, children, and migrants and refugees. G20 leaders should allocate funds for data collection in their countries and, if they have not done so already, establish a government office responsible for recording and analyzing this data. In addition, government and civil society actors can support regional and international databases by assisting in data collection efforts.
- 7) *Establish clear continuing mechanisms with the G20 Interfaith Association to pursue action plans involving religious leaders and faith-linked initiatives towards comprehensive responses to trafficking.* Building proactively on the experience and assets of faith actors offers significant promise to strengthen modern slavery strategies as they offer and specific means that governments and other civil society actors lack. The institutional capacity of large religious bodies allows for collaboration across borders and access to critical areas. Religious groups’ close work with at-risk populations such as refugees and migrants positions them well to engage with policymakers. First steps would include sharing resources and expertise, and assuring adequate funding for priority activities.

Reviewed by: Sister Denise Coghlan, Kevin Hyland, Mark Lagon, Juan Navarro Floria, Cole Durham, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Katherine Marshall. Draft: Luisa Banchoff

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