

Human

Trafficking

Foundation

Human Trafficking Foundation Online Forum: Ongoing and Future Challenges Faced by Survivors due to Covid-19

18th March 2021, 2pm – 4pm via Zoom

Chaired by Tamara Barnett, Director of Operations HTF and Vicky Brotherton, Rights Lab

Co-ordinated by Jasmine Selby HTF

The recording of the meeting can be viewed [here](#)

Introductions by Tamara Barnett, Human Trafficking Foundation (HTF)

At the start of the pandemic in 2020, HTF set up a series of online forums for colleagues to share information about the challenges they were facing and how they were adapting. Last autumn, as expertise and understanding grew, we returned to more general forums, but today, one year later we are delighted to be pairing up with Rights Lab at Nottingham University to be discussing their research on the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery survivors.

Please refer to Survivors Alliance's guidelines that if survivors are present, please ensure that you are sensitive and respectful when responding to participants' self-disclosure, mindful of asking for details about someone's trafficking experience if it is irrelevant to the discussion at hand and use the terminology of 'survivor' to refer to people who have exited slavery, instead of using 'they/them'. Moreover, no survivor involved in the Rights Lab project should feel any way obligated to identify themselves.

Vicky Brotherton, Rights Lab University of Nottingham Research Overview

Since last summer Nottingham University's Rights Lab have been working with Survivor Alliance, FLEX and Sheffield University to access the accrued risks, impacts and mitigating responses of COVID-19 for survivors of modern slavery.

The purpose of this forum is to share findings of Rights Lab research and to hear from the audience on whether the research findings resonates with their experiences. Looking forward, we hope to see from this forum when transitioning out of the pandemic, what are the ongoing challenges that need to be addressed.

Erika Jimenez, Rights Lab University of Nottingham

There are three key strands of the project which are:

- *Surveying 102 survivors in the UK and USA*

A survey conducted with survivors which took place in December 2020, 56 of which are based in the UK (46 resided in the USA). The countries of origin of UK respondents included Nigeria (40%), Philippines (20%), UK (13%), Albania, Russia, Mongolia, Botswana, Congo, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malawi, and Mauritius. 91% of UK respondents identified as female, 6% as male, and 4% selected

the category of 'other'. The age of UK respondents ranged from 21 to 59 years, with the average age being 38 years. The survey explored three key areas:

1. How survivors have been impacted by Covid-19 since the pandemic. 73% indicated psychological health worsened since pandemic, 66% felt that relations with wider family and friends had worsened, and 65% felt that their financial status had become worse.
2. What survivors anticipated to be the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next six months. 63% felt again that their psychological health would be impacted, 59% felt their physical health would be affected and again 55% of survivors were concerned that their financial status would be impacted.
3. The survey finally asked an open-ended question of what would survivors like people in power (local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or do to address past or future issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *Rapid Evidence Review*

1st March 2020 – 31st October 2020. This rapid Evidence Review analysed 106 'grey literature sources' in the public domain i.e. NGO reports, policy briefings, blogs and government docs and notably no academic sources.

- *Web monitoring*

The monitoring of strategic communications related to Covid-19 broadcast via Twitter by anti-slavery organisations and government accounts between January and September 2020.

Key areas of risk from the findings:

Psychological Health

Found that there were issues accessing mental health services, lockdown triggering past trauma, uncertainty around immigration status source of anxiety, safeguarding issues that could have been missed and found that testifying to legal representatives could be traumatic when done remotely without in-person support.

1.08% of 479 tweets from anti-slavery organisations mentioned mental health factors, which was at odds with the survey results.

Financial Status

In the Evidence Review there were reports that partial closures of baby banks and foodbanks increased financial pressure on survivors, there was a rise in cost of essential items and many survivors were unable to afford items such as mobile credit. The Evidence Review also revealed problems accessing Universal Credit and a significant loss of employment under zero-hour contracts.

Physical health

Survivors are disproportionately at risk from contracting the virus due to overcrowded accommodation, pre-existing health conditions, an inability to isolate due to financial pressure to continue working and delays in initial health e.g. UASC, reluctance to access health care for Covid-19 due to fears of deportation and being controlled by traffickers & experience of racism in the NHS.

While Covid-19 healthcare was made available to everyone it does seem that more needs to be done to make clear that these initiatives exist. 14.7% tweets from the 64 anti-slavery organisations discussed physical health which was reflective of the survey results.

Legal documentation (including rights of domestic workers)

Within the Evidence Review there were reports that survivors faced longer delays accessing legal support and experienced a lack of privacy and childcare which proved to be a barrier to communication with legal representatives and asylum authorities.

Reports also showed that domestic workers left destitute following Home Office decision to end support following negative conclusive grounds decisions.

Domestic workers were flagged in the dataset as those at risk of exploitation and destitution under the General Workers category.

Risks to children

Although the survey only covered adults, within the Evidence Review it was identified that children were at a heightened risk due to school closures of online sexual exploitation with UK perpetrators shifting to online methods.

Concluding remarks

From the Evidence Review it seems that there have been piecemeal responses at government level of the complex issues facing survivors as a result of the pandemic. Civil society organisations seem to be leading the way in terms of responding to risks but the Evidence Review would not have captured all interventions that have been put in place.

Rights Lab Q&A

- *Lack of males responding to the survey*

Emily from Rights Lab noted that this could have been a factor connected to the demographic of Survivor Alliance's members, noted that trans members are also a minority. Minh from Survivor Alliance commented that services for men are limited compared to the service provision for women and this is demonstrative of the field, their membership is recruited through existing NGOs and word of mouth and is difficult to expand.

- *Domestic workers who were forced to continue to work throughout the pandemic inclusion in the survey*

Emily from Rights Lab noted that background information of participants was minimal in the survey around ethical guidelines. However, domestic worker themes came up a lot in the open-ended questions within the survey particularly in the UK participants.

- *The expectation for survivors to travel in person to the Home Office*

This concern wasn't highlighted within the open-ended survey questions, but this wasn't asked.

Breakout Room Chairs, Feedback from break-out rooms

This online forum is keen to hear audience's experiences, and thoughts on best practice so they can be replicated where appropriate and if necessary. The audience separated into five different groups to discuss the following topics, and this was the feedback from the groups:

1. Adult survivor health & access to support services

Within this first breakout session participants explored the difficulties survivors experienced in accessing mental health support, losing places on waiting lists. It was evident that health and wellbeing was deeply connected with financial issues including digital poverty. This group also discussed the impact of geographical location on access to services particularly in rural areas.

Concerns were raised about medical support available to survivors seeking vaccinations, and the importance of trauma informed services to address the emotional barriers with engaging with medical support and how diversity in the sector may help with engagement. There was a suggestion made for out-reach services from councils to those not able to visit their GPs.

2. Adult survivor health & access to support services

This second breakout session reflected on the research findings and agreed that access to mental health services raised as an area of concern and was exacerbated by digital poverty. Concerns were also raised about survivors struggling with childcare throughout the pandemic.

This group discussed the interventions implemented to mitigate risks: such as activity packs, food and toiletries packages, online dance therapy and found that regular texts 'checking in' were important for survivors.

Finally, housing challenges during Covid-19 were explored, noting that relocating people outside their area proving to be more difficult in the last year.

3. Legal support & immigration

This breakout group found that the Rights Lab research reflected what was happening on the ground. A big issue found were delays in processes such as immigration and NRM decisions which impacted on mental health. These were pre-existing issues which were worsened through the pandemic. There were new problems such as cases being dropped without communication, solicitors on furlough, turnover of staff, the shift to working remotely and the impact of this on courts.

Many survivors felt they couldn't trust local authorities because of fears of immigration and detention. The group also raised the issues of the lack of legal aid pre NRM and the rapidly changing guidance across the period which caused confusion, exasperated by pandemic but also due to Brexit.

4. Legal support & immigration

The second group on Legal support and Immigration talked about the problems survivors without recourse to public funds experienced, particularly parents who were trying to receive support. There was a discussion on addressing the culture of disbelief for survivors, the lack of accountability in the NRM and the problems of data sharing between asylum decision and NRM decision which means that survivors entering the system face unfair chances when questioned about immigration.

During this time service providers and survivors found it hard to complain, without a formal complaints system. Complaints surrounding abuses in housing and in subcontractors, which were under pressure under Covid-19, were not followed up.

5. Risks for children

This group discussed how the exploitation of children had shifted due to the pandemic and it was no longer in the places that service providers had been looking. Participants evaluated the shift from in-person to remote support, some reflected that remote support had enabled some young people to reach out more privately feeling safer to do so from their own homes. Service providers discussed the interventions they put in place to break down communication barriers through art workshops, sport, activity packs and music workshops delivered over zoom which had been effective.

Exploring the ongoing risks to children, the group raised concerns of children groomed online during the pandemic who may be at risk of meeting perpetrators, the mental health legacy of the pandemic, the backlog of court processes as referrals have been halted and the link between those experiencing online exploitation and future trafficking risks. The group concluded that an all level response was needed in partnerships between the Government, local councils and NGOs.