

# The impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking in Sudan

## Research Summary

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May 2021



Research by



**WagingPeace**

This is a Research Summary of *The impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking in Sudan: A case study of transition*, a research collaboration between the Rights Lab, Global Partners Governance, Royal United Services Institute, and Waging Peace. The project was funded by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC) through the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The full report can be accessed on the Right Lab website at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources)

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC. This project was funded through an open call for proposals to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery.

## Background

This research investigated the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on human trafficking and modern slavery in Sudan—a country of ongoing political transition and a critical source, destination, and transit country for people experiencing or at risk of modern slavery. Due to the unfolding nature of the pandemic, the impacts on human trafficking and modern slavery in transitional and post-conflict contexts like Sudan remain under-explored. These contexts are critical for interrogation, not only because of high levels of existing risk and vulnerability, but also because transition provides an opportunity to embed robust evidence-based anti-slavery in new structures of governance.

As of February 2021, Sudan had reported 27,443 cases of Covid-19 and a total death count of 1,830 from the virus. Limitations on access to testing equipment led to limited testing and as a result a positivity rate of nearly 55%. Stark geographic differences in fatality rates were evidenced. In Khartoum the fatality rate was 3.8% while in Northern Darfur 31.7%. In response to the pandemic, the Government of Sudan implemented strict lockdown measures in March 2020. Most restrictions had been lifted as of January 2021, although schools remained closed for fourteen months, not reopening until May 2021, and many healthcare centres were still shuttered at the time of writing. Sudan received support to mitigate the crisis from several international partners, including Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt in addition to the World Bank and World Food Program.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

This study combined systematic evidence review with semi-structured key informant interviews, a stakeholder survey, and survivor focus group. Participants included representatives of governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental organisations, as well as Sudanese survivors based in the UK. Research was conducted rapidly over a three-month period (January–March 2021), with the Covid-19 crisis ongoing and extending beyond the life of the study. Evidence presented is therefore nascent, and further research is needed to understand the medium and long-term impacts of Covid-19 in Sudan.

1. All data sources are referenced in the full research report, available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources>

## Key findings

**The study found that the pandemic has increased individual risks and vulnerabilities to human trafficking and modern slavery in Sudan.** Rather than fundamentally reshaping vulnerabilities in Sudan, the pandemic exacerbated existing individual, community, structural, and environmental risk factors which drive human trafficking and modern slavery within, through, and from the country. While many of the criminal networks, perpetrators, and methods employed in trafficking have remained the same, the dynamics of vulnerability and routes taken have shifted as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic has also disrupted the capacity of criminal justice, governance, and humanitarian organisations to provide services to survivors or to prosecute perpetrators. These disruptions further exacerbate the effects of the pandemic and Covid-19 mitigation strategies on vulnerable groups.

**The lack of resources and institutional memory at the governmental level to tackle these issues represents a substantial challenge.** However, the beacon of hope identified by interviewees was that collaborative strategies to tackle trafficking were put in place by governmental actors prior to the pandemic. **Chief actors in government were identified as capable advocates and governors, willing to act on the strategic goals.** The hope was that this momentum would continue post-pandemic.

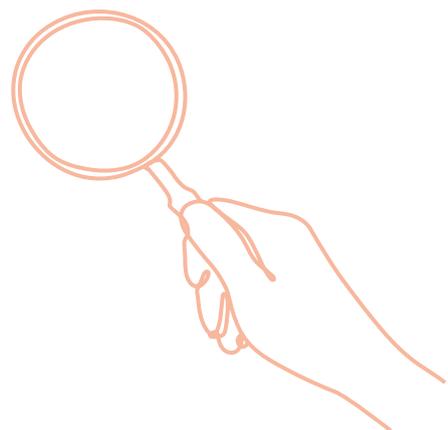
### Impacts of Covid at the household and individual level

**Restrictions on mobility and social gathering have adversely affected income generation activities, particularly in the informal sector.** Refugees, women, and internally displaced people are most likely to be employed within this sector and were thus disproportionately affected by the closure of businesses and livelihoods.

**Increased poverty or economic precarity has forced families to consider risky coping strategies and increased vulnerability to exploitation.** In particular, refugees and displaced populations were more likely to consider onward migration through increasingly risky routes involving trafficking or smuggling. Mobility restrictions also increased the isolation of women, particularly domestic workers, who were more likely to experience abuse and exploitation as a result.

### Impacts of Covid on governance

**The pandemic interrupted the normal functioning of the government, impeding efforts to tackle human trafficking.** Border closures all but ended cross-border collaborative efforts to tackle human trafficking. In addition, the pandemic reduced policing of crimes, including trafficking, and shut down courts and criminal prosecution of perpetrators. Third sector organisations who typically supply resources to tackle trafficking to the government or provide direct support to survivors lost their ability to do so due to the economic toll of the pandemic and lockdown measures.



## Impacts of Covid on institutions

**Public and civil institutions were closed by pandemic restrictions.** This included schools, public health clinics, counselling services, and safe houses. This limited the ability of vulnerable individuals to seek help, survivors to find care or support, and institutions to monitor the well-being of the populations they served.

## Particularly vulnerable populations

The research suggests that the pandemic most severely impacts particular groups, and that these populations are in greatest need of intervention. Intersecting vulnerabilities further increase risk, with individuals and populations with intersectional identities most susceptible to the negative effects of Covid and modern slavery.

### Women and girls

Pre-existing gender imbalances in Sudan place women and girls at increased risk of particular forms of trafficking and exploitation. Women and girls were reported to face disproportionate risks of violence and exploitation, including in both domestic and conflict settings. Women's livelihoods were noted to have been disproportionately disrupted by Covid-19 and access to healthcare centres that provide both crucial access to care and opportunities for identification of trafficking was curbed. School closures were also reported to create disproportionate risks of trafficking and modern slavery for girls.

### Refugees and displaced populations

Refugees and displaced populations from Eritrea and Ethiopia, including unaccompanied minors, are warehoused in camps in Sudan with limitations on their mobility. Lockdown restrictions on public gathering and social distancing further limited opportunities for income generation. Loss of income has driven risky onward migration, aided by smugglers and traffickers to circumnavigate closed borders. Within camps, internally displaced persons (including children) are frequent targets for forced conscription into armed militias, while women and girls are often at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

### Domestic workers

Domestic workers were further isolated by the pandemic. Their invisibilisation and lack of contact with community raised concerns about their exploitation and victimisation. Already a population at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse prior to the pandemic, domestic workers were identified as particularly impacted by Covid and related response measures.

### Migrants and people on the move

In recent years, the criminalisation of migration and border closures has resulted in migrants taking increasingly dangerous and deadly routes through the Sahara to reach Libya or Egypt. Pandemic restrictions led to more border closures, stranded populations, and increased use of alternative migratory routes. Along these routes, migrants face risks of debt bondage, abduction and ransom, sexual exploitation, forced sex work, and forced marriage.

## Children

Children were reported to be disproportionately at risk of exploitation and trafficking as a result of the economic consequences of Covid-19, as families facing economic precarity and material deprivation, due to a lack of alternatives, are more likely to rely on negative coping strategies including child labour, child exploitation, and child marriage. School closures were noted to increase risks of trafficking, as well as reducing opportunities for identification and intervention.

## Informal workers

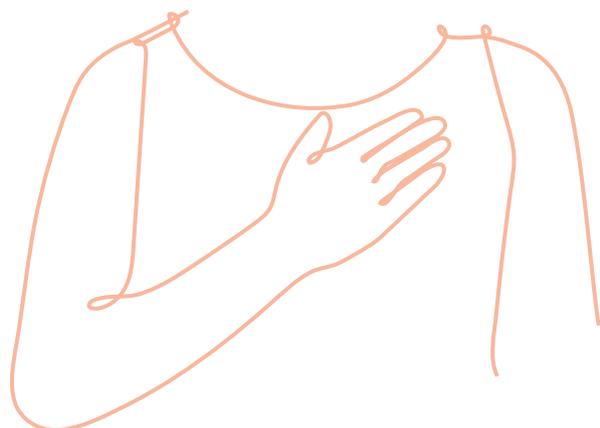
Those working in the informal economy in Sudan, as well as informal Sudanese workers abroad, faced greater risk of losing their employment as a result of lockdowns and economic contraction caused by the pandemic. Typically in low-paying work, informal workers were less likely to have savings that could cushion job losses, making them particularly at risk of both being targeted for exploitation and negative coping strategies involving trafficking.

## Rural and urban communities

Both rural and urban communities were reported to experience disproportionate negative impacts of the pandemic. In urban areas, lack of access to sanitation and clean water were noted to create increased risk of contracting Covid-19, and household vulnerability. In rural areas, reductions in support services and the difficulties of reaching vulnerable populations were highlighted as increasing risk of targeting for trafficking, particularly forced recruitment of children into armed groups.

## Additional vulnerability factors

In addition to particular groups being identified as disproportionately vulnerable to the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as a result to human trafficking and modern slavery, the study identified several key factors which also exacerbated risk of exploitation and trafficking in Sudan. These factors include poverty and socioeconomic conditions (particularly economic precarity and material deprivation), as well as conflict, environmental factors, education, and healthcare. Not only were these reported to be risk factors in themselves, but often intersected with other risks and identity-based factors to magnify vulnerability to trafficking.



## Priority recommendations

The research report ([available on the Rights Lab website](#)) sets out a series of recommendations for international and Sudanese actors to help mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 and address the vulnerabilities identified in the research. Key recommendations identified in the report include the following.

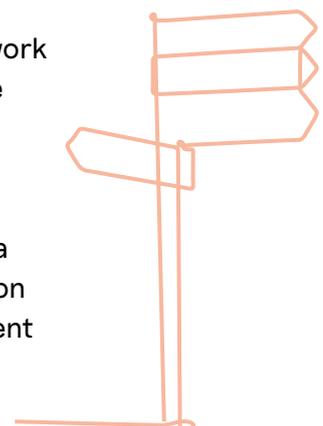
**Recommendation 1.** The international community and donors should continue and extend support for developing capacity, institutions, and infrastructure in Sudan. Funding to ensure access to social welfare, healthcare, and education across the population, as well as dedicated anti-trafficking activities and support for victims and survivors should be ensured across the country.

**Recommendation 2.** The transitional and new government in Sudan should continue to prioritise addressing human trafficking and modern slavery, and human rights, in new government administrations. Review and reform of the legislative and policy structures to ensure effective anti-trafficking, labour rights, and human rights governance should continue, with support for the implementation and enforcement of these frameworks expanding over time.

**Recommendation 3.** Horn of Africa States, working in collaboration with the African Union, should explore options for regional open borders following the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) approach, to reduce the need for vulnerable migrants to use smugglers and dangerous traffickers. The new government of Sudan should work with the European Union and the African Union to reframe the emphasis of international migration governance from stopping flows to Europe and criminalising migration, to addressing root causes and targeting traffickers.

**Recommendation 4.** The Sudanese Ministry of Education, with support from international partners, should explore and evaluate alternative education models to reach out-of-school students, and students in conflict zones and rural areas. The Ministry of Health should distribute personal protective equipment (PPE) to teachers and students to ensure classroom safety while the pandemic is ongoing, and provide support and programming through education to address risks for particularly vulnerable children.

**Recommendation 5.** The new Sudanese government should work to incorporate women into the governance structure and with the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking (NCCT) build a legislative framework that reflects women's voices and provides access to care, support, and opportunities for women across Sudan. As a part of this, Sudan should commit to the Juba peace process and work to actualise Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), implement women's full participation, and outlaw child marriage.



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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre is funded and actively supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), from the Strategic Priorities Fund.

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