



Integrated and Indivisible: The Sustainable Development Agenda of Modern Slavery Survivor Narratives

Findings of a forthcoming academic study by Professor Zoe Trodd, Dr Andrea Nicholson and Lauren Eglén

With an estimated 40.3 million people in slavery around the world today, the United Nations has set a target of eradicating slavery by the year 2030.ⁱ Despite this ambition, there is not yet a clear blueprint for achieving this goal. Using a case study of child marriage in India, The Rights Lab used survivors' own narratives from the world's largest narratives database, VOICESⁱⁱ, to decipher which Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets are likely to prevent and end enslavement, and explore the possibility of a systematic design of new antislavery strategies based on the accounts and ideas of enslaved people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Key findings

The narratives housed in the VOICES database of cases of child marriage in India contained vital information about risk factors, trafficking journeys, gender dynamics, cultural identity, and gaps in survivor support. They showed that child marriage is a 'fusion' between issues, namely poverty and gender discrimination. Existing non-governmental and government intervention programmes aimed at forced marriage tend to tackle the issue through community awareness-raising or focused around single SDG target issues (e.g. girls' education), in isolation from a wider development agenda. **However, most of the narratives consulted showed multiple SDG vulnerabilities, and therefore an intersectional, long-term and systemic 'multi SDG' approach is vital for tackling modern slavery in the form of child and forced marriage.**

Recommendations

- The ideas and voices of survivors should play a central role in the design of anti-slavery and anti-trafficking programmes.
- Existing initiatives to address child marriage that focus on a singular SDG target e.g. improving healthcare, should, where possible, be expanded to consider wider, intersected SDG targets.
- In addition, greater collaboration should be encouraged between intervention programmes that focus on different SDGs in isolation in order to provide a much-needed multi-SDG approach.

Research overview

162 narratives from India were analysed and codified relating to the UN's 169 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, and the relationships between them. India is estimated to have the highest absolute number of victims and therefore is the country most represented in the VOICES database.^{iv} 70% of the narratives were from women and girls and 35% of were primarily narratives of forced marriage, rather than of forced labour.

Most narratives revealed at least three primary SDG targets and some as many as five. Beyond the crucial 8.7/5.3 nexus (ending child labour and eliminating child and forced marriage, respectively) the most common SDG codings for the narratives were those that focused on education, healthcare, housing, eradicating poverty and violence against women.^v



The value of an intersectional SDG approach to tackling slavery is clear in the narrative of Papuram, who was forced to end her education at age 17 to marry a man who was 26. Her narrative showed a key SDG target issue that underpinned her exploitation: **discrimination against women (SDG 5.1)**. The overarching theme of her story pointed to patriarchal control of female sexuality. “A general fear that it was not safe for girls to remain unmarried and that we would fall in love”, was her explanation for why her parents pushed her into the union and took out huge loans to pay her dowry.

The narrative also illustrates the impact of undervaluing female economic contributions. Papuram had to marry because daughters are a “heavy responsibility.” This notion of economic burden recurs frequently in the narratives, with another survivor, Sujatha, explaining that the prompt for her marriage was “the burden of three girls in the family.” Nearly all of the other 48 Indian forced marriage narratives, describe this vulnerability factor of gender inequality as a key driver for their exploitation.

The intersection with **SDG 1.2 (reducing poverty)** is also apparent in many of the narratives. For example, Anumaraju’s parents had three daughters and could not afford to delay her marriage past the age of 14. The dowry system renders earlier marriages economically advantageous because increased age attracts higher dowries. Younger, less educated girls are seen as easier to discipline and train for housework and childcare, requiring less of a financial contribution from their parents.

SDG 4.5 (gender disparities in education) was also found to converge with the aforementioned targets. Secondary education remains limited and costly in rural areas and the barriers to accessing secondary education are further compounded by gender norms. Educational access is more gender-balanced at the primary level, where education is free, but sons are given priority at the secondary level when families are required to cover costs.

The practice of child marriage in India is deeply embedded in gender norms, exacerbated by poverty and perpetuated by a devaluation of female education. Survivors’ own narratives reveal that gender disparities in education are a key vulnerability factor but cannot be addressed in isolation without tackling the gender-based and economic inequalities that lead to reduced education access in the first place.

A multi-SDG approach would be a step-change for the delivery of SDGs 8.7 (ending forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking) and 5.3 (ending child, early and forced marriage). Development interventions remain siloed. If in-country multi-SDG collaborations exist, they are rarely systemic or long-term. **But as this multi-SDG analysis of survivor narratives shows, the antislavery community needs to tackle the socio-economic, cultural, and political drivers for slavery that are embodied in a range of other SDG targets—rather than tackling 8.7 and 5.3 in isolation from the wider development agenda.** Survivors’ narratives suggest the imperative of designing, testing and evidencing the effectiveness of community-based strategies that tackle the development issues currently enabling slavery to thrive.

¹ International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation, “Global Estimate of Modern Slavery” (2017 www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_575479/lang-en/index.htm)

² <http://antislavery.ac.uk/solr-search?facet=collection:%22VOICES:+Narratives+by+Survivors+of+Modern+Slavery%22>

³ See University of Nottingham, “VOICES: Narratives by Survivors of Modern Slavery,” www.antislavery.ac.uk/narratives; For Sustainable Development goal targets see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

⁴ Walk Free Foundation, “Global Slavery Index” (GSI), 2018: www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/country-studies/india/

⁵ **1.2** (reduce poverty); **3.8** (achieve universal health coverage); **4.1** (provide free, equitable education); **4.5** (eliminate gender disparities in education); **5.1** (end discrimination against women); **5.2** (eliminate violence against women); **8.3** (support job creation); **8.8** (protect labour rights); **10.2** (promote social inclusion); **11.1** (safe housing for all).