



Anti-Slavery Strategic Communications During COVID-19

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Introduction

As part of an [on-going UKRI-funded project](#) to assess the risks, impacts and mitigations of COVID-19 for modern slavery survivors, we examined the strategic communications broadcasted by prominent NGO or civil society, and government anti-slavery organisations (e.g. Anti-slavery International: @Anti_Slavery, Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX): @FocusOnLabour, Free the Slaves: @FreetheSlaves, The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority: @UK_Glaa) during COVID-19, within the SDG 8.7 social media discussion-sphere (explored in work such as Lucas and Landman 2020 and Lucas et al., 2020). We took social media, and specifically Twitter, as a focus given the vantage point it affords researchers in quickly landscape mapping large strategic communication (and accompanying public discourse) arenas on subjects such as grand challenges and SDGs.

We do so as a means of exploring: **(a)** the mosaic of issues highlighted and amplified by these organisations (i.e. reactive and responsive communications), and as a means of exploring: **(b)** communicative proxies for their collective **strategic agendas** and **tactical priorities** in terms of: **(c1)** addressing prominent COVID-19 risks affecting specific demographic groups across vulnerable populations, victims, and survivors of modern slavery, and **(c2)** representing and serving these affected populations during this time.

To this end, we generated a Twitter dataset of 49,834 Tweets and Retweets broadcast by an initial search list of 99 organisations between January 2020 and September 2020 (resulting in a final dataset of 64 organisations active during this timeframe, and with reference to our filtering criteria). We distilled this dataset into 11 distinct risk categories (Figure 1), and 15 distinct populations (Figure 2).

This process involved developing a procedure for filtering Tweets (described in Bravo-Balsa et al., 2021), where we took explicit mentions of ‘risk’ and “covid_” or “coronavirus” as a basis for selecting Tweets for qualitative interpretation into discrete categories. This resulted in a final sub-dataset of 719 unique Tweets and Retweets – which we interpreted further into a sub-dataset of 479 Tweets and Retweets (i.e. which explicitly mentioned risks related to COVID-19).



Figure 1: Identified Risks



The definition of both *risk categories* and *affected populations* was based on the selection and use of terminology **by the original author**, and on the most **logical interpretations** of Tweet content (e.g. terms such as ‘abuse’ and ‘exploitation’ do indeed overlap, but have been retained in their author-usage form when developing our discrete categories). This means that Tweets were often classified into multiple categories (i.e. when mentioning more than one type of risk and / or one affected population), but were ultimately categorised based on the most simple-logical interpretation of the content. An overview of risk categories is provided next, with percentages denoting the proportional amount of Tweets identified as explicitly mentioning ‘risks’ in line with the allocated theme (in descending order).

Risk Categories

General Exploitation (36.41%)

Prominently featured in the General Exploitation category are explicit and implicit mentions of ‘exploitation’. This extends into usage of the term in phrases such as ‘labour exploitation’ (e.g. recruitment abuse, exploitative working conditions and labour rights violations - such as unrealistic work pressures and targets, compromised working conditions (i.e. in terms of health and safety), wage underpayment and wage theft, illegal sick pay conditions, and denying workers minimum wage rights or fair overtime payment. More broadly, this category also included forced labour, debt bondage, child labour, child marriage, and ‘county lines’ in the UK), the use of the term ‘sexual exploitation’ (including child sexual exploitation), and the term ‘re-exploitation’ across populations.

Economic (15.51%)

The Economic category includes mentions of keywords/phrases such as: broad (societal) “economic / financial risks”, “acute economic distress”, “economic challenges/vulnerabilities”, “financial difficulty”, “financial hardship”, “economic strain”, and the “severe socio-economic impact” resulting from COVID-19. Especially prevalent in this category was reference to risks to workers in general, spanning loss of income, unemployment, underemployment, heightened informality, destitution, food shortages: lost income when sick, wage theft, cut backs to hours in low-paid sectors, and risks specific to those self-employed or on zero-hour contracts.

Potential risk amplification was also flagged for already low-paid workers, and especially undocumented workers, and also for younger populations who are potentially reliant on limited financial resources and less-secure employment channels. Access to government support in the event of unemployment was also highlighted. Other themes related to SDGs and grand challenges such as poverty (SDG 1), and food insecurity (SDG 2) were also flagged here, along with risks affecting specific populations (e.g. domestic workers, and workers in specific sectors such as hospitality and the garment industry). More broadly, exacerbated socio-economic structural inequalities, housing and homelessness, trickle-down effects based on the impact of COVID-19 on major employers, and fraud (scams) related to COVID-19 were also highlighted in the data.

Physical Health (14.75%)

The Physical Health category captures, in particular, the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 (across all age demographics). This includes specific sub-themes such as PPE access for workers, as well as risks specific to particular industries and associated work commutes and housing. These risks extend into themes such as sick leave and benefit entitlements (e.g. “protection gaps”). Also included in the Physical Health category are issues around overcrowded camps for refugees and displaced persons, and issues regarding fears among refugee populations, at-risk migrants, and modern slavery survivors in accessing healthcare, and the risks around various vulnerable populations being excluded from adequate access to COVID-19 testing and treatment in the event of diagnosis.

Other highlighted risks include those pertaining to populations disproportionately affected by lockdowns, such as in the case of informal economy workers impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns (e.g. via contagion or resource shortages faced by such populations), food shortages and compromised access to essential items exacerbated by COVID-19 fuelling, among other issues, the global hunger crisis, as well as misinformation distorting public health guidance.



Trafficking (9.52%)

The Trafficking category included a broad range of risks related to **trafficking as a specific act**, and the resulting increased vulnerability of certain populations to this (i.e. via new and amplified risks of activity initiated by criminal groups during the pandemic). Interpretation of our findings should also include a note on the key Trans-Atlantic differences in the use of this term. In the UK, the term 'modern slavery' tends to be the predominant term used in public discourse due to the introduction of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, and is used as an umbrella term to cover a range of offences, including human trafficking. Therefore when the term 'trafficking' is used it tends to be deliberate to refer to the specific offence of human trafficking. In the US, the term 'modern slavery' is not commonly used; instead 'human trafficking' remains the term most widely used to describe the specific offence but also related forms of exploitation.

Implicit mentions included references to links between criminal activity and heightened risks for victims during COVID-19 (e.g. the evolution and adaptation of forms of criminal exploitation during lockdown), whilst more direct and explicit references included heightened risks for child victims due to family breakdown during COVID-19. This extended to increased concerns around re-trafficking.

The indirect effects of COVID-19 and its impact on human trafficking were also widely highlighted: including issues around the restriction and / or closing of support services during lockdowns, changes to border controls and visa conditions around the globe, as well as issues related to the separation of family members. Broadly, trafficking as a consequence of the economic impact of COVID-19 along the lines of lost incomes, the collapse of certain industries, or reduction in consumer demand, as well as unemployment in general, emerged as prominent themes. The 'aggravation' of existing risks was also highlighted in general, and with reference to specific sectors such as agriculture. This category also captures a wide population spectrum: including the homeless, runaway youth, migrant workers, women and children.

Abuse (8.29%)

Prominently featured in the Abuse category was explicit and implicit mentions of abuse of children and child marriage (including references to contextual events such as school closures). More broadly, sexual abuse across populations also featured prominently, with specific examples including increased risks around abuse in the sex work industry. Abuse as an explicit term also captured increased risk of labour abuse, including geographic and industry specific abuse risks.

Support Access (5.22%)

Support Access category includes mentions of reductions in NGO funding: putting at risk modern slavery prevention work, and modern slavery support services in general. More specifically, this category included the impact of COVID-19 on frontline services and resulting response efforts along the lines of efforts to identify and support survivors. The impact of COVID-19 on reducing the capacity of, or limiting access to, government financial support, essential services and medical services, legal services and safeguard systems for children was also flagged.

Safety (3.53%)

The Safety category includes themes such as general violence, and the heightened risks of attacks on human rights defenders, land and environmental defenders, health workers, children living in poverty, children's rights being compromised in general, as well as risks affecting migrants and minority populations, and those employed in specific industries such as fishing and mining. This category also included highlights of unsafe working conditions, women facing violence at work, children working in hazardous environments (and the security of children in general), and the potential risks around migrant worker travel (for example: traveling back to their homes or cities of origin during COVID-19).

Family / Safe Houses (3.07%)

The Family / Safe Houses category was dominated by themes such as increases in domestic abuse during lockdown: including gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and child abuse (including risks associated with child marriage and risk exposure involving populations afflicted by FGM). This category also includes the link



between increased risks of housing insecurity (e.g. eviction) and the exposure of individuals to various societal risks.

Education (2.00%)

A central theme in the Education category was the risk associated with the exacerbation of compromised educational attainment due to the COVID-19 crisis. Additional highlighted risks included risks to education in rural areas stemming from resource access (e.g. access to internet communications). School closures and the relationship of this phenomena to increased risks of child labour and child marriage, and the broader highlighted theme of the ‘COVID generation’ (young people whose life trajectories will be irreparably interrupted by COVID-19) were also flagged. Risks to refugee education (and especially the impact of this phenomena on young women and in regions such as Africa and Asia) were also mentioned.

Mental Health (1.08%)

A prominent theme within the Mental Health category was the impact of isolation, loneliness and broader mental health issues afflicting the general population as a result of lockdowns. Risks such as mental stress and employment-related psychological risk, and the risk of emotional trauma among children as a focal population, and re-traumatisation for child survivors were also flagged.

Integration (0.61%)

Within the Integration category, we observed increases in reporting and responses related to risks associated with increases in racial discrimination, hate crimes and societal exclusion. Specific examples included heightened risks for migrant workers employed on precarious contracts and the impact such employment formats has on integration. Misconceptions and misinformation around the affect of COVID-19 affecting internally displaced people was also flagged here.

Affected Populations

An overview of affected populations is provided next, with percentages denoting the proportional amount of Tweets identified as explicitly mentioning these populations.



Figure 2: Affected Populations



General Workers (34.28%)

This category included, for example, workers affected by the pronounced risks of contracting COVID-19 due to lack of PPE, and because of living conditions (e.g. migrant workers in overcrowded accommodation). Some economic risks for this population category related to loss of income, destitution, unemployment, and lack of financial support. Risk of exploitation, including debt bondage and susceptibility to forced labour, abuse and trafficking-based employment also overlap this category. Increased stress and isolation (affecting workers' mental health) was also mentioned.

In terms of specific industries, this category included frequent mentions of garment workers losing their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis (due to major fashion brands cancelling orders), and the labour market risk exposure of workers in service sectors (e.g. hospitality). Migrant workers and workers employed in the informal economy are also particularly at risk according to the dataset. For further illustration: in the UK, the dataset featured mentions of migrant workers (and migrant domestic workers particularly), and carers at risk of exploitation and destitution. In the US, our dataset featured frequent mentions of the risk of exploitation faced by farmworkers in California.

Children (18.73%): The Children category is demographic specific, but broad in terms of affected sub-populations. Illustrated via risk types, this category includes the risk of school closures and the wider COVID-19 lockdown scenario putting children at increased risk of violence, exploitation, abuse - including sexual abuse and exploitation, domestic abuse and trafficking - with specific mentions of children in care. The increased risks of child labour, child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) during COVID-19 are also highlighted. Also extremely concerning is the increased risk during COVID-19 of child sex offenders and other criminals contacting children online. Limitations around access to support for child victims of abuse, disruptions to education, and educational gaps worsening were also highlighted. In terms of risks around contracting COVID-19: children in refugee camps were highlighted as a particularly vulnerable sub-population within this category. Similar to other identified populations, the risk of re-trafficking and re-traumatisation for child survivors was also highlighted (in the UK). This category included references to geographic locations such as the US and the UK, Africa, Asia, refugee camps on the Greek islands, India, China, Philippines, Nepal, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda, Ghana, Somalia, Kenya.

Migrants (12.54%)

Specific mention is made in our dataset to migrant workers in relation to all COVID-19-related risks. This includes the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 due to living conditions and limited healthcare (including, for example, persons not seeking healthcare for fear of deportation), economic risks: including not being able to access government support, and the heightened risk of destitution and exploitation (e.g. labour exploitation and debt bondage), trafficking and abuse. Also included in this population category were risks around rises in xenophobia, nationalism and misinformation: putting the safety and integration of migrants at risk. Specific mentions of the UK, the US, Europe, South Asia, Spain, Malaysia, Libya, Sudan, Horn of Africa, Arabian Gulf, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, Kyrgyzstan, Somalia and Nepal - as well as Venezuelan and Ethiopian migrant populations specifically, were highlighted in our dataset.

Vulnerable Populations (6.35%)

As with the Survivors and Victims categories - the Vulnerable Populations category is also broad and captures strategic communications making general references to "vulnerable populations" without specific reference to demographics, as well as strategic communications making reference via related identifiers such as "marginalised populations", "deprived communities" and "at-risk communities". This category included reference to the heightened risk of exploitation, trafficking and slavery - including child labour, forced labour and bonded labour - for vulnerable populations around the world due to lockdowns, poverty, and unemployment, with specific mentions to the UK and India. Another prominent (direct and indirect) risk affecting this population was that of worsening inequalities around the world, and in the UK specifically. The increased risk related to difficulties accessing support, information, and essentials items such as hygiene products due to the COVID-19 crisis was also highlighted, along with the increased risks surrounding (rental) evictions for vulnerable families in the UK.



Survivors (4.68%)

As with the Vulnerable Populations and Victims categories - the Survivors category is broad, and captures strategic communications making general references to “survivors” without specific reference to demographics – including general risks facing modern slavery and human trafficking survivors related to COVID-19, increased economic risks and risk of forced labour and other forms of exploitation (e.g. sexual exploitation) for survivors globally. The heightened risks of re-trafficking around the world, with specific reference the UK and Bangladesh, along with the effect of lockdown-driven re-traumatisation risks for child survivors in the UK were also highlighted. Limited access to healthcare due to fear of retaliation, and the reduced capacity of services and support available as a result of drops in NGO funding and disruptions was also highlighted.

Women (4.52%)

As a specific category: the increased risk of gender-based violence, sexual violence, abuse, and domestic abuse for women globally, with specific mentions of the geographic locations: China, Nepal, Kenya, Canada, the Middle East, and the OSCE area was prominent in our dataset. The heightened risk of exploitation, trafficking and forced labour was also flagged, along with health risks for women in brothels specifically. Also included in this category was the risk of contracting COVID-19, various economic risks, and risk of unemployment for female workers in particular.

Victims (4.52%)

As with the Survivors and Vulnerable Populations categories - the Victims category is broad, and captures strategic communications making general references to “victims” without specific reference to demographics. This category includes “victims” of modern slavery and human trafficking, including sub-populations such as victims of sex trafficking and sexual abuse, domestic abuse, debt bondage, forced labour, and child labour. Increased economic risks, and the risk of further exploitation and trafficking in particular were flagged in our dataset, along with the heightened risk of child exploitation and child sexual abuse. The risk of contracting COVID-19, and limited healthcare access along with disruption to frontline services, and reported drops in NGO funding – and the subsequent flow-on effect for victim support and services was also flagged.

General Public (3.51%)

The dataset highlighted the risk facing the general population around the world in terms of risk of contracting and spreading Covid-19, with specific mentions of Syria and Canada. The exposure of the general public to misinformation and mental health issues due to lockdown situations was also prominently flagged. Increased levels of fraud and COVID-19-related scams in the UK, as well as risk around food shortages in the Sahel, and exacerbated poverty in the Asia-Pacific region also emerged. Health risks related to buying and trying online products, and treatments at home were also flagged.

Three smaller population categories were also identified (<3% to 2% of the dataset). The first of these was **Refugees (2.51%)**: which prominently included references to refugee populations at risk of COVID-19, with examples including in refugee camps on the Greek islands, Venezuela and broader Latin America, Syria, Libya, across Africa, and Australia. Heightened risk of trafficking for Rohingya refugees, and risk of malnutrition and hunger for refugees in Africa was further underscored. Risk to education of refugee children, and refugee adolescent girls in particular was also prominently flagged. The second was **Homeless (2.51%)**. As introduced, the increased risk of human trafficking for homeless people – and newly homeless people in particular - and for homeless youth around the world, due to shelters and other public places closing was especially prominent in our dataset, with specific mentions to the US and Canada. The third was the demographically specific category **Youth (2.34%)**, which encompasses (among other themes) the economic risk for education leavers, young workers and unemployed youth. Risks around imprisoned youth at risk of COVID-19 were also highlighted. Heightened risks of human trafficking for homeless and runaway youth due to shelters closing during the COVID-19 crisis (with specific mentions of the US and Canada as geographic locations) were also captured in our dataset.



Four very small population categories were also identified (<2%). The first of these was **Displaced People (1.51%)** which refers here to those persons displaced by conflict or disaster: with our dataset highlighting overcrowded refugee camps in general, and displaced individuals in geographic locations such as Yemen, Syria and Libya, as well as internally displaced communities in Nigeria, and displaced indigenous populations in Latin America at risk of Covid-19. The risk of domestic violence for displaced women and girls in general, as well as heightened risks of discrimination for internally displaced individuals in Somalia was also highlighted. The second was **Indigenous Communities (0.84%)**, including COVID-19-induced risks to local indigenous populations in general (globally), and displaced indigenous populations in Latin America in particular. The risk of human rights abuses to indigenous communities by companies in Peru as a further specific geographic location was also flagged. This category also included the increased risk of exploitation for Native American women in general. The third was **Activists (0.84%)**, which primarily encompassed the risk of attacks on human rights defenders around the world, with land and environmental defenders in Colombia also specifically mentioned. The fourth was **Prisoners (0.33%)**, which refers to people currently incarcerated in detention centers around the world, and to youth in juvenile detention facilities in the US. Risk to physical health due to limited healthcare access and difficulties for physical (social) distancing during COVID-19 was the main theme highlighted in this category.

Key Takeaways

1. Enhanced Risk Radars

Our analysis highlights the importance of NGO, wider civil society, and government anti-slavery organisations expanding their 'risk radars' to encompass the communications of other organisations in the anti-slavery discussion sphere. This includes the way in which these organisations participate in, and shape the array of issues highlighted and amplified in a reactive and responsive sense, and the way in which these organisations shape their strategic agendas and tactical priorities based on the actions of other actors engaged with SDG 8.7. Proactive monitoring of social media is recommended as part of this toolkit, given the capacity this affords along the lines of real-time monitoring (i.e. in addition to in-house research, news and political discourse monitoring). This is especially critical during times of crisis (e.g. as is the case during COVID-19).

2. Content Calibration, Campaign Cut-through and Message Resonance

Issues such as **content calibration** (adjusting strategic communications to best align with the interests of a given audience and temporal context), **campaign cut-through** (ensuring the prominence of important messages during times of increased volumes of strategic communication, media coverage and amplification, and social discussion 'noise'), and **optimised message resonance** (e.g. engineering messages that circumvent human perceptual filtering and tap into core audience concerns, whilst avoiding *audience burnout*), are extremely important for organisations engaged with grand challenges such as SDG 8.7 – especially during the COVID-19 crisis. These organisations face increased risks around message 'clutter' drowning out key messages and campaigns. An example of a critical campaign during COVID-19 is Freedom United's "Mind the Gap" campaign – focused on modern slavery survivor (and migrant population) access to healthcare.

3. Next Steps

Next steps include: (a) quantifying the degree of primary risk and primary affected populations within the dataset, (b) in-depth exploration of the interrelations between risk and population categories, (c) developing insights around the broader context-mechanism-outcome risk-complex based on this data, (d) assessing the extent to which individual organisations disproportionately influence analysis of the wider modern slavery risk landscape under COVID-19, and (e) more formally examining how accurately strategic communications represent strategic agendas and tactical priorities (versus serving as simply a barometer of reactive-response activity).



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Further written materials stemming from this research will be published in due course here: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/research-projects/covid-19-risk-and-response-impacts-and-mitigations-for-modern-slavery-victims-and-survivors.aspx>