



The Impact of Covid-19 on Modern Slavery in Sudan

Emerging findings briefing, March 2021

This briefing is part of an [ongoing project](#) by [the Rights Lab](#) (University of Nottingham), [Global Partners Governance](#), [Royal United Services Institute](#), and [Waging Peace](#), exploring the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on modern slavery in Sudan, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre.

This briefing provides a high-level summary of a selection of key findings from a systematic evidence review and five semi-structured interviews with key informants. Further analysis is underway, to be released mid-April 2021.

Key findings

Restrictions introduced in response to Covid-19—particularly border closures and restrictions on mobility—have three significant impacts on practices of [modern slavery](#), including trafficking in and through Sudan.

- **Adaptation in migration, smuggling, and trafficking routes:** Border closures have made it more difficult for populations to move across borders, increasing the use of more difficult routes with less oversight and more vulnerability to traffickers.
- **Increased vulnerability to exploitation amongst specific populations:** Restrictions in place have differential impacts between different groups. Populations particularly negatively affected include: vulnerable refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants; children and in particular girls who have left school due to the pandemic; workers in the informal sector, seasonal agriculture, and domestic work.
- **Limitations on support and assistance for vulnerable populations:** Institutions (e.g., healthcare, non-governmental humanitarian work, reproductive healthcare, and educational entities) have been widely closed, limiting outreach and assistance provided to vulnerable populations.

Why is this important?

The lockdown restrictions introduced in Sudan in response to the Covid-19 outbreak came during a period of intense political and socio-cultural transition. The country was undergoing political transition following the 2019 deposition of Former President Omar al-Bashir by coup after three decades in power. In the period after, in rapid succession, Sudan experienced several crises of conflict and displacement (in Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and the Tigray conflict in bordering Ethiopia), a period of catastrophic flooding, and major food shortages caused by low crop yield, pests, and drought (among other factors). As a result, the country experienced an elevated level of economic and food insecurity—amongst the highest in the region or world—while public institutions had

been degraded by conflict, years of neglect and limited resources. These crises continue to impact the Sudanese context.

Groups and individuals who were already marginalised or vulnerable economically and socially became increasingly so under lockdown restrictions. Many humanitarian institutions and civil society institutions like schools, were closed, shuttering what was the only institutional form of support for many. While restrictions have eased, the economic conditions have continued to deteriorate while conflict and displacement are ongoing. The increased risks of trafficking, modern slavery, forced recruitment into armed groups, and child marriage are of paramount concern.

Interim recommendations

[1] The impacts of the pandemic in Sudan are **severe and far-reaching**, with implications internally, regionally, and internationally. The UK Government, other national governments, and inter-governmental agencies should therefore continue to **prioritise international programming, advocacy, and development assistance to Sudan** and the wider region, to address modern slavery and human trafficking, as well as structural drivers.

[2] Many vulnerable populations in Sudan and the region have **minimal contact with dedicated antislavery and anti-trafficking actors**, but often have **interactions with other actors and agencies**. Organisations working with vulnerable populations in Sudan and along migration routes—including in activities not directly connected to modern slavery and trafficking, such as health and welfare support—should **prioritise coordination** to ensure that individuals vulnerable to exploitation are identified and supported.

[3] Governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental actors in Sudan and internationally should work towards a **robust data strategy** to support systematic data collection and analysis on emerging trends. The Government of Sudan should **prioritise improving data systems and increasing knowledge** on the impacts of Covid and other crises on modern slavery and human trafficking now and into the future.

[4] The impacts of Covid-19 should be considered in the context of **multiple current and potential crises** facing Sudan and the region. **Lessons learned** from previous crises, as well as from the current pandemic, should therefore be **integrated into processes and planning** for the future by government, intergovernmental actors, and civil society.

[5] Many of the emerging impacts of Covid-19 relate to **existing structural drivers and vulnerabilities** in Sudan and the region. Efforts to understand and mitigate the consequences of the pandemic should therefore be developed with a **focus on these intersections**, to support meaningful and sustainable protection.



Impact of border closures and mobility restrictions on migrant populations

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government of Sudan instituted a series of lockdown measures beginning 14 March 2020. This had several effects for migrating groups. For irregular migrants, the border closures closed down migratory routes making it more difficult for migrants to cross into or through Sudan. Human smugglers and traffickers were forced to adapt their routes, taking non-traditional routes that were more invisible to oversight. Preliminary evidence from interviews indicates that migrants are more vulnerable to abduction by smugglers or traffickers along these routes who, after kidnapping them, extorted ransom from their families through violence and coercion. Traffickers targeted Ethiopians and Eritreans coming from the East due to perceived familial connections abroad.

“Many are foreign nationals, many Eritreans ...are entering Sudan, either they are trying to reach the refugee camps in east Sudan or they are moving to Khartoum, on the way they are kidnapped and sometimes the smugglers coordinate with traffickers, and sometimes they are trafficked on the way while reaching their destination... During this time frame they abuse the victim, either it could be rape, torture, or all kind of abuses, a victim can face until he or she is released.”

Sudan contains many internally displaced and refugee populations. As the pandemic grip tightens and poverty increases, displaced populations are at heightened risk of trafficking, recruitment by armed militias, exploitation, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. The population of displaced persons includes many unaccompanied minors. Children in conflict areas or displaced refugees—South Sudanese refugees and displaced people from the Tigray region in particular are more likely to be targeted for trafficking, exploitation, or armed forces recruitment.^{1,2} They are more likely to experience secondary problems including early marriage, violence and conscription.

“We saw that due to the airport closure some groups were intercepted. They couldn't go back or move forward, because of border restrictions and closure of the airport.”

Elsewhere, migrant children are particularly exposed to risks of forced exploitation during their journey. Special concern has been raised for vulnerable populations including street children, unaccompanied minors, children with disabilities, youth in the informal economy and children in institutional settings like Khalwa schools.³ Through lockdown and institutional closure the pandemic has invisibilised many of these populations, making it difficult to reach them or to perform assessments.

Finally, border closings have trapped migrants on both sides of the border with implications for their vulnerability. Ethiopian agricultural labourers were unable to reach Sudan creating challenges with the harvest and the food supply chain. Sudanese labourers were trapped in Egypt, no longer able to work and yet unable to return home with dwindling resources. Migrants in Sudan were unable to move forward or go back. Stranded, these individuals were unable to make a living and unable to support their families or repay travel debts. Consequently, concerns have been raised by commentators and interviewees about their vulnerability to exploitative labour recruitment.

Impact on livelihood strategies

“Last year due to lockdown till end of July, many of these people lost their livelihood opportunities. This made them more vulnerable, of course.”

Covid-19 induced mobility restrictions have decimated the informal economy. Our research indicates that women, who frequently work in the informal sector, have been more likely to lose their employment. In addition, populations already at risk, like internally displaced persons and refugees, who have fewer resources to cut, are more precarious to poverty and the secondary impact of negative coping behaviours. Lack of clean water and population density within camps, combined with extreme poverty are factors known to increase household level vulnerability by distracting resources.⁴ In the absence of humanitarian aid or debt restructuring, there is concern that these economic shocks will increase the use of negative coping mechanisms for these populations and vulnerability to trafficking or exploitation.⁵ Stakeholders spoke specifically to concerns over increases in child marriage, child trafficking, transactional sex, and gender-based violence.⁶ Children are more likely to be exposed to child labour, child trafficking and forced onward migration and in turn run the risk of child and adolescent pregnancy. These assessments are based on preliminary reports and observations of the impact of Ebola in West African communities.

Additionally, in the evidence and during interviews, many individuals mentioned the impact of the pandemic on domestic and sex workers in Khartoum. Sudanese women and girls—particularly internally displaced persons or those from rural areas—are being exploited in domestic work and in the sex industry. Sudanese traffickers compel Ethiopian women to work in private homes in Khartoum and other urban centres where they are often abused. The pandemic has further isolated these populations who have frequently fragmented knowledge of the labour laws and limited local social support networks. Isolated from the public view and from assistance, stakeholders are concerned about their risks of exploitation increasing.⁷



Impact on institutional support and resource redirection

The diversion of humanitarian funding from projects including maternal and reproductive health to Covid related needs, is diminishing access to healthcare and advocacy services in Sudan. With the reduction in humanitarian presence, groups have less contact with government or institutional supports which provide a form of support and may protect them from exploitation.⁸

The lockdown has played a role, limiting contact and access to information more broadly, and making it more difficult for women to escape from perpetrators of gender-based violence or to notify authorities. Women trapped in the house by the pandemic cannot access phone or hotline services while the pandemic is causing an increase in domestic violence including severe gender-based violence and death.⁹ Reproductive healthcare centres are a place that under normal circumstances women might have sought help or healthcare providers might have identified cases of sexual exploitation, but all International Planned Parenthood Federation centres were closed as of April.¹⁰ Further, the general breakdown of social service coordination caused by closure of centres is predicted to have ramifications for gaps in the coordinated care delivery.¹¹ Finally, lockdowns have closed public courts and attorney offices, leaving women with no form of legal recourse or protection.¹² Again, in situations of domestic employment where labour is forced or exploitative, women may be more at risk of becoming trapped and subject to abuse.¹³ It is anticipated that these gaps in services and generalised lack of attention to the condition of women will increase vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation and violence.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the literature predicts that school closures will disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, most significantly in Sudan affecting girls, displaced populations, and rural students.¹⁴ Girls are less likely to return to school following prolonged school closures,

and, less able to engage in distance learning. The longer they are out of school, the more significant the increases in household responsibility and in turn the likelihood of early or forced marriage and pregnancy.^{15,16} Risks are also posed to rural students who while out of school are susceptible to recruitment by armed groups and trafficking.¹⁷ Schools provide a stabilising force, a civil service organisation that monitors students and their well-being.¹⁸ The compounding loss of educational institutional stability, loss of household income, and reduction in social services has increased poverty and with it the risk of exploitation, trafficking and forced marriage.¹⁹

Evidence Gaps

The evidence presented here is emerging. It is based largely on insights from stakeholders who work in the field of human trafficking or modern slavery in Sudan and those that have worked on the topic in the region and bring their expertise to this analysis. This is combined with evidence from existing research and evidence, which remains relatively limited. As such, while many of the predictions are preliminary, they are contextually grounded. However, it is difficult to know whether and how the trends, such as changes to trafficking routes, are a result of the pandemic restrictions or the increasing criminalisation of human smuggling processes. Further analysis would benefit from:

- [1] More data collected over time, in particular, a longitudinal perspective on the impact of Covid-19 (including in particular on modern slavery, human trafficking, and other vulnerabilities) after the lockdown measures are lifted and informal activity resumes.
- [2] Greater identification, coordination, collation, and analysis of data streams in and relevant to Sudan.
- [3] Insights from survivors and perpetrators.
- [4] Better understandings of the ability of new technologies to reach vulnerable populations.

¹ Wuilbercq E, 'Lone Ethiopian Child Refugees Seen at Risk of Exploitation in Sudan' Reboot-Live, Reuters (Addis Ababa, 2020) available [here](#).

² 'Global Humanitarian Response Plan Covid-19: United Nations Coordinated Appeal' (2020) available [here](#).

³ 'Guidance Note for Protection of Children During Covid-19 Pandemic-V1' (2020); 'Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment for Sudan' (2020) available [here](#).

⁴ J Cilliers et al, 'Exploring the Impact of Covid-19 in Africa: A Scenario Analysis to 2030 - World' (2020) available [here](#).

⁵ 'Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: Trends, Risks, Development and Governance' (2020) available [here](#).

⁶ 'Global Humanitarian Overview 2021' (2020).

⁷ 'Another Pandemic: Rising Domestic Violence under Quarantine in Sudan' (*Ayin Network*, 2020) available [here](#).

⁸ 'Sudan Covid-19 Needs and Services in IDP Camps - Sudan | ReliefWeb' (2020) available [here](#).

⁹ 'Covid-19: UNFPA Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Humanitarian Operations in Arab Region' (2020) available [here](#).

¹⁰ 'Covid-19 Impact: What We Know so Far – Sudan' (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2020) available [here](#).

¹¹ 'Covid-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' (2020)

¹² J True and Y Riveros-Morales, 'Conflict Zones, and Covid's Impact on Gender-Based Violence Reporting' (*Politics and Society, Monash Lens*, 2020) available [here](#).

¹³ B Mosello et al, 'Spreading Disease, Spreading Conflict? Covid-19, Climate Change And' (2020).

¹⁴ 'Five Ways Covid-19 Has Affected Education in Eastern Africa | Windle International' (Windle International: Education Transforms Society, 2020) available [here](#).

¹⁵ J Pervis (Global Partners Governance), 'Parliamentary Response to Crisis: The Secondary Effects of Covid-19 on Women at Risk to Human Trafficking' (June 2020), available [here](#).

¹⁶ Abdal-Rahman Eltayeb (Global Partners Governance), 'Reflections on Covid-19 and its Impact on Trafficked Women and Girls: Report from GPG Virtual Conference, 6 October 2020' (October 2020), available [here](#).

¹⁷ UNODC, 'Global Report on Trafficking in Persons' (2020)

¹⁸ 'Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment for Sudan' (2020);

'Covid-19: A Catastrophe for Children in Sub-Saharan Africa' (2020)

¹⁹ 'Covid-19: A Catastrophe for Children in Sub-Saharan Africa' (2020) available [here](#); 'Global Report on Trafficking in Persons' (2020)