



University of
Nottingham
Rights Lab

The impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking in Sudan

A case study of pandemic in transition

April 2021



Global Partners
Governance



RUSI

WagingPeace

MODERN SLAVERY
& HUMAN RIGHTS

Led by the Bingham Centre

POLICY &
EVIDENCE
CENTRE

This project—The impact of Covid-19 on Modern Slavery in Transition: A Case Study of Sudan—was undertaken by the [Rights Lab](#) (University of Nottingham), [Global Partners Governance](#), [Royal United Services Institute](#), and [Waging Peace](#).

This report was prepared by the project team from project research, and with expert insights from participants in the Survivor Focus Group.

The research team

[Dr Katarina Schwarz](#), Rights Lab Associate Director (Law and Policy), University of Nottingham

[Dr Audrey Lumley-Sapanski](#), Rights Lab Research Fellow in Migration and Integration, University of Nottingham

[Dr Ana Valverde-Cano](#), Rights Lab Research Fellow in Antislavery Law and Policy, University of Nottingham

[Maria Peiró Mir](#), GPG Head of Policy and Partnerships

[Abdal-Rahman Eltayeb](#), GPG Project Manager

[Emily Death](#), GPG Director

[Prof Mohamed Babiker](#), GPG Associate, Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Khartoum, and United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea

[Keith Ditcham](#), RUSI Senior Research Fellow

[Michael Jones](#), RUSI Research Fellow

[Maddy Crowther](#), Waging Peace Co-Executive Director

[Sonja Miley](#), Waging Peace Co-Executive Director

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the invaluable contributions of the research participants. The research team wishes to thank those who participated in project interviews and surveys for their time and insights.

Special thanks to the participants in the Survivor Focus Group, whose careful reflections and expertise shaped this report and project findings.

The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC).

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, reflecting the research findings, and are not necessarily the views of the Modern Slavery PEC or AHRC.

Executive Summary

This report is the product of an investigation into the impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking and modern slavery in Sudan—a site of current and ongoing political transition and a critical source, destination, and transit country for people experiencing or at risk of human trafficking. Due to the unfolding nature of the pandemic, the impacts on human trafficking 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 vulnerability to human trafficking, but because transition provides an opportunity to embed robust evidence-based antislavery in new structures of governance.

This study combined systematic evidence review with semi-structured key informant interviews, a stakeholder survey, and survivor focus group to understand the emerging impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking in Sudan. 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 in Sudan.

The pandemic in Sudan

As of February 2021, Sudan had reported 27,443 cases and a total death count of 1,830 from Covid-19. Limitations on access to testing equipment led to limited testing and as a result a positivity rate of nearly 55% with stark differences in the fatality rate. In Khartoum the fatality rate was 3.8% while in Northern Darfur 31.7%. The Government of Sudan implemented strict lockdown measures shortly after the first positive case in March of 2020, which included border closures, quarantine, limitations on intrastate movement, governmental closures, restrictions on public gathering and social distancing at employers. Most restrictions had been lifted as of January 2021, although schools remained closed for fourteen months, and many healthcare centres were still shuttered. 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.



Key findings

The study found that the pandemic has increased individual risks and vulnerabilities to human trafficking 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. It 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 already vulnerable groups.

The lack of resources 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 combat human trafficking and modern slavery were put in place by governmental actors prior to the pandemic. Chief actors in government were identified by interviewees as capable advocates and governors, willing to act on the strategic goals. The hope was that this momentum would continue post-pandemic. However, it must overcome the barriers of limited resources and lack of institutional memory within governance structures. External resourcing and support were therefore identified as crucial to effective anti-trafficking governance and action in Sudan.



Impacts of Covid-19 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 persons (IDPs) 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-19 on governance

The pandemic interrupted normal functioning of government, impeding efforts to combat trafficking. Border closures all but ended cross-border collaborative anti-trafficking efforts. In addition, the pandemic reduced policing of crimes and shut down courts and criminal prosecution of perpetrators. Third sector organisations who typically supply resources to combat trafficking to the government, or provide for survivors through direct services, lost their ability to do as a result of the economic toll of the pandemic and lockdown measures.



Impacts of Covid-19 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 human trafficking. Additional risk factors identified also intersect with identity factors, with particularly vulnerable populations often disproportionately experiencing the negative impacts of poverty, conflict, environmental factors, and barriers to accessing to education and healthcare.

Women and girls

Pre-existing gender imbalances and norms in Sudan place women and girls at increased risk of particular forms of trafficking and exploitation. Women and girls in Sudan 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 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, IDPs (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 may turn to exploitation or children and child marriage as coping strategies. 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.



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 human trafficking and modern slavery.

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Acronyms and abbreviations	6
Introduction	7
About the study	9
Research questions.....	9
Covid-19 in Sudan	10
Trafficking in Sudan	12
Forms of exploitation	12
Trafficking routes.....	13
Perpetrator behaviours	16
Key vulnerabilities	18
Particularly vulnerable populations.....	18
Key vulnerability factors	27
Anti-trafficking in Sudan	32
Governance and institutions.....	32
Criminal justice mechanisms.....	34
Support for victims and survivors.....	35
Prevention.....	36
Awareness and training.....	36
Conclusion	38
Recommendations	39
Resources and aid.....	39
Migration	41
Women and women's rights.....	40
Children and children's rights	41
Education and awareness	39
Institutions and governance	42
Annex I. Methodology	43

Acronyms and abbreviations

AU	African Union
BMM	Better Migration Management
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
EU	European Union
IDP	Internally displaced person
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
NCCT	National Committee for Combatting Human Trafficking
PPE	Personal protective equipment
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
TIP	Trafficking in persons
TLC	Transitional Legislative Council ¹
TRS	Telling the Real Story
UNAMID	United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

¹ At present Sudan is governed by the Sudanese transitional government, the Transitional Legislative Council has yet to be formed.

Introduction

This cross-sectional investigation provides insights into the impacts of Covid-19 on human trafficking and modern slavery in the transitional context of Sudan. This is a topic notably absent from current academic interrogation despite the high prevalence of trafficking and modern slavery in the country,² high numbers of vulnerable refugees and internally displaced people living in the country,³ high numbers of Sudanese trafficking victims and survivors in third countries like the UK,⁴ and the current context of transitional state-building. This research is embedded in a longer-term process of political transition in Sudan, in which human rights and addressing trafficking in persons have been considered a priority. This provides the opportunity for meaningful, evidence-based recommendations to significantly influence Sudanese antislavery governance into the future. Findings are intended to support human rights protections, institutional capacity, and rule of law in Sudan, recognised to be central to building greater stability across the region.

When the Covid-19 pandemic spread globally, Sudan was engaged in a democratic transition following the 2019 deposition of Former President Omar al-Bashir by coup after three decades in power. Although Covid has delayed the Sudanese government's plans to move forward with the transition, progress has been ongoing. This includes the announcement of a raft of legislative reforms overturning some of the country's most contentious laws (decriminalising apostasy, outlawing female genital mutilation, and strengthening women's rights) indicating that the transitional government intends to fulfil its commitments to protect human rights even in the midst of pandemic. However, limitations on available resources, restructuring, lack of institutional knowledge in the transitional government, ongoing conflicts, and climate disasters have restricted the capacity of the state.

Note on language

For the purpose of this report, the term 'modern slavery' is understood as an umbrella term, including human trafficking, slavery, practices similar to slavery, servitude, forced labour, and forced marriage. These practices are understood according to the relevant definitions established in international law, and the use of the term 'modern slavery' in this report should not be interpreted as exceeding these legal definitions.

The authors recognise contestation around the use of the term 'modern slavery', and in particular note that 'human trafficking' is a more widely accepted framing in Sudan. In this report, the term 'human trafficking' is therefore used as the primary terminology to describe the various forms of exploitation contained in the international definition of trafficking in the Palermo Protocol. 'Modern slavery' is also employed in line with the project funding.

This language should not be taken as an acceptance of the understandings of either term, nor a position on the terms that ought to be employed in Sudanese law or policy.

² The 2018 Global Slavery Index placed Sudan as the 14th most prevalent country, with 12 in every 1000 people estimated to be in situations of modern slavery. Walk Free, 'The Global Slavery Index 2018' (Walk Free Foundation, 2018), 178.

³ The UNHCR reported that Sudan was host to the 5th highest number of refugees globally at the end of 2019 – UNHCR, 'Refugee Data Finder: Top International Displacement Situations by Host Countries' (UNHCR, 2020).

⁴ UK National Referral Mechanism data shows Sudan to be amongst the top ten countries of origin for potential modern slavery victims in the UK in four of the past five years (2015-2019). See Katarina Schwarz, Ana Valverde-Cano and Alexandra Williams-Woods, 'The Top 20 Source Countries for Modern Slavery Victims in the UK: Comparative Report' (The Rights Lab, April 2021) available [here](#), 8.

In the period after the deposition of al-Bashir, 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, and stretch already limited resources in the country. As one respondent noted, the pandemic ‘is just one more piece’ in an already ‘deadly’ situation.⁵

Covid-19 has increased vulnerabilities for many people in Sudan—where half the population were already living below the poverty line.⁶ Prior to the pandemic, Sudan was already experiencing soaring inflation and high unemployment rates, which have significantly worsened as a result of the virus. In May, the country’s former Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Badawi noted that government revenue had dropped 37% from previous projections,⁷ while the IMF estimated that Sudan’s economy would shrink by 7.2% in 2020 and unemployment would increase to 25%.⁸ Lockdown measures, including the closure of schools, market places, universities, and a ban on public gathering, negatively affected the livelihoods of millions, particularly those working in the informal sector.⁹ This economic instability greatly increases vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. Risks of exploitation and human trafficking are particularly acute amongst the 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers, and 1.9 million internally displaced people in the country.¹⁰



⁵ Interviewee 09.

⁶ KPMG, ‘Sudan: Government and institution measures in response to Covid-19’ (April 2020).

⁷ ‘Sudan: Coronavirus could be tipping point for untold suffering, Bachelet urges sanctions relief’ (UN News, April 2020).

⁸ International Monetary Fund, ‘World Economic Outlook: The Great Lockdown’ (April 2020), 23. The June update to the report noted that the economic impact of the pandemic had, in fact, been worse than predicted, with recovery then considered to be more gradual than previously forecast – International Monetary Fund, ‘World Economic Outlook Update: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery’ (June 2020).

⁹ ‘Sudan: Coronavirus could be tipping point for untold suffering, Bachelet urges sanctions relief’ (UN News, April 2020).

¹⁰ Mohammed Elhadi et al, ‘The Formidable Task of Fighting COVID-19 in Sudan’ (2020) Pan African Medical Journal, 35; UNDP, COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment for Sudan (2020).



About the study

This report is based on research involving survivors, governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental actors with specific expertise and activities relevant to the consideration of human trafficking in Sudan. Respondents included, among others, members of the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Sudan, individuals from the Sudanese Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of the Interior, employees of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund, Better Migration Management, Conflict and Environment Observatory, Danish Refugee Council, GIZ, Human Rights Watch, Mixed Migration Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council, Red Crescent, SUDO, Global Partners Governance, Waging Peace, representatives and contractors of the UK and French governments, and academics both within Sudan and in Sudanese diaspora communities in the UK.

Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with key informants, a supplementary survey of key stakeholder groups, a focus group discussion with UK-based Sudanese survivors of trafficking and modern slavery, and a systematic evidence review, this project has identified significant impacts of the pandemic on human trafficking in, through, and from Sudan. Further details on the methods employed can be found in [Q](#).

A focus group of Sudanese survivors in the UK was conducted in this study, wherein survivors were invited to reflect upon the findings of the research and co-create recommendations for action. Survivors were not engaged to tell their stories, but rather to provide input and insights into project outputs building on (and in some instances challenging) findings from the research. The engagement of survivors as co-creators and consultants in research activities and outputs provides insights for researchers considering new models of research that is survivor-engaged and survivor-informed.

Research was conducted rapidly over a three-month period, 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 in Sudan. As new data is collected, further interrogation will also be necessary to understand the full range of impacts of the pandemic on human trafficking and modern slavery dynamics, vulnerabilities, and responses.

Research questions

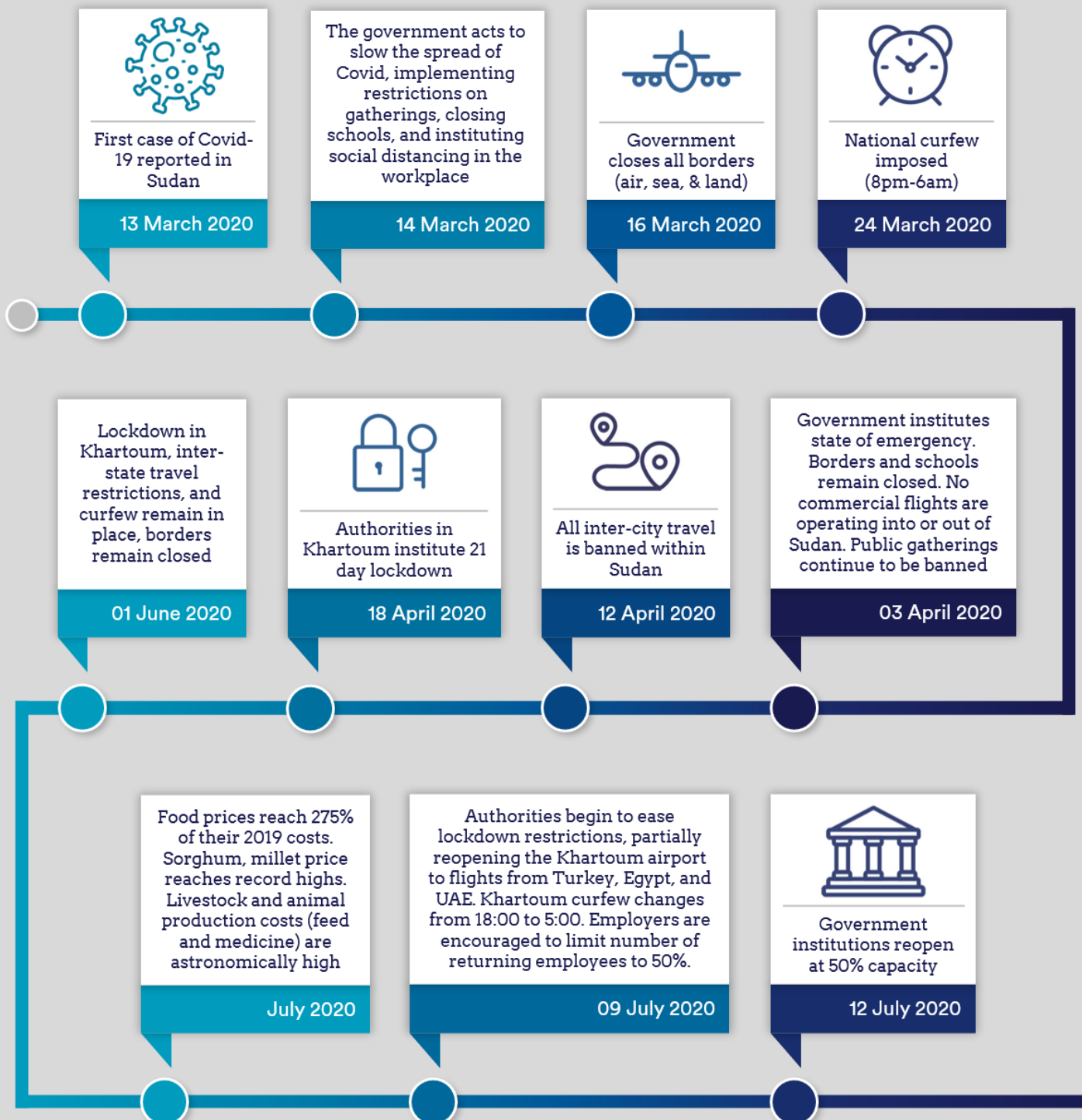
This study addressed the following five questions through multi-layered inquiry:

1. How is Covid-19 impacting the dynamics and manifestations of human trafficking and modern slavery in Sudan?
2. How is Covid-19 influencing structural, community, and personal factors that underpin vulnerability to human trafficking and modern slavery in Sudan?
3. How is Covid-19 affecting the development and implementation of anti-trafficking policy and practice in Sudan?
4. How have policy-makers and practitioners adapted their anti-trafficking efforts in response to the ongoing challenges presented by the pandemic, and to what extent have these measures been successful?
5. What measures should be adopted by policy-makers and practitioners to ensure effective anti-trafficking governance in Sudan during and after the pandemic?

Covid-19 in Sudan

As of February 2021, Sudan had reported 27,443 cases and a total death count of 1,830 from Covid-19. Limitations on access to testing equipment led to limited testing and as a result a positivity rate of nearly 55% with stark differences in the fatality rate. In Khartoum the fatality rate was 3.8% while in Northern Darfur 31.7%.

The Government of Sudan implemented strict lockdown measures shortly after the first positive case in March of 2020 which included border closures, quarantine, limitations on intrastate movement, governmental closures, restrictions on public gathering and social distancing at employers. While most have been lifted as of January 2021, schools remained closed and many healthcare centres were still shuttered.



Governments of Egypt, UAE, and Turkey send relief assistance including medical equipment, as does the Abu Dhabi fund for development and the UAE based Al Maktoum Foundation who had done so in June.

August 2020



World Bank release grant of 21.99 million USD to Sudan to address pandemic related needs.

September 2020

Government institutes Family Support Program with support of World Food Organisation who commits to distributing cash subsidies to 80% of families.

October 2020

Domestic restrictions are lifted. Public transit is operating. Most land borders are open. Protests in cities over food and cash scarcity. Polio outbreak due to lull in vaccination program.

January 2021

9.6 million people face severe hunger. Only 60% of the population have access to clean drinking water and 63% to basic sanitation. Access to healthcare services is increasingly problematic: 81% of Sudanese do not have access to a health clinic within two hours of their home. Sudan has only 184 ICU units and 160 ventilators. Schools remain closed.



February 2021

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. Donations included PPE and other medical assistance, food stuffs, and cash assistance. Nonetheless, the lockdown made food production and cultivation difficult and problematised distribution. In part as a result, over the course of the pandemic severe hunger has grown, food prices have skyrocketed, and inflation has soared.

Due to the economic conditions, the government of Sudan had the choice between strict lockdown measures and the suffering caused by those interventions. With inflation over 100 percent and GDP contracting, the lockdown's economic effect may outweigh the toll caused by the virus itself. The government has few resources to deploy to address the risk of starvation and malnutrition and implications for starvation may outweigh disease toll. In addition, with little PPE, many healthcare facilities have closed and populations have little access to medical care. The lockdown effects have had a particularly outsized effect on urban poor and others who have a high level of food insecurity. For victims, the result of these interventions is increased poverty, food scarcity, and reduced coping mechanisms.¹¹

¹¹ Covid-19 in Sudan data sources: OCHA, 'Sudan Situation Report February 2, 2021' (OCHA, 2021); HN Altayb, NME Altayeb, Y Hamadani, M Elsayid, NE Mahmoud, 'The current situation of COVID-19 in Sudan' (2020) 37 *New Microbes and New Infections*; 'Covid-19 Alert African Countries Tightening Travel Restrictions' (World Aware, 02 April 2020); 'Covid-19 and SARS Intelligence Alerts' (World Aware, March 2020); OCHA, 'Sudan Situation Report July 9, 2020' (OCHA, 2020); UN Country Team in Sudan, 'Sudan: Corona Virus - COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan CPRP - May 2020' (2020); GardaWorld, 'Sudan: National protests possible through mid-February' (GardaWorld, 2021); World Bank, 'World Bank Group provides support to help Sudan manage the health and economic impacts of Covid-19, Press Release' (The World Bank, 2020); OCHA, 'Sudan- the country continues to face the health and humanitarian consequences of Covid-19, March 2021' (OCHA, 2021); Dabanga, 'Covid-19 measures eased in Sudan' (Dabanga, July 8 2020); World Aware, 'Covid-19 alert, Sudan reopens Khartoum airport flights to Egypt, Turkey and UAE' (World Aware, July 10, 2020).

Trafficking in Sudan

Based on increased efforts to reduce trafficking in the country, Sudan was recently moved from Tier 3 to the Tier 2 Watchlist in the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) ratings.¹² This indicates that the Government of Sudan has made significant or considerable effort to comply with the minimum standards outlined in the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.¹³ This is particularly significant given that Sudan has been ranked as Tier 3 for fifteen of the twenty years of TIP reporting, and in 2018 it was assessed to be one of the ten States taking the least action to combat modern slavery in Walk Free's government response assessments.¹⁴

While the Government has made significant efforts to address human trafficking and modern slavery within and across its borders, there is considerable evidence of ongoing exploitation. Exploitation—both in the form of human trafficking and other modern slavery practices—remains prevalent in Sudan. Frequent targets include women, children, refugees, and displaced persons.



Forms of exploitation

Prior to the pandemic, common forms of exploitation reported in Sudan included: early and forced marriage;¹⁵ forced and bonded labour;¹⁶ child recruitment; forced begging; abduction and forced labour by militias; domestic work and forced prostitution.¹⁷ In particular, the following forms of exploitation were reported to be common:

Forced recruitment

Forced recruitment of children by governmental and non-governmental armed groups, both for use in armed conflict and forced labour. Recruitment occurs in various ways, targeting vulnerable individuals and families without alternative income opportunities.

Child exploitation

Exploitation of children in Khartoum in forced labour for begging, public transportation, industries such as in brick-making factories, gold mining, collecting medical waste, street vending, and agriculture, and in the sex industry. Children are exposed to threats, physical and sexual abuse, as well as to hazardous working conditions with limited access to education or health services.

Sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation, particularly of internally displaced Sudanese women and girls, as well as those from rural areas is prevalent. Increasingly well-organised and cross-border criminal syndicates force some Ethiopian women into commercial sex in Khartoum by manipulating debts and other forms of coercion. Government officials tasked with protecting vulnerable individuals were reported to have sexually exploited some refugees in Sudan's eastern provinces.

¹² US Department of State, '2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sudan' (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2019).

¹³ US Department of State, '2020 Trafficking in Persons Report' (US Department of State, 2020); US Department of State, '2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sudan' (US Department of State, 2019); US Department of State, '2018 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sudan' (US Department of State, 2018).

¹⁴ Walk Free, 'Global Findings' (Global Slavery Index, 2018). Sudan ranked ninth in this measure.

¹⁵ Michael Atit, 'Reports of Gender-Based Violence Increase in Sudan During Covid Lockdown' (VOA, 26 May 2020); Jabeen Bhatti, 'Somalian and Sudanese Girls' Lives Were Difficult Enough. They're getting worse' (Al-Fanar Media, 18 November 2020).

¹⁶ IOM, 'Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean. Trends, risks, development and governance' (IOM, 2020); Margie Buchanan-Smith and Susanne Jaspars, 'Why so many Sudanese are prepared to risk their lives to reach the UK' (Overseas Development Institute, 24 August 2020); UNHCR, 'Thousands of refugees and migrants suffer extreme rights abuses on journeys to Africa's Mediterranean coast, new UNHCR/MMC report shows' (UN News, 29 July 2020).

¹⁷ US Department of State, above n 13.

Organ trafficking

Organ trafficking targets victims based on poverty, and its perpetration is likely to continue and grow as a result of the pandemic. Prior victims are recruited and paid to find other victims. Victims are often transported to Egypt where their kidneys are removed.

Domestic exploitation

Exploitation in domestic work is recorded as prevalent, particularly affecting internally displaced Sudanese women and girls, and those from rural areas. Sudanese traffickers are also noted to compel Ethiopian women to work in private homes in Khartoum and other urban centres.

Debt bondage

Debt bondage was reported to be common in Sudan, with no legislation in place specifically addressing the practice. Debt bondage was noted to be particularly prevalent amongst migrating communities, as well as in internal instances of human trafficking and modern slavery occurring within Sudan. This form of exploitation was noted to be ‘slipping through the cracks’ in the country.¹⁸

Exploitation in migration

Different types of abuse and exploitation also occur along mixed migration routes from East and West Africa to and through North Africa—routes travelled by people from Sudan—as well as people moving through Sudan from countries such as Eritrea and Ethiopia.¹⁹ The vast majority of women and girls travelling these routes are victims of **sexual gender-based violence** during the journey,²⁰ and between 66-77% of respondents in an IOM survey had experienced either **work without payment, forced work**, being held against their will, or been targeted for an **arranged marriage**.²¹ Migrants on these routes are **sold for labour** or held in **debt bondage**.²²

Kidnapping for ransom was a common experience of East African migrants en route to Libya, Egypt, or Europe between 2017 and 2019, and kidnapped women and girls may be **forced into prostitution** by kidnappers.²³ In Libya, with further reduced opportunities to arrange successful passage across the sea to Europe in 2019, smugglers increasingly turned to other means to make money from those under their control, resulting in increased demands for ransom, with some people being ransomed on multiple occasions, as well as used for **forced labour**.²⁴



Trafficking routes

The Central Mediterranean route

The Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) is one of the most dangerous and deadliest migration routes in the world.²⁵ It links Sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and Europe, particularly through Libya and Egypt. As such, it frequently bisects Sudan. The absence of legal and safe paths for mobility have made resorting to smugglers to travel along the CMR to Europe almost compulsory.²⁶ Smugglers are among the most frequent perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse, although it is not restricted to them, often involving armed groups, criminal gangs, cross-border tribes, and government officials.²⁷

¹⁸ Interviewee 15.

¹⁹ UNHCR, “On this journey, no one cares if you live or die”. Abuse, protection, and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa’s Mediterranean coast’ (UNHCR and Mixed Migration Centre, 2020).

²⁰ IOM, above n 16.

²¹ Ibid, 193.

²² UNHCR, above n 19, 15.

²³ IOM, above n 16, 154.

²⁴ UNHCR, above n 19, 15.

²⁵ IOM, above n 16, 216 ff; UNHCR, above n 16.

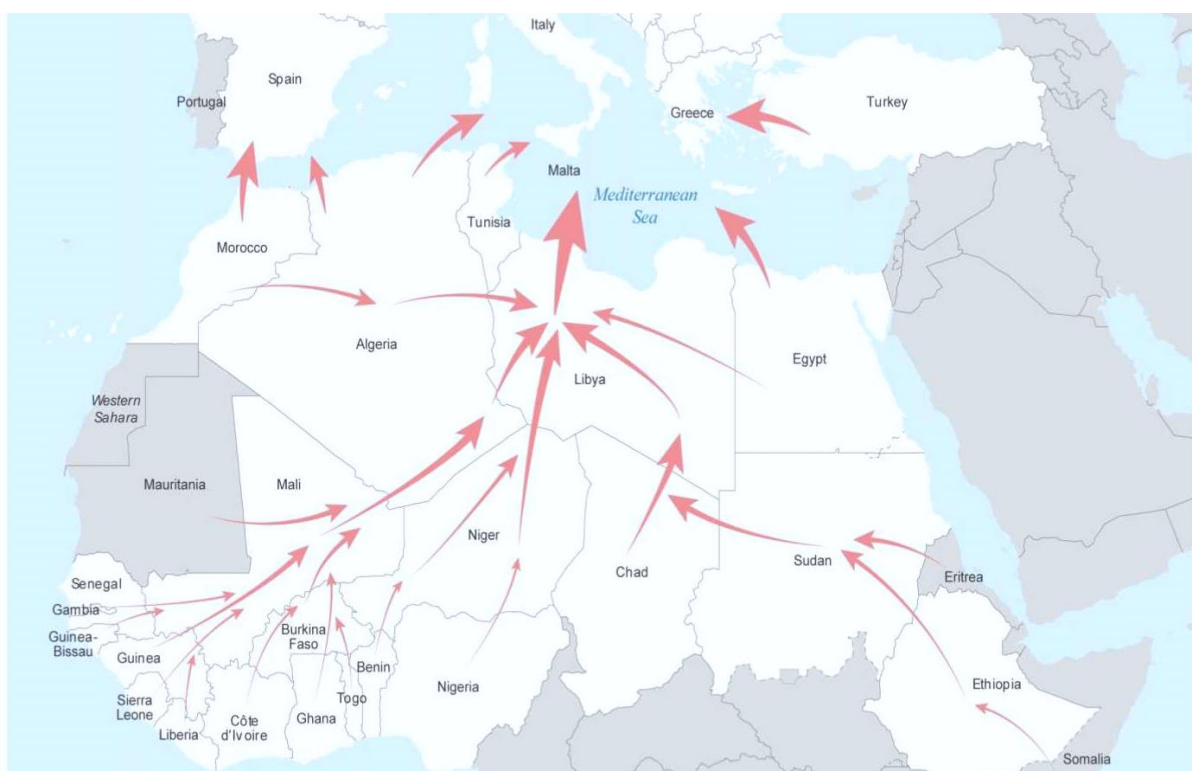
²⁶ IOM, above n 16, 220; UNHCR, above n 16.

²⁷ IOM, above n 16; US Department of State, above n 13.

Two factors facilitate irregular movement through the trans-Saharan route: (1) the proliferation of control-free areas along the journey, especially in the desert; and (2) political chaos and failures of rule of law in sections of the route, which give free rein to different types of exploitation.²⁸ These factors also make this route particularly adaptable in response to changing risks and economic costs, shifting to less well-established paths or sub-routes to circumnavigate increasing border and migration control.²⁹

More stringent policies and desire to increase profits have increased the exploitation of refugees and migrants along the route. Physical violence, robbery, kidnapping, and sexual gender-based violence are mentioned as common types of abuse along the trans-Saharan route.³⁰ Kidnapping for ransom is cited as particularly frequent among Sudanese people seeking asylum, as they are perceived as more likely to carry cash or have wealthier families to pay their rescues.³¹ Women are at high risk of rape and gender-based violence at checkpoints and border areas.³²

*Figure 1. Central Mediterranean Route*³³



Kassala and Gedaref to Khartoum and travelling north

In the east, there is a trafficking corridor of East African migrants that involves both Kassala and Gedaref and heads to Khartoum or north.³⁴ Migrants are targeted in displacement or refugee camps, particularly on the border areas with Ethiopia and Eritrea. As one interviewee in the police force commented, 'the major camps in the border where people were being displaced they were being used as the honey pots and people were being recruited from there by gangs.'³⁵ Along this route, East Africans are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Smugglers frequently avoid the well-established paths taking advantage of governance gaps and control-free areas along the journey.³⁶

²⁸ IOM, above n 16, 154; US Department of State, (2019), above n 13.

²⁹ IOM, *ibid.*

³⁰ UNCHR, above n 19, 17.

³¹ IOM, above n 16, 154.

³² UNCHR, above n 19, 27; IOM, above n 20, 367.

³³ UNHCR, 'The Central Mediterranean Route: Working on the Alternatives to Dangerous Journeys' (UNHCR 2017), 5.

³⁴ UNHCR, above n 19.

³⁵ Interviewee 15.

³⁶ IOM, above n 16; US Department of state (2019), above n 13.

“We know stuff is going on Kassala, Gedaref. It gets more challenging as you move north and west through the wilderness. There are very few areas where you can gather information about where you need to go. There is that small corridor Kassala, Ghadef, and Khartoum, but after that everything goes a little opaque.”³⁷

The Tigray conflict in neighbouring Ethiopia recently displaced over 60,000 people to Sudan, many of whom travel to, and through, Kassala and Gedaref. Children and particularly unaccompanied minors were the majority of this displaced population. Absent parental or community support, children were and are particularly vulnerable.

Darfur to Yemen

In the west, Darfur is a favoured route for perpetrators who target Sudanese nationals, particularly children, as the porous border and sustained insecurity allow traffickers to operate with impunity across the region.³⁸ Interviews indicate that children are often targeted in this area for recruitment into armed forces (militia). In particular, interviewees described the recruitment of children by Saudi forces to serve in the conflict in Yemen. Lockdown has impacted the ability of civil service groups to reach rural children susceptible to armed recruitment.³⁹

Emerging routes

In addition to the routes from the east and west, interviewees indicated that the route north towards Egypt was re-emerging. This was cited by interviewees as an example of the ways in which perpetrators are adapting to changing conditions. The border closures with Libya and criminalisation of irregular migration was forcing adaptation of the routes used. This was summarised in the following way: ‘There was a route opening up going to Egypt. That was only opening up because of the problems in Libya at that time. The routes will change in relation to conflict. Or the pandemic. If you strengthen one area, they’ll move to another.’⁴⁰

Historically, men typically migrated first from a family unit. However, the prioritisation of women and girls in UNHCR resettlement programming in Libya was reported by one respondent to have shifted this dynamic, resulting in some communities starting to encourage women, children, or whole families to travel first.⁴¹

“You feel like the second dimension is that for the border has been tightened and you will choose even a more dangerous route and approach. And I assume prices of traffickers have gone very high.”⁴²

³⁷ Interviewee 04.

³⁸ US Department of State (2019), above n 13.

³⁹ Beatrice Mosello, Adrian Foong, Christian König, Susanne Wolfmaier, and Emily Wright, ‘Spreading Disease, Spreading Conflict? Covid-19, Climate Change And Security Risks’ (The Climate Security Expert Network, 2020).

⁴⁰ Interviewee 15.

⁴¹ Interviewee 14.

⁴² Interviewee 06.

Perpetrator behaviours

Methods of perpetration

The primary methods of perpetration for human trafficking and modern slavery in, through, and from Sudan are divided into three categories:

1. Coercive;
2. Deceptive; and
3. Abusive.

In most instances, a combination of means are used to entrap victims and maintain control. Means are often experienced sequentially, with different means used at different phases of the trafficking process. This is in line with global trends, which indicate trafficking situations typically start out using deceptive means and later transition to more violent means.⁴³

“

People would go to Khartoum to go north, to move on. They were traveling into Libya, then into Chad. They would end up in a gold mine. Lot of Sudanese being held. I remember one particular case, ten or eleven guys, after a year, they said we've been working here for a year, and they said we want to go north, can we move on? And the guy said to them, you were sold to me. Now you can start working to pay me off. We have a lot of people being sold. They think they're on the move, and they're told, right before you go to the next stage, you have to work here for a year, and then they find out afterwards.⁴⁴

”

Coercive methods include abduction to perform domestic or manual labour,⁴⁵ physical coercion,⁴⁶ and kidnapping (to which Sudanese migrants are particularly vulnerable). Once kidnapped, migrants are typically held for ransom or trafficked.⁴⁷ Children are also forcibly abducted into the armed forces, sometimes with the acquiescence of officials associated with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces.⁴⁸ Deceptive means include debt bondage,⁴⁹ and false promises of better jobs in Europe or other countries.⁵⁰ Traffickers also tend to abuse victims' state of emotional dependence.⁵¹

⁴³ UNODC, 'Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020' (2021), 53.

⁴⁴ Interviewee 15.

⁴⁵ US Department of State (2020), above n 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ IOM, above n 16, 154. In the UNHRC study, most kidnappings were reported to have taken place along the route from Sudan to Egypt with the primary locations reported to be Atbara in northern Sudan (21%), Aswan in southern Egypt (18%), the desert between Sudan and Egypt (18%), and Gedaref in eastern Sudan (12%). UNHCR, above n 16, 21.

⁴⁸ US Department of State (2020), above n 13.

⁴⁹ IOM, above n 16, 367.

⁵⁰ UNODC, above n 43, 45, *passim*.

⁵¹ Ibid, 53.

The role of organised criminal networks

Organised criminal networks are noted to be common perpetrators of smuggling and trafficking in, from, and through Sudan. A combination of fixed and fluid trafficking and smuggling networks operate in the region, including from and through Sudan. Traffickers operating regionally and transnationally were reported to take advantage of local networks within Sudan, rather than operating in isolation.⁵²

Use of the internet and communications technology

The internet is recognised as an increasingly common tool for perpetrators, not only for recruiting but also for entrapping and coercing victims into crime, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and other forms of exploitation.⁵³ As one respondent observed: 'They're really now into online forms for picking, I have at least heard of this in platforms where traffickers have groups to promote this.'⁵⁴ Social media and messaging platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp have been noted to be utilised by traffickers and smugglers operating in the region.⁵⁵ The internet, where perpetrators use false identities or mask their true identities, allows greater anonymity.⁵⁶ During the pandemic, traffickers have been expanding to the new circumstances and increasingly using technology to recruit potential victims.⁵⁷

Conversely, social media has also been a source of information for potential migrants about the dangers presented by particular routes and effective in changing perceptions held by migrants.⁵⁸ Focus group participants and interviewees⁵⁹ likewise highlighted that social media campaigns could be effective tools for information-sharing with vulnerable workers, particularly domestic workers, given the saturation of social media access in Sudan.



The impact of Covid on perpetrator behaviours



Covid-19 is expected to diversify recruitment and targeting mechanisms used by perpetrators, as they adapt to the rapidly changing context. However, evidence on these emerging trends is nascent. Stakeholders indicated that many of the criminal networks, perpetrators, methods employed, and strategies have remained largely the same. The impact of the pandemic is therefore most strongly manifest in the dynamics of vulnerability and the journeys taken.

⁵² Interviewee 14.

⁵³ Ibid, 4, 14; UNODC, above n 43.

⁵⁴ Interviewee 04.

⁵⁵ UNODC, above n 43.

⁵⁶ UNODC, above n 43.

⁵⁷ Abdal-Rahman Eltayeb 'Reflections on Covid-19 and its Impact on Trafficked Women and Girls: Report from GPG Virtual Conference, 6 October 2020' (*Global Partners Governance*, October 2020), available [here](#).

⁵⁸ Interviewee 14.

⁵⁹ Interviewee 02.

Key vulnerabilities

Structural factors drive vulnerabilities to human trafficking and modern slavery and have been exacerbated by the pandemic and pandemic response measures. Sudan confronted Covid-19 in a period of structural weakness caused by economic instability, climate crisis, conflict, and food insecurity. Within this context, criminalised migration and patriarchy led certain groups to be more vulnerable to economic loss and subsequent reliance on negative coping mechanisms. Other groups were made more vulnerable by structural inequalities and geography. In general, women, migrants, refugees, IDPs, children, and pastoralists have been more likely to be affected by bordering processes and to have lost their livelihoods and security. They have therefore been more likely to experience exploitation, targeted solicitation, violence, and trafficking.

Key risk factors and the populations who have been made more vulnerable to human trafficking and modern slavery as a result of the pandemic are identified below. While these factors may be considered in isolation, in many instances these factors and identities overlap to create intersectional vulnerabilities to human trafficking. These intersections are noted to compound risk at both the individual and group level. For instance, female migrant children in situations of displacement are particularly at risk. This demands an intersectional approach to understanding and responding to human trafficking risks, including in prevention programming and in peripheral services.

Particularly vulnerable populations



Women and girls

Women's safety and livelihood strategies are disproportionately affected by the Covid crisis, with secondary but potentially severe impacts for their risk of exploitation and human trafficking.⁶⁰

“...for younger women in certain areas, they've been far more susceptible and I think they've showed the direct impact of COVID... The restrictions put in place have impacted upon women more than men.”⁶¹

The Sudanese context is shaped by an existing patriarchal power dynamic. The previous government largely permitted violence against women.⁶² Intimate partner violence and rape are legal, and until only recently, husbands had legal control over their partner's mobility. Women have not been protected by equal property and citizenship laws, leaving women unable to access the courts for basic protections.⁶³ The influence of this governing culture has affected women's participation in the public

⁶⁰ UN Women, 'Covid-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' (UN Women, 2020). This report draws evidence from previous Ebola epidemics as the basis for its conclusions.

⁶¹ Interviewee 10.

⁶² Osman Abu-Fatima, Akram Abdel Gayoum Abbas, Vincenzo Racalbuto, Lee Smith, and Damiano Pizzol, 'Child Undernutrition in Sudan: The Social and Economic Impact and Future Perspectives' (2020) 104(3) *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 1149.

⁶³ Vaishalli Handique, 'Not Just Regime Change: Women and Protest Movements in Sudan' (Global Politics, CWA #346, 17 September 2020).

sector and limited forms of help available to them.⁶⁴ The pandemic feeds into this existing dynamic of gendered inequalities and norms.

Lockdowns have closed public courts and attorney offices, leaving women with no form of legal recourse or protection. Consequently, in line with global trends, the lockdown in Sudan has contributed to further gender-based inequalities and the invisibilisation of gender-based violence and exploitation.⁶⁵ The combination of pervasive violence against women with pandemic-induced mobility restrictions is a driver of increases in violence against women, including forms of human trafficking.

Domestic violence and exploitation

Women in Sudan experience disproportionate levels of domestic violence and intimate

partner abuse, as well as other forms of exploitation in domestic contexts.⁶⁶ The pandemic has caused an increase in domestic and intimate partner violence, including severe gender-based violence and death.⁶⁷ Lockdown measures have limited contact and access to information broadly, making it more difficult for women to escape from perpetrators of domestic violence or to notify authorities.⁶⁸ Women trapped in the house by the pandemic face difficulties accessing the phone or hotlines—making it harder for them to seek information and support, or to report to authorities. Closure of public transit has problematised escape.

Violence against women in conflict

Conflict is a precursor to violence against, and exploitation of, women. Sudan continues to

experience conflict in Darfur. Women there have stated concerns over the withdrawal of UNAMID and the increased risk of sexual violence by militant groups. The lack of institutional support or contact resulting from the combination of both pandemic and conflict is predicted to cause increased vulnerabilities to sexual and gender-based violence, particularly impacting women and girls.⁶⁹ Conflict in the Tigray region of neighbouring Ethiopia is also fuelling displacement, exploitation, and abuse of women and girls including widespread rape.

Women's livelihoods

Women's livelihoods have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Women tend to be employed within the informal, service, and healthcare sectors, which have been hit the hardest by the pandemic.⁷⁰ Within Sudan, women are overrepresented in the informal sector, where restrictions on public gathering and the economic downturn disproportionately affected their ability to work. As a result, women are more likely to have lost their jobs and source of income.⁷¹ Families with limited income may be forced to make choices that increase their vulnerabilities or directly result in human trafficking and modern slavery practices.⁷² This includes early or forced marriage for girls or adolescents, often used as a coping strategy during economic downturn, and exploitative sex work, in addition to other forms of human trafficking.

Access to healthcare centres

The diversion of humanitarian funding from projects—including maternal and

reproductive health—to Covid-related needs is diminishing access to healthcare and advocacy services for women and girls.⁷³ Under normal circumstances, reproductive healthcare centres are places where women might have sought help or healthcare providers might have identified cases of

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interviewees 06 and 14.

⁶⁷ UNFPA, 'Covid-19: UNFPA Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Humanitarian Operations in Arab Region' (United Nations Population Fund Knowledge Series, 2020).

⁶⁸ Interviewee 02.

⁶⁹ Dominican Republic, Germany, and United Kingdom, 'Letter Dated 30 December 2020 from the Representatives of the Dominican Republic, Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General' (United Nations Digital Library, 4 January 2021).

⁷⁰ United Nations Development Programme, 'Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment for Sudan' (*Green Policy Platform*, 2020).

⁷¹ UN Women, above n 60.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Child Protection Sub Sector Sudan Global Protection Cluster, 'Guidance Note for Protection of Children During Covid-19 Pandemic-V1' (Child Protection Sub Sector Sudan Global Protection Cluster, 2020).

exploitation. With the closure of all planned parenthood centres as of April 2020, these opportunities for identification and support for women were lost.⁷⁴ Healthcare centres were also closed in IDP and refugee camps due to lack of PPE. The general breakdown of social service coordination caused by closure of centres has ramifications for gaps in the coordinated response and negative implications for women's psychosocial wellbeing.⁷⁵ These gaps in services and generalised lack of attention to the condition of women has decreased awareness of sexual exploitation and sexual or gender-based violence.⁷⁶

Women with intersectional identities

The impact of Covid restrictions and interventions disproportionately affect women

with intersecting vulnerabilities, in particular those in border areas, as well as refugee and displaced women.⁷⁷ As noted above, human trafficking in border areas may be increased and smuggling routes made more dangerous due to border closures.⁷⁸ Refugee women in particular may be vulnerable to these forms of smuggling.⁷⁹ Refugee encampment policy increases the risk of exploitation because refugees are not allowed to leave, and so use smugglers who exploit them to circumnavigate migration policy.⁸⁰ Eritrean and Ethiopian women who engage smugglers are often trafficked in Eastern Sudan and report gender and sexual violence during the journey.⁸¹ Eritrean women in particular are often trafficked for exploitative domestic work in Khartoum and are common victims of severe harm.⁸² The lockdown and quarantine-related measures favour exploitation in certain sectors such as domestic labour, where migrant and rural women are overly represented.⁸³



Migrant workers and people on the move

Migrants vulnerabilities to human trafficking and modern slavery have been impacted by the pandemic in a variety of ways. Sudanese migrant workers abroad have been trapped in third countries without livelihood support, forcing dangerous irregular journeys. Migrant workers within Sudan have faced disproportionate risk of livelihood loss and limited access to care and support.

Border closures instituted due to lockdown measures have created challenges and vulnerabilities for populations on the move. The closure of borders trapped migrants at the border, as well as outside and inside Sudan.⁸⁴ Sudanese workers were trapped in Egypt, unable to return home, while Ethiopian women were abandoned during smuggling attempts in Khartoum. Many migrant workers were stranded without resources to fund the return trip home or support themselves having lost their jobs and therefore their livelihoods. Forced to return home, Sudanese workers and migrants, were often dependent on smugglers to facilitate the return trip across closed borders—a trip on which they were vulnerable to traffickers.⁸⁵

The closure of Libyan borders and more specifically the closure of refuelling stations—cities within Libya who closed entry—made refuelling more difficult for migrant caravans. According to

⁷⁴ International Planned Parenthood Federation, 'Covid-19 Impact: What We Know so Far – Sudan' (International Planned Parenthood Foundation, 16 April 2020).

⁷⁵ UN Women, above n 60.

⁷⁶ UNOCHA, 'Global Humanitarian Response Plan Covid-19: United Nations Coordinated Appeal,' (UNOCHA, 2021).

⁷⁷ Peter Chonka and Yidnekachew Haile, 'Information and Communication Technologies and Mobility in the Horn of Africa: A Review of the Literature' (Research and Evidence Facility, September 2020).

⁷⁸ UNFPA, above n 108; UNOCHA, above n 76.

⁷⁹ UNFPA, above n 108.

⁸⁰ US Department of State, above n 13.

⁸¹ UNHCR, above n 19; UNHCR and John Wendle, 'Thousands of Refugees and Migrants Suffer Extreme Rights Abuses on Journeys to Africa's Mediterranean Coast' (Africa Renewal, 2020).

⁸² UNODC, above n 43; *ibid*; interviewees 02, 03 and 09.

⁸³ *Ibid*; interviewee 02.

⁸⁴ Interviewee 03.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*.

interviewees, this pushed migrant smugglers to more difficult journeys with greater risks of being targeted for trafficking, exploitation, and abuse.⁸⁶ Migrants are then susceptible to exploitation and increased risk of smugglers to navigate border restrictions.⁸⁷

Migrants with irregular status are particularly likely targets of exploitation as they are often unable or unwilling to seek help from authorities and are not typically knowledgeable about local labour laws.⁸⁸ Even those who have migrated with legal status may not be familiar with the local laws and are therefore more likely to be targeted for exploitation.⁸⁹ Gaps in legal frameworks of protection, and specifically the lack of a pathway towards legal status, leave migrants within Sudan vulnerable to exploitation in the informal sector.⁹⁰

Due to encampment policies in Sudan that prevent internationally displaced populations and other migrants with irregular status from legally working or leaving the camps, people living in camps are often dependent on irregular or informal work.⁹¹ Consequently, many have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and are increasingly desperate.⁹² The closure of institutional supports and redirection of humanitarian aid has meant that migrants and displaced communities have also lost other forms of support on which they might have relied to stabilise them in the face of risk.⁹³

Migration status itself may also increase vulnerability. Migration status can result in targeted violence against migrants when resources diminish and competition with the native population increases for basic goods.⁹⁴ Migrants have also been targeted by perpetrators of violence because of xenophobia or perceptions of risk associated with Covid-19.⁹⁵ Finally, migrants without access to social security protections or social welfare supports, are also unable to access Covid-19 benefits. Trapped by borders, with no means of support, and no remittances coming because families aren't making money, migrants are increasingly desperate and targeted by traffickers and perpetrators for exploitative labour.⁹⁶

“...the first thing is for the state to pay attention, for the state to provide information about the people who stay there, provide them with protection, and legislate laws that would protect them.”

The government's management of the crisis included changes to migration management tactics designed to manage the impact. The transitional government of Sudan has reduced the number of migrant detainees in detention centres, enhanced coordination between government agencies, and was preparing health isolation centres for migrants, which may ease the circumstances for victims of trafficking.⁹⁷ The impacts of these policies on migrant vulnerabilities remain to be seen.

Participants in the survivor focus group emphasised the importance of state attention on the movements of migrants, and provision of support and employment opportunities, as well as protection more broadly.

⁸⁶ Interviewee 18.

⁸⁷ UNOCHA, above n 76; interviewees 02 and 19.

⁸⁸ UNHCR, 'Sudan Covid-19 Needs and Services in IDP Camps,' (Reliefweb, 4 November 2020).

⁸⁹ UNODC, above n 43.

⁹⁰ Interviewees 02, 06, and 09.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² UNOCHA, above n 76.

⁹³ D Duclos and J Palmer, 'Background Paper: Covid-19 and Forced Displacement in the Middle East and East Africa', (Social Science in Humanitarian Action, 2020).

⁹⁴ Yasir Ahmed Mohammed Elhadi, Yusuff Adebayo Adebisi, Khlood Fathi Hassan, Salma Elmukashfi Eltaher Mohammed, Xu Lin, and Don Eliseo Lucero-Priso III, 'The Formidable Task of Fighting Covid-19 in Sudan' (2020) 35(2) *Pan African Medical Journal* 137.

⁹⁵ UNOCHA, above n 76.

⁹⁶ Walk Free, 'Protecting People in a Pandemic' (2020).

⁹⁷ Interviewee 03.

Displaced persons

In addition to migrants and people on the move generally, displaced persons are particularly vulnerable both to human trafficking and the adverse consequences of the pandemic. Displaced persons are noted to be particularly impacted by poverty and resource scarcity, which has been exacerbated by Covid as resources are redirected and services closed down.

Displaced populations in Sudan are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, as well as the secondary effects of the pandemic response.⁹⁸ There are significant populations of displaced people within Sudan at risk, including some two million internally displaced persons who are largely unable to meet their basic needs.⁹⁹ Sixty one percent are children.¹⁰⁰ These numbers are increasing or steady, with ongoing conflict in Tigray and areas of Darfur.¹⁰¹ Exacerbating the effects of economic turmoil, mobility restrictions have impacted the ability of humanitarian and civil society groups to reach displaced populations increasing their vulnerabilities.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

“There's a lack of infrastructure to assist with displaced persons. So for example, a lot of Eritreans have moved as far as Sudan, but they don't want to be in camps. When the camps were set up, they were temporary but now they're living their lives out there. There is nowhere for them to go. Sudan is slow to let people work in its country. So what you've got is the illicit economy around people who have been displaced, people are trying to find work, they're trying to support their families, they're trying to make a living in Sudan. They can't get work. They can't get work visas. They can't get legitimate. They're being targeted.”¹⁰⁴

Displaced populations in Sudan are often employed in day labour or the informal economy, as a result of restrictions on their rights to work associated with their migratory status (for internationally displaced persons) as well as situational factors. Within this sector, many lost their incomes as a result of the pandemic restrictions.¹⁰⁵ Without the ability to move to find new work, and no right to work legally, displaced populations and refugees were described as more likely to migrate. However, closed borders problematised movement and many engaged a person to assist them to overcome Covid-19 barriers.¹⁰⁶ This made them vulnerable to targeting for trafficking and exploitation.¹⁰⁷

The lack of local support entities, including community and formal institutional engagement also play a role in increasing vulnerability within displacement camps. Institutional closures during the pandemic reduced available support, including access to resources and healthcare.¹⁰⁸ Host communities may also restrict access to resources, like food and energy, as resources dwindle during

⁹⁸ Interviewee 02.

⁹⁹ United Nations Development Programme, above n 70.

¹⁰⁰ UNICEF, 'Children in Sudan: An Overview of the Situation of Children in Sudan' (UNICEF Sudan, 2020).

¹⁰¹ Child Protection Sub Sector Sudan Global Protection Cluster, above n 73; Buchanan-Smith and Jaspers, above n 16; Ann Cincia, 'Sudanese Refugees in Egypt Face Impoverished Conditions' (*The Borgen Project*, 13 October 2020).

¹⁰² Coker M et al, above n 103.

¹⁰³ Modupe Coker, Morenike O Folayan, Ian C Michelow, Regina E Oladokun, Nguavese Torbunde, and Nadia A Sam-Agudu, 'Things Must Not Fall Apart: The Ripple Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Sub-Saharan Africa' (2020) *Pediatric Research*; Walk Free, above n 96; Cincia, above n 101; UNOCHA, above n 76; Buchanan-Smith M and Jaspers S, above n 16.

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee 15.

¹⁰⁵ UNOCHA, above n 76.

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 18.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee 19.

¹⁰⁸ Sudan GBV Sub Sector, 'Guidance on Covid-19, 1st Bulletin – 22nd March 2020 – Sudan, UNFPA' (United Nations Population Fund Protection Cluster, 22 March 2020).

the crisis. IDPs and migrants who are indefinitely stranded on their journeys—sometimes for a protracted period—are likely to face targeted recruitment for trafficking and labour exploitation.¹⁰⁹

Camps were referred to as honey pots where traffickers or their representatives could enter and recruit victims at will.¹¹⁰ It is difficult to underscore how significant the experience of protracted displacement was for youth who lacked local education, employment, or integration prospects. Without them, and facing increasing restrictions under the pandemic, their motivations for migration have increased and with it their vulnerability to being targeted for trafficking and exploitation.¹¹¹

Participants in the survivor focus group highlighted the severity of intersecting challenges and vulnerabilities faced in displacement camps. Participants agreed that camps provided little opportunity for income-generating activity, and that providing legal right to work would help displaced people to be financially stable. They further noted that material deprivation in camps was common—'sometimes they eat and others they don't'—and that education for children in camps was all but forgotten. Resource scarcity was noted to be acute, with the volume of people in camps overwhelming the capacity of organisations to provide support. Where PPE had been provided, survivors noted that these were not being used, particularly by children who were simply throwing them away. With the concentration of people in camps and little space for social distancing, participants considered these to be at high risk of Covid spreading.

While education and income opportunities were seen by the focus group as important for the livelihood and wellbeing of displaced persons, participants considered security to be the most critical issue, even in the context of pandemic.

“... we are thinking all the time about protecting the kid, not from God's will, of course, but from what is taking place. So, the issue is not only about eating and drinking and stuff like that. The issue is that there is no protection whatsoever. Even the organisations themselves are not protected.”

Participants therefore emphasised the immediate importance of improving security in the camps in protecting people from human trafficking and modern slavery, as well as other forms of violence and abuse. However, participants had little faith in government provision, and called on the government to do more to support people in camps.



Children

Children are generally considered to face disproportionate and differentiated risks of human trafficking. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted children differently, with school closures creating additional risks and limiting opportunities for intervention, while sale, marriage, and exploitation of children are used as coping mechanisms in response to economic precarity.

Exploitation of children in Sudan, as well as of children migrating through and from Sudan, was already noted to be an issue of significant concern prior to the pandemic. Children are reported to be at risk of forced marriages, recruitment into armed forces, forced begging, domestic servitude, and forced labour in various high-risk sectors.¹¹² Special concern has been raised for particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people, including street children, unaccompanied minors,¹¹³ children with disabilities, youth in the informal economy, and children in institutional settings like *Khalwas*

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee 02.

¹¹⁰ Interviewee 15.

¹¹¹ Interviewee 19.

¹¹² Interviewee 07, 02, 08, 03, 06, 10, and 11.

¹¹³ Interviewee 04.

Qu'ranic schools.¹¹⁴ Children in displacement camps are also at particularly high risk.¹¹⁵ They are more prone to being separated or unsupervised for longer periods, increasing their risk of being abused or exploited.¹¹⁶ Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali children were identified as particularly at risk by interview respondents in part as a result.¹¹⁷

Interviewees emphasised that some refugee camps do not have Civil Registry Offices nearby, which impacted access to birth certificates for displaced groups. As a result, children born in Sudan lacked legal paperwork documenting their identities, making it more difficult to protect children from being targeted for trafficking and exploitation.¹¹⁸ Through lockdown and institutional closure, the pandemic has invisibilised many of these populations, making it difficult to reach them, perform assessments, or provide care.

“ In the streets when you used to see only two or three children now you see ten or fifteen, especially in Khartoum.¹¹⁹ ”

Despite reportedly high levels of child exploitation and risk in the country, efforts to address human trafficking and modern slavery of children in Sudan were noted by one respondent to be less highly politicised and securitised than efforts to address trafficking of adults.¹²⁰ There is a separate process for identifying child cases and a UNHCR process for providing legal representation to children. A number of one-stop centres have been established aimed at protecting children that include access to police, social workers, and clinics.¹²¹ There are more initiatives to improve protection and prevention for children at risk of, or experiencing, trafficking and proposals were reported to face fewer obstacles than those seeking to protect adults. In addition, there are potential positive impacts of the pandemic for some children, namely the release from detention and *Khalwas* Qu'ranic schools—some of which have been accused of abuse, mistreatment and torture—to be reunified with their families.¹²²



Rural and urban communities

Not all communities have been equally affected by the pandemic. Particular communities are more likely to be affected by the pandemic response and mitigation strategies, and in turn, to be vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. In addition to previously discussed groups, rural communities and urban dwellers are considered to be particularly at risk in Sudan.¹²³

In rural areas, particularly poor rural areas, loss of social protection or oversight of civil service groups due to conflict, climate induced conditions (flooding), and the pandemic, have made it difficult to reach the population.¹²⁴ Loss of these supportive entities increases risk of child marriage in communities where the practice is accepted.¹²⁵ In rural conflict areas, children were at risk for forced conscription by armed forces.¹²⁶ While the practice of recruiting child soldiers for external conflict is

¹¹⁴ United Nations Development Programme, above n 70; Child Protection Sub Sector Sudan Global Protection Cluster, above n 73101; interviewee 11.

¹¹⁵ Interviewee 04 and 02.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 15.

¹¹⁷ Interviewees 04, 06, and 10.

¹¹⁸ Interviewee 02.

¹¹⁹ Interviewee 06.

¹²⁰ Interviewee 11.

¹²¹ Interviewee 02.

¹²² Interviewee 11.

¹²³ Mosello et al, above n 39; UNOCHA, above n 76.

¹²⁴ Coker et al, above n 103.

¹²⁵ UNHCR Global Protection Cluster 'Aftershock: Abuse, Exploitation & Human Trafficking in the Wake of Covid-19 - Global Protection Update' (Global Protection Cluster, 2020).

¹²⁶ UNOCHA, above n 76.

believed to have slowed because of border closures, conflicts continue within Sudan and with them the attendant need for child soldiers.¹²⁷

Residents of urban settlements are likely to have difficulty accessing sanitation or clean water, increasing their risk of contracting Covid-19, as well as household level vulnerability.¹²⁸ Many migrant groups live in these urban areas in Khartoum, and again without a pathway to legal status, they are particularly targeted for domestic exploitation or sexual servitude.¹²⁹



Informal workers

Lack of labour and employment protections has resulted in informal workers disproportionately experiencing job loss as a result of the pandemic. Typically without savings to cushion the loss of livelihood, informal workers are noted to be at greater risk of exploitation and trafficking when access to work is reduced.

Widespread reliance on subsistence agriculture and work in the informal economy made people in Sudan vulnerable to the effects of Covid-19 lockdowns.¹³⁰ Sudan has an extensive informal economy, which disproportionately employs already vulnerable populations. Those working in the informal sector are generally at greater risk of exploitation than those with formal employment. Prior research indicates that people are more likely to be trafficked into forced labour when labour rights have deteriorated, work is informal, people are paid less, and work is less visible (like sea fishing, domestic servitude, agriculture or mining).¹³¹ Diminishing purchasing power makes particular populations—those more likely to work within these sectors, including rural groups, women, children, migrants with irregular status, IDPs, and refugees—particularly at risk of extreme forms of poverty.¹³² This further exacerbates risks of exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking.

Without labour and employment protections, informal workers have experienced job loss at a higher rate than those in formal employment during the pandemic. Workers in the informal economy are also typically reliant on their daily income to meet their basic needs. Precarious work and low wages leave little room for accruing savings that would help to cushion economic shocks. Lack of insurance for informal workers also limits access to healthcare services for these populations. On the other, hand, interviewees noted that demand in the informal sector had not completely abated since the pandemic, and in some contexts informal markets grew.¹³³ These impacts were noted to disproportionately impact women, migrants, displaced persons, and refugees, as these populations were more likely to be employed in the informal economy than other groups.



Domestic workers

Already reported to be at increased risk of exploitation and abuse, domestic workers were noted to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and pandemic response measures. Shut inside with their employers, with opportunities to report or escape restricted, opportunities for identification were further reduced. Overall increases in domestic violence during lockdowns were considered likely to impact domestic workers.

¹²⁷ Interviewees 04 and 05.

¹²⁸ UNHCR, above n 125.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Interviewee 06, 09, and 10.

¹³¹ UNODC, above n 43.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Interviewees 09 and 10.

Domestic workers were already frequent targets of sexual violence and labour exploitation in Sudan, which was reported to have increased during the lockdown period. Incidents such as forced detainment of housemaids by employees,¹³⁴ suggest that this type of work—outside of public view—may be subject to increased risk of exploitation and abuse. Domestic workers’ isolation, lack of contact with community, lack of knowledge of local labour laws, and accommodation in the homes of their employers contribute to vulnerability. The vulnerability of domestic workers is noted to intersect with issues of poverty, illiteracy, age, gender, and irregular status, with Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants, as well as Sudanese nationals from rural areas, considered particularly at risk.¹³⁵ The invisibilisation of domestic workers, both within communities and in law, contributes to their exploitation and victimisation. One interviewee particularly highlighted the need for reform of the 1955 Domestic Servants Act, to align with international standards and so that ‘the rights of those invisible domestic workers cannot be violated’.¹³⁶

Domestic workers were identified as particularly impacted by Covid and related response measures. Isolation was exacerbated by the pandemic, as activities of domestic workers outside the house were reduced by lockdown and restrictions on movement. At the same time, many domestic workers were locked down with their employers, subjecting them to higher levels of monitoring and thus little opportunity for connecting with support. Increases in domestic violence overall during lockdowns have also impacted domestic workers, placing them at higher risk of abuse. The issues of domestic worker vulnerability and informal economy were also noted to intersect, with domestic workers more likely to be employed informally and therefore experiencing the risks and impacts associated with informal employment as well as domestic work.¹³⁷

Participants in the survivor focus group emphasised that domestic exploitation, particularly in Khartoum, was a critical issue in Sudan that required concerted and dedicated attention. Participants emphasised the difficulties of identifying exploitation in domestic contexts, the severity of exploitation that occurs, and over-representation of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese migrants, as well as Sudanese nationals from rural areas and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This was considered to be exacerbated by a lack of attention of the Sudanese state on migrants generally, as well as domestic workers specifically.

“ You wouldn’t see what is happening behind closed doors, but inside houses only God knows what takes place. There is humiliation and, should you be in their place, you wouldn’t live there or work there whatever the reasons may be. ”

Participants went on to recommend awareness raising as a critical activity to help address exploitation in domestic work, noting that use of social media for such outreach could be effective as ‘the media has access to every house’. The group therefore advocated the development and dissemination of material, clips, and publications through social media that would ‘would illustrate all the laws, so that these workers themselves become aware of, as well as the society, so that they won’t get violated’.

¹³⁴ IOM, above n 16, 186.

¹³⁵ GIZ, ‘First Steps Taken to Protect Migrant Domestic Workers in the Sudan’ (EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 21 September 2020); interviewees 03, 06, 07, and 09.

¹³⁶ Interviewee 03.

¹³⁷ Interviewee 06.

Key vulnerability factors



Poverty and socioeconomic conditions

Already high rates of poverty and material deprivation in Sudan were exacerbated by the pandemic. Poverty is known to be a significant driver of human trafficking and modern slavery, making people vulnerable to being targeted for trafficking as well as resulting in negative coping strategies such as child marriage, child labour, and transactional sex.

“Another factor which is strongly related to Covid-19 is the economic crisis in the country.”¹³⁸

Within Sudan, high rates of existing poverty have been exacerbated by the continental recession and economic contraction. Over 50% of the population of Sudan was already in poverty prior to the spread of Covid-19, a situation which has been made worse by the pandemic.¹³⁹ Sudan had not recovered from the economic shock of 2011, and was experiencing high levels of fiscal deficit, inflation, inequality, and instability when the pandemic reached the country. The economic impact of the Covid response, and in particular the inflation rate (at its highest since 1996), caused food prices to consume 75% of household income.¹⁴⁰ As of March 2021, food costs had risen 146% within Sudan.¹⁴¹ The high costs of food results in increases in material deprivation, as people are forced to spend a higher proportion of income on food at the expense of other needs, or have insufficient income to meet basic subsistence needs. An estimated 9.6 million people were considered to be in Crisis or worse levels of severe acute food insecurity in June–September 2020.¹⁴² Over 20% of children under five are experiencing chronic wasting, and about one third are stunted by serious malnutrition.¹⁴³ This impact is more harshly felt in migrant and IDP camps, where lack of clean water and population density, combined with extreme poverty, increases household level vulnerability by distracting resources.¹⁴⁴

The relationship between poverty and human trafficking victimisation has previously been established.¹⁴⁵ Material deprivation is a key predicting determinant of exploitation. Areas with the highest pandemic-induced economic contraction are therefore likely to see the biggest growth in human trafficking.¹⁴⁶ Vulnerabilities within these places will be borne unequally.¹⁴⁷ Push factors—including poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities for decent work—may increase the precarity of individuals in these situations.¹⁴⁸

¹³⁸ Interviewee 04.

¹³⁹ FAO, ‘Sudan Revised Humanitarian Response Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) May–December 2020’ (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2020).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Mosello et al, above n 39.

¹⁴² FAO, above n 139.

¹⁴³ Abu-Fatima, above n 62.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid; Kakkie Cilliers, Marius Oosthuizen, Stellah Kwasi, Kelly Alexander, TK Poee, Kouassi Yeboua, and Jonathan D Moyer, ‘Exploring the impact of Covid-19 in Africa: a scenario analysis to 2030’ (Institute for Security Studies, Gordon Institute of Business Science, and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, June 2020).

¹⁴⁵ UNODC, above n 43.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ UNODC, above n 43.

¹⁴⁸ Walk Free, above n 96; UNOCHA, above n 76; IOM, above n 16, 186.

“...people have to eat at the end of the day. Lockdown, economic crises, isolation—if economic crisis is one of the reasons that triggers more trafficking then it’s the worst times.”¹⁴⁹

A component factor of this is the implications of hollowed out public services caused by endemic poverty. Defunding has implications for mitigating the impact of the pandemic and helping vulnerable populations to avoid targeting by traffickers or exploitative agents. Further, resources have been redirected from core humanitarian services to fight the pandemic, increasing existing vulnerabilities for populations like displaced people who relied on them.

Sudan’s capacity to negotiate the crisis is limited by its financial situation.¹⁵⁰ The nation has debt arrears and cannot borrow money, meaning they are less able to address the crisis and mitigate the impact.¹⁵¹ In the absence of humanitarian aid or debt restructuring, the likelihood is that these economic shocks will increase the use of negative coping mechanisms for at-risk populations.¹⁵²

Poverty and vulnerabilities particularly affect already at-risk groups. Common targets for victimisation include members of low-income households, children in extremely poor households, and children in households with no parental care or high levels of dysfunction.¹⁵³ Within these groups, people in desperate need of employment and with other barriers are particularly at risk of being trapped in forced labour situations or trafficked for labour elsewhere, notably women and migrants without documentation.¹⁵⁴ Refugees in encampment situations with limited mobility or rights to employment may be pushed into more vulnerable work by constricted options.¹⁵⁵ Common coping strategies for economic hardship in the region include child marriage,¹⁵⁶ child labour, and transactional sex as a survival strategy.¹⁵⁷

Education

School closures created increased risk of human trafficking and modern slavery, particularly for girls, displaced populations, and rural students. As economic conditions deteriorate, children at home face increased risk of exploitation and child marriage employed as coping mechanisms. School closures also removed an important mechanism for identifying at risk children and intervening to prevent exploitation.

Schools provide a stabilising force for children—a civil service organisation that monitors students and their well-being.¹⁵⁸ Schools in Sudan were closed under the national lockdown and remained so for fourteen months, reopening in May of 2021.¹⁵⁹ School closures disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Most significantly affected in Sudan were young girls, displaced populations, and rural students.¹⁶⁰ Girls are less likely to return to school following prolonged school closures.¹⁶¹ The longer they are out of school, the more significant the increases in household responsibility and decreased likelihood of a return to school. With restricted resources, commentators predict the likelihood of

¹⁴⁹ Interviewee 06.

¹⁵⁰ Interviewees 15 and 17.

¹⁵¹ Cilliers and others, above n 144.

¹⁵² IOM, above n 16.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Jeremy Pervis, ‘Parliamentary Response to Crisis: The Secondary Effects of Covid-19 on Women at Risk to Human Trafficking’ (*Global Partners Governance*, June 2020).

¹⁵⁵ UNODC, above n 43.

¹⁵⁶ Pervis, above n 154; UNICEF, above n 100.

¹⁵⁷ UNOCHA, above n 76.

¹⁵⁸ UNICEF, above n 100; United Nations Development Programme, above n 70.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Joy in South Sudan, as schools reopen after 14-month COVID lockdown’ (UN News, 4 May 2021).

¹⁶⁰ IOM, above n 16; Pervis, above n 154; Natalie Seo, ‘Covid-19 Is Pushing Girls to Marry Early and Drop Out of School: Reports’ (*Global Citizen*, 5 June 2020).

¹⁶¹ Windle International, ‘Five Ways Covid-19 Has Affected Education in Eastern Africa’ (Windle International, 2020).

early/forced marriage and pregnancy will increase.¹⁶² This prediction is based on evidence from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, where more families arranged marriages for their children to secure dowry as economic conditions deteriorated.¹⁶³

Rural students and refugee students out of school are also susceptible to exploitation. In this case, rural school leavers are frequently recruited by armed groups.¹⁶⁴ Refugee students or displaced youth cannot enrol in secondary school in Sudan, leading many to migrate again. The compounding loss of education, alongside climate change, the locust infestation, loss of household income, and reduction in social services has increased poverty and with it the risk of exploitation, trafficking, and forced marriage.¹⁶⁵ While school closures overall have potentially negative consequences for young people's risk of human trafficking, the return of young people from *Khalwas* Qu'ranic schools to be reunified with their families may have positive impacts on vulnerability of some of these students.¹⁶⁶ As noted above, children in these settings have been reported to be particularly at risk of abuse in some cases.



Conflict

Ongoing conflict in Sudan and neighbouring countries (particularly in the Tigray region of Ethiopia) have coincided with the pandemic, creating intersecting vulnerabilities to human trafficking and modern slavery. Pandemics are noted to accentuate vulnerabilities in conflict zones along common fault lines.

Various conflicts impact human trafficking dynamics within, through, and from Sudan. Sudan continues to experience conflicts in several 'geographically peripheral' areas. These conflicts are rooted in calls for political representation, self-determination, and secession from states including Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile. In response, the Sudanese central government had used systematic violence, rape, and ethnic cleansing.¹⁶⁷ These conflicts overlapped (and at times were part of) the civil war fought with South Sudan, ultimately resulting in its secession and independence in 2011.¹⁶⁸ These conflicts contribute to underlying vulnerabilities to trafficking and modern slavery.

“Movement started again though because you have the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia or at least that area in that region where we've had a civil war taking place, lots moving, and then you've got displaced people, through that you have a migration issue, and a human trafficking problem.”¹⁶⁹

Evidence from prior conflicts has shown that pandemics accentuate vulnerabilities along common fault lines in conflict zones. Human trafficking and modern slavery are evidenced in 90% of modern wars.¹⁷⁰ Principally, conflict fuels a need for new combatants, and therefore forced recruitment. As displaced persons are commonly targeted, the pool of potential victims grows as conflict and instability displace greater numbers of people. In addition, forced marriage is a common tactic of militant groups. Finally, armed groups use human trafficking and modern slavery as a form of suppression and terror against other populations. In conflict contexts, state institutions and humanitarian actors are often absent or have limited capacity, decreasing oversight and increasing

¹⁶² UNICEF, above n 100; Seo, above n 160.

¹⁶³ Seo, above n 160.

¹⁶⁴ UNODC, above n 43; Mosello et al, above n 39.

¹⁶⁵ UNICEF, above n 100; UNODC above, n 43.

¹⁶⁶ Interviewee 11.

¹⁶⁷ See BBC, 'Quick Guide: Darfur' (BBC, 6 December 2006).

¹⁶⁸ For an overview, see Council on Foreign Relations, 'Civil War in South Sudan' (Global Conflict Tracker, 2021).

¹⁶⁹ Interviewee 15.

¹⁷⁰ Kevin Bales, Angharad Smith and Monti Datta, 'Contemporary slavery in Armed Conflict Dataset' (*Contemporary Slavery in Armed Conflict*, 2020), available [here](#).

vulnerability.¹⁷¹ In sum, conflict and protection issues are amplifiers of human trafficking and modern slavery practices.¹⁷²

With conflict and displacement comes greater vulnerability to human trafficking and modern slavery practices for women and children in particular.¹⁷³ Women are particularly at risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation within conflict zones, where women are 70% more likely to experience gender-based violence.¹⁷⁴ Children are targeted for sexual violence, for forced conscription as soldiers, or for child marriage. Children travelling alone are also more vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation and human trafficking.¹⁷⁵ While the impacts of the pandemic on conflict dynamics remain to be seen, the intersection of vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by the pandemic with conflict-related trends amplify risk.



Healthcare

Access to healthcare in Sudan was already diminished prior to the spread of Covid-19, and exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Healthcare is not accessible to all, with particular populations disproportionately facing barriers to access. Healthcare access issues can divert resources away from other basic needs, exacerbating material deprivation and increasing risks of human trafficking and modern slavery.

“ I have not talked yet to the vulnerability of the disease. This is another issue. I am a hundred percent sure none of them has received a mask or sanitary gloves. They [Ethiopian migrants] have not received basic products to keep away from getting infected. ¹⁷⁶ ”

Healthcare access in Sudan has been diminished by conflict, climate disasters (in particular flooding), and the pandemic, which has resulted in widespread facility closures.¹⁷⁷ These factors have come on top of defunding by the previous administration leaving only 1.9 doctors for every 10,000 people in the country.¹⁷⁸ Further, due to restrictions and lack of PPE, women's reproductive services were largely closed, and entirely closed in some areas of the country.¹⁷⁹ As a result, there are fewer institutional checks on women's well-being, or providers to respond to sexual health crises and emergencies. Elsewhere in Sudan, military facilities have refused access to clinics for people with Covid-19, prompting concerns about household level vulnerabilities.¹⁸⁰ Access to healthcare for migrant communities and informal workers was reported to be particularly low, and costs of healthcare particularly high, as a result of lack of medical insurance.

“ And they do not have access to medical services... So it's more costly for migrants to receive treatments, because they do not have insurance... I am sure this has led to more exploitation. ¹⁸¹ ”

¹⁷¹ Ibid; ICRC (2020) 'Sudan: Food Shortages Widespread as Communities Face Triple Threat' (ICRC, 2020).

¹⁷² 'Save the Children, above n 184.

¹⁷³ Emeline Wuilbercq, 'Lone Ethiopian Child Refugees Seen at Risk of Exploitation in Sudan' (Reuters, 15 January 2020); Mohammed Elhadi et al, above n 94; UNOCHA, above n 76.

¹⁷⁴ UNFPA, above n 108.

¹⁷⁵ UNOCHA, above n 76; Child Protection Sub Sector Sudan Global Protection Cluster, above n 73; Wuilbercq, above n 173.

¹⁷⁶ Interviewee 09.

¹⁷⁷ Abu-Fatima et al, above n 62; Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, 'Bad Company: How Dark Money Threatens Sudan's Transition' (European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2020).

¹⁷⁸ Abu-Fatima et al, above n 62.

¹⁷⁹ International Planned Parenthood Federation, above n 74.

¹⁸⁰ Gallopin, above n 177.

¹⁸¹ Interviewee 09.

Lack of access to healthcare may lead families to divert resources to cover healthcare costs from other basic needs. This in turn results in increased vulnerability to exploitation and human trafficking, and advergence to negative coping strategies that include human trafficking and modern slavery practices.

Outside of Sudan, irregular Sudanese migrants lack access to healthcare, putting them at risk of stigmatisation and marginalisation in addition to increased household vulnerabilities. With no sick leave from work, families who have sick members forced to quarantine are more likely to become economically precarious.¹⁸²



Environmental factors

The pandemic in Sudan intersected with multiple environmental crises to exacerbate vulnerabilities to human trafficking. Excessive rain, flooding, and locust infestation increased displacement, food insecurity, and precarity. In conjunction with the pandemic, these conditions increased vulnerability to human trafficking and modern slavery.

The linkages between climate induced changes, human trafficking and modern slavery, and the pandemic within Sudan are not yet fully understood. There are identified linkages between climate change and conflict elsewhere and in the region, suggesting that the experiences of climate change and severe weather—evidenced in excessive rain, flooding, and locust infestation—will increase vulnerability to conflict and disease.¹⁸³ The most vulnerable populations are the same populations most adversely affected by the pandemic: refugees in camps (informal settlements with poor sanitation), urban poor without proper sanitation, pastoralists and subsistence farmers whose livelihoods are affected, and rural groups in areas of conflict who are difficult to reach.¹⁸⁴ With the reduction in humanitarian presence,¹⁸⁵ groups have less contact with government or institutional supports that protect them from exploitation.¹⁸⁶ Further, the reduction in resources will decrease food security and may increase tensions over resources possibly increasing conflict.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Walk Free, above n 96.

¹⁸³ Mosello et al, above n 39; UNOCHA, above n 76.

¹⁸⁴ FAO, above n 139; Save the Children, 'Sudan: 250,000 Children Impacted by Flooding as the Nile Records Highest Water Levels in over a Century' (Save the Children, 2020); Mosello et al, above n 39.

¹⁸⁵ UNICEF, above n 100.

¹⁸⁶ UNFPA, above n 108; UNHCR, above n 19, 16.

¹⁸⁷ UNICEF, above n 100.

Anti-trafficking in Sudan



Governance and institutions

At the time of this research, the Government of Sudan had recently undertaken a three-year strategy to address human trafficking. Its success was framed around the buy-in of key government officials, the oversight of the National Committee for Combatting Trafficking, and the participation of third sector organisations for funding and implementation. Interviewees indicated that the government had demonstrated the will to implement the strategy, despite the transition in government and the pandemic.¹⁸⁸ Key actors within the government—including the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Justice¹⁸⁹—were identified by interviewees as well positioned, dedicated actors committed to developing and implementing antislavery practices. Participating actors across multiple organisations include UNHCR and BMM, largely through the NCCT.

The overall framework of governance for implementation was built around commissions, with direct links to the parliament and administration.¹⁹⁰ International donors further supported implementation, encouraging interviewees that it could be successful.¹⁹¹ This builds on previous linkages between international donors and awareness, training, and prevention. International entities had assisted in providing extensive training to government and police, which led to a perceived culture shift exhibited in a willingness to act.¹⁹²

“The needs are so immense. The resources are so low. That is a challenge for them. This is where external support can help as far as prioritisation... There is desire to tackle this now and the issue just becomes resources and the capacity. There has been huge turn over in the officials. From the previous regime. There’s a huge lack of institutional memory loss across the board. [...However,] I have not detected any reduction in desire to tackle these, in fact I’ve seen an increased desire...”¹⁹³

While an appetite for improved antislavery governance was highlighted, there were noted barriers to the implementation of this strategy. Much of the legislation governing migration, trafficking, modern slavery, and forms of exploitation was considered outdated and requiring attention by the stakeholders working to protect at risk populations and provide care to survivors.¹⁹⁴ The 2010 Act, the 1977 Domestic Terrorism Act, and the 2014 Combatting of Human Trafficking Act were described as non-compliant with international law.¹⁹⁵ Advocates called for the ratification of CEDAW and the continued promotion of gender equity within legislation, and the implementation of the anti-trafficking frameworks.¹⁹⁶ At the end of April 2021, the Sudanese government voted to ratify CEDAW. However, reservations to the endorsement of the convention articulated in the decision have drawn criticism from civil rights groups as undermining equality and the goals of the convention.¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁸ Interviewees 15, 04, 06, 10, and 11.

¹⁸⁹ Interviewee 10.

¹⁹⁰ Interviewee 10.

¹⁹¹ Interviewees 04, 06, and 10.

¹⁹² Interviewees 04 and 15.

¹⁹³ Interviewee 10.

¹⁹⁴ Interviewees 04, 06, and 10.

¹⁹⁵ Interviewees 04, 15, 06, and 10.

¹⁹⁶ Jacqui True, Yolanda Riveros-Morales, Sara Davies, and Phyu Phyu Oo, ‘Conflict Zones, and Covid’s Impact on Gender-Based Violence Reporting’ (Monash University Lens, Politics and Society, 08 December 2020).

¹⁹⁷ The New Arab Staff, ‘Activists disappointed as Sudan government votes to ratify women’s rights convention with reservations’ (The New Arab, 30 April 2021); Naba Mohieddeen ‘Sudan Ratifies Women’s Rights Convention — With Exceptions’ (VOA, 29 April 2021).

The limited resources available to combat human trafficking were noted to be a significant barrier to implementation.¹⁹⁸ The pandemic further stretched already limited resources, with the national budget being focused elsewhere.¹⁹⁹ The transitional government's ability to manage the pandemic, or actualise anti-trafficking policy as a result, was seen as vastly insufficient by interviewees and focus group participants.²⁰⁰ In addition, the effectiveness of government efforts was seen to be hampered by a lack of institutional knowledge, memory, and experience—a direct result of the transitional nature of the Sudanese context.²⁰¹ This concern was echoed by survivors in the focus group, expressing concern at the limited capacity, lack of experience, and lack of awareness of the transitional government.

“ If we think logically about it, you cannot grow a plant that is already missing, and then expect it to bear fruits. This is impossible. ”

However, participants also recognised the challenges faced by the transitional government and the limited time in which they have operated. Participants therefore acknowledged the need for patience as the government rebuilds.

As significantly, a widespread lack of coordination across the country was noted, with divergent approaches by region caused in part by the governmental transition.²⁰² While core staff were in place, with an ambitious plan to combat human trafficking, the bureaucratic processes and accompanying civil servants were described by interviewers as in disarray due to the reorganisation implemented by the Dismantling Committee during the transition.²⁰³ In addition, interviewees reported a perception held by governmental officials that the problem of trafficking was not a Sudanese problem, but that Sudan was a transit country for external actors. This perception was reported to affect the willingness or ability of actors to respond.²⁰⁴ Combined, these factors negatively impacted the ability of official mechanisms to identify and support victims and survivors, as well as impeding persecution of perpetrators.²⁰⁵

“ At a macro level the ongoing support of international community—external support and donor conferences—is really valuable for them and is necessary...Consensus bodies are important. Whilst it may be a cluttered framework of governance, these are a result of negotiations and consensus and therefore have a valuable role just by being there the capacity side for them is very limited. And there is another area of external support. It is the capacity and resource issue. ”²⁰⁶

Despite the legislative framework to combat human trafficking, governance decisions contribute to an increase in trafficking vulnerabilities. First, the decisions to close borders encouraged smuggling and dangerous forms of trafficking and exploitation.²⁰⁷ Border closures increased the costs to smugglers/traffickers and therefore may have increased the risk of experiencing exploitation by smugglers/traffickers or abduction and extortion.²⁰⁸ This builds on a migration ‘criminalisation’ trend, which has amplified the dangers of migration in the Sahara to trafficking.²⁰⁹ Second, in general, restrictions on mobility have made it difficult for pastoralists, women, and refugees to employ livelihood strategies. This can contribute to the use of alternative forms of income, including child

¹⁹⁸ Efforts to address modern slavery in Sudan are primarily framed in terms of trafficking in persons, and consideration of relevant governance and policy therefore refers to trafficking rather than modern slavery.

¹⁹⁹ Interviewee 18.

²⁰⁰ Interviewees 04, 06, 10, and 15.

²⁰¹ Interviewees 12.

²⁰² Interviewees 18.

²⁰³ Interviewee 12.

²⁰⁴ Interviewee 18.

²⁰⁵ Interviewees 06, 10, 12, and 15.

²⁰⁶ Interviewee 10.

²⁰⁷ IOM, above n 16.

²⁰⁸ Eltayeb, above n 57.

²⁰⁹ IOM, above n 16.

marriage and transactional sex.²¹⁰ Last, the international community's priorities had driven—largely through funding—attention to trafficking resulting in its recognition as a priority area. This meant that participating in training was obligatory for police, but not for border control forces with implications for vulnerability.

International funders are unwilling to use funds to train or provide resources to the RSF forces who have been involved in ethnic cleansing and other atrocities in Darfur.²¹¹ Consequently, borders are policed and governed by RSF forces (former Janjaweed) who have not received training on human trafficking.²¹² Interviewees indicated that the members of the RSF directly benefit financially from smuggling/trafficking and irregular migration across Sudanese borders. 'Ownership' and governance over border areas with key smuggling and trafficking routes were noted to be distributed to RSF units as a means of profit generation, both by trafficking in persons and taxing migrant caravans.²¹³ The power to distribute governance over these routes was wielded, according to interviewees, by central actors who in turn benefitted.

The role of the RSF complicated policing of Sudan's borders and identification of traffickers and victims. Unwillingness of foreign partners to work with the RSF—solely responsible for border work in Sudan—leaves them untrained and the borders essentially ungoverned with regard to trafficking.

“The RSF has rightly got a bad reputation, but whatever anyone says it is the first line border patrol and if you're going to have any movement in that country land-wise, it is RSF and if you're not engaged with RSF you're not engaged with the borders.”²¹⁴

This means, paradoxically, that opportunities are missed to identify or implement anti-trafficking interventions in key areas of identification. The borders are effectively ungoverned with respect to anti-trafficking.



Criminal justice mechanisms

Efforts to address and combat human trafficking through the criminal justice system in Sudan were impeded by the virus response, further undermining an already resource-poor system. Specifically, border sweeps and criminal arrests were effectively stopped due to fears of spreading the virus within the police force and jails.²¹⁵ The government ran at fifty percent capacity, and courts were also closed by the pandemic restrictions reducing prosecution.²¹⁶ As one interviewee summarised, it led to the impression that the system was decreasing trafficking, while it was in fact a lack of policing and prosecution:

“You got it. It could have grown as a problem, but no one was going to recognise it. Like the old narcotics business. You ain't got drug squad, you ain't got drugs.”²¹⁷

Concerns about police corruption and complicity in human trafficking were raised across the various research strands, identified in secondary evidence, interviews, and survivor focus group reflections. Issues with police were noted to be complex, however, with some officials doing their best to address human trafficking in a difficult context where resources are scarce, and others taking advantage of the situation to perpetrate human trafficking and modern slavery offences. Survivor participants highlighted systemic bribery in the police, as well as instances of police overlooking exploitation or

²¹⁰ Eltayeb, above n 57.

²¹¹ Interviewee 12.

²¹² Interviewees 02 and 12.

²¹³ Interviewee 18.

²¹⁴ Interviewee 12.

²¹⁵ Interviewee 05.

²¹⁶ Interviewee 08.

²¹⁷ Interviewee 15.

participating in exploitation themselves—particularly debt bondage and sexual exploitation. Concerns were raised that this corruption and complicity went up to the highest levels, and are enabled by a lack of oversight and accountability for police abuses. Participants therefore emphasised the need for greater oversight and accountability for police forces, and the importance of the government taking action to ensure such. Survivor participants also noted the importance of transnational cooperation in criminal justice, particularly between border forces of all countries neighbouring Sudan.



Support for victims and survivors

Survivor support in Sudan was reported to have been significantly affected by the pandemic, chiefly in three ways:

1. There were difficulties reaching populations due to the pandemic, which inhibited the ability to assist survivors;
2. The pandemic affected the finances of care providers; and
3. Use of new or emergent technologies to provide support during the pandemic were developed and rolled out.

Service providers have had difficulties reaching persons of concern due to restrictions on mobility and lockdown implemented in response to the pandemic.²¹⁸ To address this, new technologies are being introduced, including a hotline for survivors of sexual and gender based violence, a hotline for psychological support and legal advice, and targeted mass media campaigns containing information on positive masculinities.²¹⁹ Elsewhere, the United Nations and UNHCR are calling for increased use of safe houses where migrants who have experienced trafficking, exploitation, or violence can go for protection, legal advocacy, and support.²²⁰

Existing safe houses are administered and/or funded by civil society organisations (CSOs). The redirection of funds by CSOs to pandemic-related causes affected the ability of these safe houses to offer services. In addition, failure to comply with Covid-19 restrictions led to the closure of several safe houses and the release of survivors with little transition planning. This put these women in direct danger.²²¹ Lastly, the UN drew attention to the reduction in funding for non-pandemic related causes, including humanitarian work to address gender violence or trafficking and a need to support women and survivors of violence to minimise the long-term impact.²²² In general, there was a lack of survivor care when the pandemic began, and the pandemic only led to further reduction in resources to support survivor care.²²³

“During the pandemic and the movement restrictions in Khartoum, UNHCR and many other humanitarian agencies... our offices were closed and our reception facilities where we provide services, counselling services to persons of concern, and the government, the RCS centres, they were closed. Due to this, we put in place the helpline and anyone who wants to seek support from UNHCR and partners, they could seek us out but the movement restrictions they had a bad impact. And of course, IOM I believe in Khartoum and in the east, I think it was also affected. Pandemic affected vulnerable communities, victims of trafficking and others, to receive timely services.”²²⁴

²¹⁸ IOM, above n 16; Ayin Network, ‘Another Pandemic: Rising Domestic Violence under Quarantine in Sudan’ (Ayin Network, 2020); Atit, above n 15.

²¹⁹ UNFPA, ‘How a Phone Number Is Preventing GBV in Sudan’ (UNFPA, 2020); Atit, above n 15; UN Women, above n 60.

²²⁰ UNODC, above n 43; Anne-Marie Biassada, ‘Coronavirus: Sudan’s Economy and Pandemic Threaten Revolutionary Gains’ (The Africa Report, 29 May 2020); Dominican Republic, Germany, and United Kingdom, above n 69; UNHCR, above n 19.

²²¹ Interviewee 02.

²²² UN Women, above n 60.

²²³ Interviewees 04, 06, 09, 10, 15, and 17.

²²⁴ Interviewee 04.



Prevention

There were areas in which Sudan and the governing entities had taken proactive steps to prevent slavery during the pandemic, or were called upon to do so. Identified interventions and preventative measures in place to reduce the pandemic's effect on instances of human trafficking were focused on the expansion of previously identified mechanisms. Actors like the non-profit entity Walk Free, and international entities UNHCR and UNODC, encourage the adoption of interventions which have been used previously in situations of increased economic precarity and vulnerability to exploitation.²²⁵ These include the use of hotlines and new technologies like social media to reach potential victims. Additionally, while the three-year strategy is a good first step, there was widespread support for updating existing legislation to ensure compliance with present day antislavery frameworks.²²⁶ Further action should include extending legal protection for domestic workers and extending support desk and legal aid services to adults.²²⁷

Concerns were raised about the impact of governmental interventions on the capacity to prevent human trafficking during this period. Public facing governmental institutions were shuttered during the crisis, including police, courts, and civil service organisations. Cross-border cooperation activities were halted.²²⁸ In lieu of these collaborations, communication is ongoing, but the instruments have not been adapted leaving gaps in the governance structure.



Well in the case of Sudan, and Ethiopia...we would have had to adapt our instruments. We would not have been able to organise a cross border meeting as we did in the past. Communication was still ongoing...the will was yes, so it is like how do we do it better? For most of these activities, we don't necessarily have alternatives to what we do before.



Awareness and training

As with prevention efforts, several awareness raising efforts were identified in interviews and secondary evidence for combatting increased vulnerabilities caused by the pandemic. The tactics employed were not new, but emphasis was placed on use of technologies to disperse messaging to reach vulnerable populations whose mobility and engagement with institutions was limited.²²⁹ This included development and dissemination of awareness materials to combat online targeting.²³⁰ There was also increased emphasis on the need to target awareness campaigns to the geographic areas where trafficking victims originated, both to young children and potential victims.²³¹

The UNHCR program *Telling the Real Story* (TRS) was identified by interviewees as a good model.²³² Advocates called for the use of victim centred approaches, in particular those that built on people's experiences and amplified their voices within the community such as TRS.²³³ In addition to incorporating the voices of trafficking survivors, multiple actors identified implicit male supremacy as a barrier to service delivery and policy.²³⁴ Advocates pushed for the implementation of a gendered lens in awareness and prevention.

²²⁵ Walk Free, above n 96; UNICEF, above n 100; Seo, above n 160; IOM above n 16; Eltayeb, above n 57.

²²⁶ Interviewees 04, 15, 06, and 10; True et al, above n 196.

²²⁷ Interviewee 02.

²²⁸ Interviewee 15.

²²⁹ Ayin Network, above n 218.

²³⁰ UNODC, above n 43.

²³¹ UNHCR (2020), above n 19; IOM, above n 16.

²³² Interviewee 04.

²³³ Interviewee 10.

²³⁴ True et al, above n 196.

“One measure that I also think should continue is being done with other actors in Khartoum, [to] call on the network within the community itself. A lot of VOTs [victims of trafficking] exist there. And that is a focus I think we should have. In order for us to gain the information to raise awareness of the persons of concerns, to make a sound decision if onward movement is really what they want to do, it’s a lot about working with communities themselves to educate them on the risks of onward movement and perils, which could end up in trafficking.”²³⁵

With recalibration, it is noted that awareness raising and training within the government, security, and police forces responsible for anti-trafficking governance were broadly deemed adequate by participants and orchestrators. There were multiple forms of training and awareness in place. The police training authority had previously launched training on victim identification and protection principles.²³⁶ This was complemented by a governmental training program for members of the military designed to teach them to recognise child protection issues including child soldiering.²³⁷ UNHCR continues to train or provide training to the Territorial Commission to assist them in identification of trafficking victims.²³⁸

The pandemic affected delivery of training and awareness activities, contributing to existing challenges. Much of the work put in place to address trafficking relied on cross border cooperation or internal cooperation between different sectors of the government. The three-year strategy and the NCCT built cooperation across and between actors to address facets of human trafficking and modern slavery. International organisations and third sector actors have a history of collaborating with local actors. However, the pandemic limited the ability of groups to meet or act.²³⁹ Further, the Empowerment, Entitlement, Anti-Corruption and Funds Recovery Committee recommended dismissal of a number of employees, leading to their departure and loss of governmental institutional memory. This left gaps in knowledge processes, and capacity to perform bureaucratic tasks.²⁴⁰ Additional barriers to implementation included insufficient resources to implement programs and corruption within the police force.²⁴¹ Low salaries were perceived to encourage the taking of bribes by police according to one interviewee.

²³⁵ Interviewee 04.

²³⁶ US Department of State, above n 13.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ IOM, above n 16.

²³⁹ Interviewee 09.

²⁴⁰ Interviewee 12.

²⁴¹ Interviewee 15.

Conclusion

The toll of the pandemic was felt most heavily by Sudan's most precarious populations. The pandemic undermined the ability of these groups to seek physical safety from conflict or abuse by shuttering support and criminal justice institutions. The lockdown interfered with their abilities to practice their livelihood strategies, exacerbating poverty risks. Border closures meant that migration to circumnavigate the impacts of the virus and lockdown was made more difficult, increasing vulnerabilities to exploitation. Humanitarian actors—who often provide critical aid in Sudan—were affected by the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Intersecting crises, ongoing transition, and instability meant that Sudan was poorly situated to respond to the needs of their most vulnerable populations when the pandemic hit. The lack of resources and diminished institutional presence further amplified vulnerabilities, leaving many vulnerable to extreme deprivation and targeting by perpetrators.

Despite the constraints presented by the current Sudanese context, evidence collected demonstrated belief in the will of the government to address the issue of human trafficking. This was further reinforced by the implementation of a collaborative multi-year strategy to eradicate human trafficking that—despite the pandemic—was ongoing. The leadership and participants implementing this strategy were lauded as committed and capable actors. While the current crisis in Sudan continues to wreak havoc, there was some hope that the incorporation of the goals addressing human trafficking and modern slavery would lead to long term change.

Significant barriers to achieving effective antislavery in Sudan were identified. The transitional nature of the government, and the large amounts of overturn in employees meant that, while there was legislation in place, there was little infrastructure and support in place to actualise policy. Further, irrespective of will, areas of governance require immediate attention to address human trafficking and modern slavery. The government needs to address the issue of border management, ensuring that groups responsible for border management are properly trained and receive adequate resources to combat trafficking. More broadly, issues of corruption and abuse by police and security forces must be addressed if those actors are to implement trafficking policy. A national referral mechanism would help service providers and civil servants to identify victims and survivors and ensure that they received adequate care. A social service system that responded to the needs and provided safety for victims is required to bring victims to safety and perpetrators to justice. A child-centric, gender appropriate, victim-centred approach would more successfully address the needs of survivors and victims. Finally, Sudan requires significant support from external actors who are willing to provide financial resources that can be allocated to service delivery, migration management, and the implementation of the anti-trafficking frameworks.

Sudan is not an island, and the approach taken would benefit if it were a systems-level approach that engaged regional neighbours whose populations travel to and through Sudan, and to which Sudanese nationals travel. Combatting human trafficking in Sudan requires recognition of Sudan as not only a source country for transnational trafficking, but as a transit and increasingly a destination country. Internal human trafficking and modern slavery practices must also be addressed, grappling with the complexities and intersecting vulnerabilities manifest in the phenomenon in Sudan.

Recommendations

The impacts of the pandemic in Sudan are severe and far-reaching, with implications internally, regionally, and internationally. The international dimensions of the issues considered in this report call for action not only by actors operating within Sudan, but also intergovernmental actors, international civil society organisations, and foreign governments. Both immediate and longer-term action are needed to mitigate the adverse consequences of the pandemic, protect victims and vulnerable populations, and ensure that efforts to combat human trafficking are embedded effectively in Sudan's new governance structures.



Resources and aid

1. International and civil society organisations, as well as the Transitional Legislative Council, should work to provide resources to teams combatting modern slavery that go beyond training and awareness to service delivery.
2. The government of Sudan should build access to a social safety net and social welfare services into the new governance structure.
3. Governmental, international, and civil society actors operating within Sudan should collaborate to provide safe houses and standardise victim protection with regulation and oversight by the government.
4. Support organisations and service providers operating in Sudan should ensure children and families have access to humanitarian and economic support despite lockdown restrictions through mobile units, adequate distribution of PPE, and protection of medical personnel.
5. Building on recent economic reforms Sudan, is under a review process for Highly Indebted Poor Countries which will position them for debt relief. The international community should continue to support this process, joining France, Germany and Norway who have signalled a willingness to support debt relief (and should continue this support).
6. The government of Sudan, and international and civil society organisations operating within Sudan, should work with actors who have signalled support, including France and the US, to release grants and aid to decrease soaring food insecurity and poverty.
7. The new government in Sudan should increase funding and accessibility of public health, supported by international actors.



Education and awareness

8. The Sudanese government in partnership with international entities like ILO and IOM should undertake awareness raising and rights campaigns for vulnerable workers along the lines of those of UNMISS, UNAMID, and UNFPA, taking advantage of social media to reach those that are otherwise isolated, such as domestic workers.

9. The NCCT, SAF, RSF and police should collectively determine a way to address the issue of border management by establishing a method of engaging with the RSF to provide training and resources to adequately identify and provide services to victims. Considerations might include a combination of a peace and reconciliation processes, collaborative policing, wage increases, and criminal prosecutions.
10. The central government and UN entities should support efforts to empower local actors, as lockdown restrictions resulted in local actors being one of the few resources operating in some areas.
11. The government of Sudan should seek resources from CSO's like UNFPA and IPPF to scale up the use of hotlines and new technologies used to reach victims, perpetrators and to provide education to the public more broadly.



Women and women's rights

12. The new Sudanese government should explicitly work to incorporate women into the governance structure and with the NCCT build a legislative framework that reflects women's voices. As a part of this, Sudan should commit to the Juba process and work to actualise CEDAW, implement women's full participation, and outlaw child marriage.
13. Local CSOs on the ground should be supported by international aid entities (e.g., UNFPA) in providing relevant place and population specific training and education to families to help combat risks and help family members protect women and children.
14. Gulf State partner-benefactors already providing medical aid to Sudan should earmark provided safety equipment (PPE) for women to safely work and solicit further resources for this purpose. Match provision of equipment with public campaign to normalise use.
15. Health clinics and local actors should consider a toolkit of services to address gender-based violence and spousal rape, and pursue strategies to challenge and combat the patriarchal, coercive, and paternalistic dynamics which encourage its practice and its normalisation.
16. The government of Sudan and advocacy organisations operating in Sudan should engage a social media campaign to address toxic masculinities and dominant patriarchy.
17. The government of Sudan should engage international entities to secure funding for and provide tools for women and children to find safety whether through use of technologies, safe houses, and/or victim/witness protection.
18. International funders should support IPPF and access to reproductive health resources for women and girls.
19. The government of Sudan should consider legal methods, criminalisation, or restorative justice processes to address gender-based violence and discrimination.



Children and children's rights

20. The Ministry of Education and international partners should work to evaluate alternative education models to reach out-of-school students and students in conflict zones for whom the pandemic further disrupted education. Potential models exist such as Creative Associates (funded by US AID) or War Child (UK).
21. The Ministry of Health should distribute PPE to teachers and students over age 10 to ensure classroom safety.
22. The government of Sudan should take action to criminalise child marriage and lead a concerted response against the phenomenon.
23. The NCCT should design and guide the implementation of a national referral mechanism for unaccompanied migrants to ensure they have access to immediate care, considering a care system that moves them from camps immediately to reduce risk of targeted exploitation.
24. The UN and partners should take action to secure refugee and displacement camps to prevent militia recruitment.
25. Border patrol forces or security forces operating at border points should institute border checks to ensure children are not being trafficked for use in combat, for instance to Libya, Saudi Arabia, or Yemen.
26. The NCCT should work with the new government to build labour regulation into law where there are gaps and enforce it to protect child labourers, particularly from the worst forms of child labour, exploitation, and hazardous work.
27. The NCCT should work with the new government to build accountability systems for artisanal gold mines that involve regulation and compliance to ensure children are not being exploited. Supply chain analysis could also support in holding buyers and markets accountable.



Migration

28. International actors like the IOM, NRC and UNHCR should continue work to reduce group vulnerabilities to exploitation by providing rights-based training and education to potential migrants in origin countries and camps. In particular, targeting Eritreans who pass through Sudan en route to Libya.
29. The international community, and specifically those engaged in implementation of the Khartoum Process, should reduce the emphasis on criminalisation of migration, which drives use of more dangerous smuggling routes, replacing it with a targeted approach focused on traffickers.
30. The new government in Sudan should work with the EU and AU to reframe the emphasis of migration governance from stopping flows to Europe to instead collectively address local causes of irregular migration and humanitarian needs through Sudanese and regional policy.

31. Horn of Africa states with support of African Union should consider regional open borders to reduce the need to use smugglers and dangerous traffickers following the ECOWAS approach.
32. The US, UN, EU and AU should work with Eritrea alongside international partners to address root causes of forced migration. These actors would benefit from engagement with survivors in the diaspora to understand best approaches.
33. Members of the international community, through the UN and WHO, should support initiatives to increase access to healthcare and other forms of social welfare resources for all Sudanese migrant workers in destination countries to decrease their economic vulnerability and likelihood of targeted recruitment.
34. Agencies specialised in support and care (including the ROCK and the Centre) should adopt gendered and child sensitive frameworks to address trafficking vulnerabilities.
35. Researchers in partnership with BMM, MMC, NRC, UNHCR, and IOM should conduct analyses to understand the best ways to strengthen security and protection in displacement camps to address critical threats to life and safety, including trafficking. Interventions should be built around resident insights.



Institutions and governance

36. The Sudanese government should reform the 1955 Domestic Servants Act to ensure adequate labour protections for domestic workers.
37. The government of Sudan should adopt legislative provisions prohibiting and addressing debt bondage and ensure appropriate implementation of such.
38. The government of Sudan should create a monitoring and oversight mechanism for police, to ensure accountability for corruption and complicity in police forces.
39. The transitional and new government of Sudan should continue to prioritise addressing human trafficking and modern slavery, and protecting human rights, in new government administrations.
40. The NCCT and members should build capacity and institutional memory in government to address modern slavery effectively, drawing on international evidence and guidance.



Annex I. Methodology

To understand the impacts of the pandemic on human trafficking and modern slavery dynamics, vulnerabilities, and responses, this project combines four layers of research and analysis:

1. A systematic review of existing and emerging evidence;
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants in policy and practice in Sudan and internationally;
3. A supplementary survey of key stakeholders; and
4. A reflective focus group with Sudanese survivors in the UK.

Systematic evidence review

The review was delineated into five key stages: (1) developing the research question, sub-questions, and objectives; (2) identifying and collecting relevant literature through a standardised and systematic search protocol developed *a priori*; (3) screening and selecting literature through the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria identified *a priori* in the search protocol; (4) extracting data from the literature, coding sources using NVivo 12 software; and (5) analysing, synthesising, and reporting findings and results. Stage 2 combined Boolean searching in Google and Google Scholar, to capture academic and grey literature as well as media reporting. This was complemented by manual searching of key organisations relevant to the research inquiry.

Data collection was conducted from 25 January – 02 February 2021. Evidence published after this date may therefore not have been considered in the review. Evidence reviewed was limited to that published in English from 2018-2021 and accessible online (either publicly or with existing University of Nottingham access).

The full systematic evidence review is available [here](#). Detailed methodology for the review is outlined in this report.

Semi-structured key informant interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders relevant to the research inquiry operating or with expertise in Sudan. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, seeking to ensure diverse representation across relevant sectors (national and key foreign governmental actors, civil society organisations, and inter-governmental agencies). Respondents included, among others, members of the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Sudan, individuals from the Sudanese Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of the Interior, employees of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund, Better Migration Management, GIZ, Red Crescent, SUDO, Global Partners Governance, Waging Peace, representatives and contractors of the UK and French governments, and academics both within Sudan and in Sudanese diaspora communities in the UK. Interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic, with all interviews transcribed in English for analysis.

Thematic analysis and synthesis

Thematic analysis and synthesis was employed to assess the data collected in both the systematic review and semi-structured interviews, with coding conducted in NVivo 12 software. The coding matrix was established deductively prior to analysis, with additional codes developed inductively during coding to ensure adequate coverage of the themes represented in the literature. Inquiry through all stages of the research was based around the effect of the pandemic on the practices of human trafficking and modern slavery within six core theme categories, with more extensive analysis of sub-themes. The use of themes allows for consistency in data collection and reporting across all four research activities. In this report, data analysis is presented in keeping with this structure.

However, where there was significant overlap—for instance in population: MIGRANTS and risk factor: MIGRATION, themes have been combined for discussion.

Theme codes were organised under the following six categories:

1. Human trafficking and modern slavery dynamics
2. Human trafficking and modern slavery experiences
3. Perpetration
4. Risk factors
5. Vulnerable populations
6. Antislavery efforts

Additional free codes were also included to assess the relation between these categories and the pandemic:

7. COVID response measures
8. COVID impacts
9. Pre-COVID dynamics

The full codebook with sub-themes is available in the evidence review report [here](#).

Stakeholder survey

A mixed methods stakeholder survey was developed to supplement findings from interviews, and secure a wider variety of insights on study themes. The survey was disseminated to relevant stakeholders based on a stakeholder list generated collaboratively by the project consortium. At the point of publishing this report, the number of survey responses was insufficient to include separate analysis of survey results. However, responses were considered in the discussion of thematic analysis.

Survivor focus group

A two-hour focus group discussion with survivors in the UK was held to discuss key findings to ensure the voice of affected communities were incorporated into policy and practice recommendations. This approach positions survivors not as the subjects of research, but as co-creators of research outputs. Survivor participants were invited to review and reflect on emerging findings and recommendations from the evidence review and interviews. Participants were presented with a brief list of findings and recommendations along five key themes:

1. Domestic worker vulnerabilities
2. Displacement camps as recruitment sites
3. Debt bondage
4. Diaspora communities
5. Compounding structural factors

Eight survivor participants attended the focus group discussion. Responses were invited in both English and Arabic, with interpretation provided. Survivors were also invited to share additional reflection with the focus group organisers (Waging Peace), with two survivors sharing written supplementary insights. Wraparound support for survivor participants was provided by Waging Peace.

Survivor expert insights were central to validating findings and shaping the final recommendations. The process of engaging with disparate and diverse survivors using new technologies was successful and the approach and model provide insights to others who might be endeavouring similarly approaches.

Further details on the survivor focus group methodology will be outlined in a supplementary Survivor Focus Group Methods and Guidance Note, to be made available in June 2021 [here](#).



The **Rights Lab** is a University of Nottingham “Beacon of Excellence” and home to the world’s largest and leading group of modern slavery researchers. Through its five research programmes, impact team, and INSPIRE project, the Rights Lab is underpinning antislavery with an advanced research agenda, collaborating with civil society, business, and government, and elevating survivor-informed research as a key part of knowledge production to help end slavery.

Global Partners Governance is built around the belief that strengthening the institutions of representative politics is crucial to improving the quality of people’s lives. Since 2005 GPG has worked in more than 40 countries, supporting politicians, Ministers and civil servants, helping them to strengthen their institutions, and manage change in some of the world’s most complex and sensitive political environments.

Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) is the world’s oldest and the UK’s leading defence and security think tank. Its mission is to inform, influence and enhance public debate on a safer and more stable world. RUSI is a research-led institute, producing independent, practical and innovative analysis to address today’s complex challenges.

Waging Peace is a London-based NGO that campaigns against human rights abuses in Sudan and supports the Sudanese community in the UK, including survivors of modern slavery. Waging Peace convenes the UK-Sudan advocacy working group, which brings together 50+ iNGOs and humanitarian agencies working on or in Sudan, alongside individual researchers.

Discover more about our world-class research

nottingham.ac.uk/rights-lab



rightslab@nottingham.ac.uk



[@rightsbeacon](https://twitter.com/rightsbeacon)

This publication is available
in alternative formats
[+44 \(0\)115 951 5559](tel:+441159515559)

