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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Impact of COVID-19 Response on Contemporary Forms of Slavery

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) reminds Member States of their commitment to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has exposed inequalities around the world, by disproportionately affecting those who are most vulnerable.

There are 40.3 million people estimated to be in modern slavery (2016) and over 70% of those were women.¹ Yet not enough is being done to identify, assist and protect victims and survivors, especially now, as their circumstances are even more hidden and precarious than before. The pandemic has adversely impacted efforts towards achieving SDG Target 8.7 by exacerbating the vulnerabilities of those already living in contemporary forms of slavery, and by increasing the risk of even more people who are pushed into situations of exploitation.

We urge Member States to acknowledge the specific vulnerabilities of victims and survivors of contemporary forms of slavery and prioritise efforts to alleviate and protect the enslaved in their responses to COVID-19, including through the allocation of sufficient resources and building inclusive partnerships with all stakeholders.

COVID-19 response: Intensifying vulnerabilities of victims and survivors

While lockdowns have shown varying degrees of success in dealing with the pandemic, they have created peculiar issues for victims of contemporary forms of slavery by putting them at risk for further exploitation. Many people in exploitative labour conditions globally are being forced to work, without proper physical distancing measures, putting them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Migrant workers in many countries live in densely packed, often poorly sanitised accommodation and labour camps, making them more susceptible to the infection.² Victims of forced labour may be unwilling or unable to access healthcare for fear of deportation. Their access to local healthcare may also be further restricted as increasing demands on those services force Governments to limit or prioritise who receives healthcare.³ Rising demands for personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitisers and face masks has resulted in irregular orders and price pressures by retailers, creating conditions of forced labour, abuse of workers, or other unscrupulous labour practices. Border closures, travel disruptions and stigmatising, discriminatory policies and narratives have made them easy targets for exclusion.⁴

Restrictions on movement, diversion of law enforcement resources, and reduction in regular activities and functioning of social services and community groups have left victims with little support or assistance.⁵ The current response to COVID-19 has affected women and girls disproportionately, especially those from socio-economically marginalised groups, by putting them at the risk of early and forced marriage⁶; domestic violence and child abuse have also increased.⁷ Similarly, survivors in shelter homes and rehabilitation centres are at heightened risk, as the level of care available may deteriorate in the coming months because of re-prioritisation of the COVID-19 response by health officials and governments. This may

¹ International Labour Office (ILO) & Walk Free Foundation, 'Methodology of the global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage (2017)'.

² For example, in Singapore, Malaysia, the Gulf countries.

³ United Nations University, 'Impact of COVID-19 on Modern Slavery', 2 April 2020.

⁴ For example, in India, Bangladesh, Malaysia.

⁵ UN News, 'COVID-19 crisis putting human trafficking victims at risk of further exploitation, experts warn', 6 May 2020.

⁶ Girls Not Brides, 'COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda For Action', April 2020.

⁷ UN Women, 'COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls', 2020; see also, BBC News, 'Five ways virus upheaval is hitting women in Asia', 8 March 2020.

deepen the sense of isolation among them and exacerbate mental health risks. Economically vulnerable survivors will increasingly struggle to locate basic resources.

Increased risk

Although lockdowns to curb COVID-19 have involved the suspension of many economic sectors, such measures have increased the number of workers exposed to exploitation. Major recruitment drives are seen in high-demand sectors, yet fewer checks on labour and business supply chains mean less victim identification and an increase in the risk of contemporary forms of slavery. It is anticipated that with the deepening of the economic fallout of the pandemic, many more may be forced into exploitative labour practices and human trafficking.⁸

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has reported that the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 may see global unemployment increase by almost 25 million. More than four out of five people (81 percent) in the global workforce of 3.3 billion are currently affected by full or partial workplace closures. Two billion people worldwide, working in the informal sector (mostly in emerging and developing economies), are particularly at risk.⁹ The Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery has warned of increasing poverty and rising unemployment caused by the COVID-19 health crisis¹⁰ and we look forward to his upcoming report on how COVID-19 is a key driver in pushing people into exploitative employment, increasing their vulnerability to forced labour, worst forms of child labour, other slavery-like practices such as bonded labour, as well as forced marriage.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has warned that the pandemic has created new opportunities for trafficking and organised crime to prey on people who are even more vulnerable than before. Many of the latter have lost their livelihoods due to measures to control the virus.¹¹ Sex workers are also particularly vulnerable. With limited access to essential health and reproductive services, they are more susceptible to punitive measures, harassment and violence due to criminalisation of selling sex in many countries. They are forced to work at risk to their own health and safety with low incomes and support.¹² Sex traffickers are also adapting to COVID-19 by moving online; online child sexual exploitation has increased.¹³ This move of sexual exploitation and trafficking to online spaces creates further obstacles to its detection and disruption.

Once restrictions on economic activities are lifted, there is a real threat of unethical practices and outsourcing to meet the growing demand, increasing chances of exploitation and human rights abuses.¹⁴ With education systems suspended and the financial crisis mounting, children are also more vulnerable to exploitation, and can be pushed into child labour,¹⁵ trafficking, sexual exploitation¹⁶ as well as child marriage.¹⁷

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, 'COVID-19 and Modern Slavery: Challenges, opportunities and the future of the fight', 28 April 2020.

⁹ ILO News, 'COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment', 7 April 2020.

¹⁰ OHCHR, 'UN Rights expert urges States to step up their anti-slavery efforts and protect most vulnerable amid COVID-19', 5 May 2020.

¹¹ UN News, 'COVID-19 crisis putting human trafficking victims at risk of further exploitation, experts warn', 6 May 2020.

¹² The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), 'COVID-19 response must uphold and protect human rights of sex workers', 24 April 2020.

¹³ Reuters, 'Online child sex abuse rises with COVID-19 lockdowns: Europol', 18 May 2020.

¹⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, 'COVID-19 and Modern Slavery: Challenges, opportunities and the future of the fight', 28 April 2020.

¹⁵ UN Sustainable Development Goals, 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children', 15 April 2020.

¹⁶ UN News, 'COVID-19 crisis putting human trafficking victims at risk of further exploitation, experts warn', 6 May 2020.

¹⁷ Girls Not Brides, 'COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda For Action', April 2020.

Anti-slavery efforts by civil society during COVID-19

The pandemic and its concomitant restrictions have also had the effect of disrupting existing anti-slavery efforts due to restrictions on movement, diversion of resources and law enforcement, as well as policy-based reprioritisation. Civil society organisations (CSOs) on the frontline of the fight against contemporary forms of slavery are also hit hard. They are quickly learning to respond to their new working circumstances. These include limitations on essential care and support to survivors, such as access to safe house support, skills building, outreach and frontline response. CSOs, service providers, and survivors have adopted innovative ways to continue their anti-slavery work. Survivor alliances are using social media to share vital health information with those held in slavery. Those offering aftercare services are quarantining in shelters with survivors for up to 90 days. CSOs and networks¹⁸ are collaborating, sharing resources, information and good practice. CSOs are organising transport for survivors to get to hospitals and access the care they need. Businesses have been called upon to deliver online modern slavery awareness trainings to current and new workers.

Recommendations

In light of the above and to protect victims and survivors of contemporary forms of slavery, we encourage States to:

- Sustain support and increase resources allocated for anti-slavery services and initiatives.
- Continue to prioritise measures to tackle modern slavery, as victims and survivors are among the most vulnerable groups impacted by the pandemic.
- Integrate a human rights perspective and consider the impact of restrictive measures on the most vulnerable and marginalised groups when framing policies to curb the pandemic.
- Work closely in collaboration with civil society and service providers to design collective strategies to address contemporary forms of slavery and by enabling them to adapt their work to COVID-19, thus ensuring continuity of essential support.
- Ensure that law enforcement does not penalise either victims of contemporary forms of slavery who are forced to work despite lockdown measures, or survivors who require access to healthcare or other essential services. Law enforcement personnel need to be sensitised to the context and needs of victims and survivors.
- Include survivor voices and participation in policy development, planning, implementation, and decision-making, both short-term and long-term - their input is vital if service delivery is to be truly robust, relevant and capable of meeting their needs.
- Rethink social protections and enforce mandatory due diligence and evaluation of supply chains to ensure ethical production and business and global trade practices in line with international human rights standards.
- Work with child protection and anti-sex trafficking CSOs to research and respond to the movement of sex trafficking, particularly child sexual exploitation. Law enforcement should continue to prioritise online spaces in which this sexual exploitation occurs to disrupt trafficking networks and rescue victims.

¹⁸ For example, the Commonwealth 8.7 Network.