

The Nexus between Forced Displacement and Contemporary Forms of Slavery

Submission by the Rights Lab, University of Nottingham

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About Us

The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is the first large-scale research platform for ending slavery, bringing together the largest group of modern slavery scholars in the world to tackle a key challenge of global development and one of the great human rights issues of our time. The Rights Lab works to support the wider antislavery movement with an advanced research agenda. More information about the Rights Lab is available at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/rights-lab>

1. Introduction

Displaced persons are widely noted to be particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and contemporary forms of slavery. Disruption of income, material deprivation, alienation from family and social support systems, limited access to education, lack of migration status, and dangerous security contexts with limited oversight and protection—all recognised risk factors driving contemporary forms of slavery in themselves—coalesce to make displaced persons one of the most at-risk populations for contemporary slavery. Lack of access to safe, formal migration routes drive displaced persons towards dangerous, invisible routes, often placing them in the hands of criminal actors and perpetrators of contemporary slavery. These vulnerabilities manifest in different ways in different contexts, with specific local factors influencing the risks faced, perpetrator demographics, dynamics of victimisation, and requirements for effective response efforts. Yet, in all countries considered in our research, displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers share a particularly high risk of exploitation and abuse.

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures adopted to control and mitigate its spread have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of displaced persons to contemporary forms of slavery. Within Sudan and Uganda, the primary focus of this submission, lockdown measures have further limited mobility and negatively affected the livelihood strategies of women and children, displaced persons, refugees and irregular migrants, leaving them more vulnerable to targeted exploitation. The effect has been unequal. Greater risk is borne by groups with pre-existing and often intersecting vulnerabilities, specifically unaccompanied minors, women employed in the informal sector, and girl school leavers.

This submission draws primarily from two contemporaneous projects employing systematic, rigorous, inter-disciplinary mixed methods research in Sudan¹ and Uganda.² It also draws on comparative research on the top twenty source countries for modern

¹ 'The Impacts of COVID-19 on Modern Slavery in Transition: A Case Study of Sudan' (MS-PEC), see [here](#).

² 'Addressing Child Trafficking and Slavery in Uganda' (GFEMS) with Hope for Justice, see [here](#).

slavery victims identified in the UK.³ It covers the following key issues related to the experiences of displaced persons from and to Sudan and Uganda:

- [1] The experiences of persons who were displaced within their countries or across international borders in regard to contemporary forms of slavery.
 - a. To what extent are these groups affected by contemporary forms of slavery?
 - b. What forms of exploitation are they subjected to?
 - c. In which sectors are they most commonly exploited?
- [2] Particular (intersecting) vulnerabilities of individuals including gender, age, and ethnic group membership.
- [3] The role of COVID-19 in exacerbating the vulnerabilities of displaced persons.
- [4] The preventative measures in place to protect displaced populations.

2. Background on displacement in Sudan and Uganda

According to UNHCR, Sudan hosts around 1.1 million refugees in addition to an estimated 2 million internally displaced persons, making it home to one of the largest populations of displaced people globally. Sixty-one percent of the displaced population are children.⁴ Within the population are significant numbers of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees living in protracted displacement situations.⁵ In addition, since 2011, nearly a million South Sudanese have lived in and around camps near the southern Sudanese border.⁶ The numbers displaced persons is increasing or steady with ongoing conflict in Tigray and areas of Darfur.⁷ These groups are largely unable to meet their own needs. The general consensus is that as the pandemic grip tightens and poverty increases, displaced populations are at a heightened risk of trafficking, recruitment by armed militias, exploitation, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.⁸

It is estimated that 40% of the two million south Sudanese refugees have settled in refugee camps in Northern Uganda, most in Bidibidi, the second largest refugee camp in the world.⁹ Northern Uganda has itself experienced decades of conflict which ended in 2003.¹⁰ Throughout much of the conflict, the population were placed into IDP camps for their own protection. Alcohol addiction and SGBV significantly increased during this time, becoming complex issues that are still prevalent today.¹¹

Large populations of Sudanese and Ugandan displaced persons, as well as displaced persons who have travelled through these countries, make their way to Europe and the Gulf. This exposes them to severe risks of exploitation and abuse at the hands of criminal actors on their journeys, as well as in destination States.¹²

³ 'Building the Evidence Base for Effective Antislavery Governance in the UK and Top Twenty UK Source Countries' (MS-PEC), see [here](#).

⁴ 'Children in Sudan' [2020] *UNICEF Sudan* <<https://www.unicef.org/sudan/children-sudan>> accessed 19 February 2021.

⁵ 'Sudan: Country Vision Note' (IFC, ILO, UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2020), see [here](#).

⁶ 'Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19: United Nations Coordinated Appeal', see [here](#).

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Wuilbercq E, 'Lone Ethiopian Child Refugees Seen at Risk of Exploitation in Sudan' Reboot-Live, Reuters (Addis Ababa, 2020), see [here](#); Coker M and others, 'Things Must Not Fall Apart: The Ripple Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Sub-Saharan Africa', see [here](#); 'Global Humanitarian Overview 2021' (2020).

⁹ R Nuri, 'Suicides on the Rise among South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda,' UNHCR, see [here](#); N. Strohlic, 'In Uganda, a Unique Urban Experiment Is under Way,' National Geographic, see [here](#).

¹⁰ C Dolan, *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986-2006* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009).

¹¹ MC Okello and L Hovil, 'Confronting the Reality of Gender-Based Violence in Northern Uganda,' *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1 (2007).

¹² K Schwarz, A Valverde-Cano, A Williams-Woods, and D Ogunniyi, 'The Top Twenty Source Countries for Trafficking to the UK' (*Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre*, 2021).

3. Forms of exploitation

Which contemporary forms of slavery are displaced persons subjected to (e.g. bonded labour, forced labour, forced marriage, sexual slavery, domestic servitude or other forms of exploitation)?

Forms of exploitation in Sudan

Prior to the pandemic, common forms of exploitation reported in Sudan included: early and forced marriage; forced or bonded labour; child recruitment; forced begging; domestic work and forced prostitution.¹³ Displaced populations and refugees are particularly vulnerable to abduction and exploitation in border areas and within displacement camps where populations have limited mobility, livelihood opportunities, and less institutional support. Often displaced populations are abducted and sold to traffickers during the process of migration, at times by their smuggler. Previously identified perpetrators have included, Darfuri armed groups and smugglers linked to cross-border tribes, including the Rashaida, who abduct migrants at border crossings, extort them for ransom, force abductees to perform domestic or manual labour and abuse them in other ways, including exploiting them in forced labour or forced prostitution.

Due to the recency of the pandemic, there is limited evidence of the impact of COVID on these practices although there are some preliminary reports of increasing areas of risk. Reports indicate that the isolation of women due to social distancing and lockdown measures has increased GBV (Gender Based Violence) and SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) in Khartoum and Sudan.¹⁴ Children and particularly girls are also at increased risk of trafficking or sexual exploitation due to school closures and the cumulative effect of a lack of supervision caused by the pandemic restrictions and reductions in household income.¹⁵ Child marriage may be used as a coping strategy when economic conditions deteriorate. Finally, regarding IDP (Internally Displaced People) and other forced migrant communities, as host communities suffer the implications of the pandemic, they may restrict access to resources, such as food and energy. As COVID-19 causes the economic conditions in Sudan to deteriorate, trafficking risks in general are predicted to increase.

Forms of exploitation in Uganda

In Uganda, early and forced marriage is common, especially in periods of hardship (such as droughts), and rates of sexual and gender-based violence are high.¹⁶ Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in child marriage in marginalised communities which have been particularly affected by school closures.¹⁷ Early and forced marriage is difficult to prevent which has implications for the refugee camps as protection mechanisms for vulnerable girls and women may be ineffective. Northern Uganda is a patriarchal culture and intimate partner violence is considered broadly acceptable,

¹³ US Department of State, '2020 Trafficking in Persons Report' (US Department of State, 2020); see [here](#); US Department of State, '2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sudan' (US Department of State, 2019), see [here](#); US Department of State, '2018 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sudan' (US Department of State, 2018), see [here](#); Smith, Angharad, Monti Narayan Datta, and Kevin Bales. 2020. "Introducing Contemporary Slavery in Armed Conflicts: Introducing the CSAC Dataset, 1989–2016."

¹⁴ M Atit, 'Reports of Gender-Based Violence Increase in Sudan During COVID Lockdown' (*Voice of America*, 2020), see [here](#).

¹⁵ 'Five Ways Covid-19 Has Affected Education in Eastern Africa | Windle International' (Windle International: Education Transforms Society, 2020), see [here](#).

¹⁶ Jennifer Schlecht, Elizabeth Rowley, and Juliet Babirye, "Early Relationships and Marriage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Vulnerability of Youth in Uganda," *Reproductive Health Matters* 21, no. 41 (2013).

¹⁷ Girls Not Brides, "The Impacts of Covid-19 Make It More Critical Than Ever to Address Child Marriage in Uganda," <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/ending-child-marriage-in-uganda-during-covid-19/>.

therefore, it is unlikely that preventing violence within families in refugee camps will be considered a priority.

4. The gendered dimensions of exploitation of displaced persons

Is there a gender dimension to exploitation and if so, in what way?

Gender inequality causes women and girls to be more vulnerable in times of conflict or instability. Covid-19 further exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities for women, making them more likely to experience various forms of exploitation and abuse. Gender norms and inequality also play a role in the exploitation of men, with young men and boys tasked with more dangerous forms of labour due to their desire to live up to masculine ideals. Men can also be targeted for sexual exploitation, an underreported phenomenon due to a fear of stigmatisation within the community.¹⁸

Gender shapes the forms of violence perpetrated against vulnerable refugees and displaced persons, and the opportunities for exploitation. Loss of schooling associated with both displacement and the pandemic is a compounding problem, which tends to affect female children in greater numbers. Girls being removed from school, whether as a result of lockdown restrictions, economic hardship, or displacement, leads to loss of social protection and increases the risks of secondary side effects like adolescent pregnancy.¹⁹ Children also lose enjoyment of other rights such as the right to play which has adverse effects on future vulnerabilities, including access to employment.²⁰ Lack of access to schooling disproportionately affects more vulnerable populations, particularly individuals in conflict zones who are more likely to experience early marriage and childbearing.²¹

Gender dynamics of exploitation in Sudan

Stakeholders are concerned about the practice of child marriage within Sudan and in particular within displaced and vulnerable populations. Early childhood marriage—legal at age ten—is used as a coping strategy for economic hardship and there is concern it will be used to combat the economic effects of the situation.²²

Surveys show that women are likely to experience sexual violence and exploitation throughout their migratory journeys. Border closures associated with criminalization of migration, in addition to COVID-19, have made movement more difficult within Sudan and across borders. Stakeholders are concerned that about the incidence of human trafficking in border areas increasing as a result and that to evade detection smuggling routes have been made more dangerous. Refugees experiencing severe economic hardship and an ongoing food crisis, may engage smugglers to circumnavigate closed borders exposing them to exploitation. For example, Eritreans and Ethiopian women trafficked in Eastern Sudan report exposure to SGBV during the journey. Eritrean women in particular are often trafficked for exploitative domestic work in Khartoum and are common victims of severe harm.²³

¹⁸ UNHCR, "Working with Men and Boy Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Forced Displacement," (2012).

¹⁹ 'Global Humanitarian Overview 2021' (2020).

²⁰ N Lott, 'The Right to Play', PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham 2020.

²¹ J Bhatti, 'Somalian and Sudanese Girls' Lives Were Difficult Enough. They're getting worse' *Al-Fanar Media* (18 November 2020), see [here](#).

²² *Ibid*.

²³ 'Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: Trends, Risks, Development and Governance' (2020) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/migration-west-and-north-africa-and-across-mediterranean-trends-risks-development-and-0>>; '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' (2020), see [here](#).

Upon reaching Libya, Sudanese migrants are often experience forced exploitation described as 'akin to trafficking' and endure abuse.¹³¹ This often takes the force of contract labour, an experience of increasing exploitation wherein women are forced to work off a 'debt'. Some women are forced into prostitution to pay debts and support themselves. Sexual violence during the journey and after arrival are common, a practice used at times to extort a ransom.²⁴

Gender dynamics of exploitation in Uganda

Within refugee camps in Uganda, poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment increase family violence with women and girls being beaten for failing to fulfil traditional gender roles. Women and girls are expected to cook for the family and they are frequently punished if there is a lack of food regardless of the reasons (such as food shortages in the camps). Gendered tasks such as collecting water and gathering firewood also put women at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence as these tasks are typically completed alone and away from the populated camp area.²⁵ The safety of women and girls has recently been further compromised by a surge of deforestation in Uganda, meaning that women must travel further for firewood which increases their vulnerability to SGBV. Moreover, women rely on social networks more than men which means that the closure of schools, churches, community centres, and businesses disproportionately affects their wellbeing.

5. Intersecting vulnerabilities of displaced persons in Sudan

Are other sub-groups within displaced persons affected by different forms of slavery and if yes, in what way?

Sudan has been in acute economic crisis since 2018. Spiralling inflation, high levels of food insecurity,²⁶ a dramatic jump in poverty levels, reduced food assets,²⁷ droughts, floods, locust invasion, climate shocks, and conflict²⁸ all exacerbated poverty conditions and problems for vulnerable residents prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁹ The global pandemic has aggravated many of these vulnerabilities, increasing unemployment and poverty and severing vulnerable populations from vital institutional and social protection and support mechanisms. The cumulative effect of these crises has been increased precarity for populations of refugees and displaced persons. Food costs have risen 146 percent, and the UNHCR has estimated that only one percent of refugees could afford the basic food ration.

Stakeholders have cautioned that reductions in resources as a result of crisis, which have particularly hit displaced populations with limited mobility, may encourage use of negative coping strategies. It is also feared that targeting by traffickers and other perpetrators of exploitation has become more frequent. Closure of public institutions due to the pandemic

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ CH Logie, M Okumu, and M Latif, "Exploring Resource Scarcity and Contextual Influences on Wellbeing among Young Refugees in Bid Bidi Settlement, Uganda: Findings from a Qualitative Study.," *Journal of Conflict and Health* 15, no. 3 (2021).

²⁶ A Bereir, 'Impact of COVID19 on Sudan Agriculture: The Role of Agricultural Extension during the Pandemic Era' [2020] *International Journal of Agricultural Science, Research and Technology in Extension and Education Systems* 43.

²⁷ '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' (2020), see [here](#).

²⁸ A-R Eltayeb, 'Reflections on Covid-19 and Its Impact on Trafficked Women and Girls: Report from GPG Virtual Conference, 6 October 2020 | Global Partners Governance' (*Global Partners Governance*, October 2020), see [here](#).

²⁹ 'COVID-19: A Catastrophe for Children in Sub-Saharan Africa' (2020), see [here](#).

is likely to further amplify these vulnerabilities by removing consistency in institutional engagement, and eliminating healthcare access or social welfare services where wellness checks would normally occur. Children, and especially girls, are predicted to leave school in large numbers, and are unlikely to return, increasing the risk of child marriage and early pregnancy.

Population subgroup focus: children and unaccompanied minors

Of displaced populations, children and particularly unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable to targeted exploitation. Within Sudan, lax labour laws and poor labour conditions contribute to increased vulnerability of children across society. Child labour is normalized and used as an economic survival strategy, making it more difficult for parents and carers to identify potential perpetrators of modern slavery, trafficking, and exploitation. Children within displacement and refugee camps, separated or unsupervised for extended periods of time, face increased risk of abuse and exploitation as a result.³⁰ Perpetrators are known to target children for exploitation forcing them to work in the streets of Khartoum, and in other areas of Sudan in industries including brick-making factories, gold mining, collecting medical waste, street vending, agriculture, and in the sex industry. In these sectors, children are exposed to threats, physical and sexual abuse, as well as to hazardous working conditions with limited access to education or health services. In rural conflict areas, children are at risk for forced conscription by armed forces.³¹

Population subgroup focus: women and girls

Women and girls in Sudan—particularly internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and those from rural areas—are vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual exploitation and exploitation through domestic work. Women represent the majority of informal laborers and have experienced widespread job loss due to limitations on mobility and gathering. Women living in informal settlements, displacement and refugee camps have been especially hard hit by the pandemic restrictions as outside of the informal economy there are few other employment opportunities. In addition, with the redirection of humanitarian aid, women are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation.

Migrant and displaced women are frequent victims of abduction and sexual exploitation and violence. The criminalization of migration and border closures has forced those migrating to access increasingly invisible and dangerous routes. This increases their susceptibility to targeting by traffickers. Well-organized and cross-border criminal syndicates are known to have forced Ethiopian women into commercial sex in Khartoum by manipulating debts in association with other forms of coercion. Traffickers also compel Ethiopian women to work in private homes in Khartoum and other urban centres where they are frequently subjected to extreme harm. These women are at an increased risk due to their invisibility during the pandemic, including escalating levels of violence and murder.³²

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to COVID-related border restrictions, UNOCHA has raised concerns that migrants are stranded outside of their home countries or in peripheral areas where they are at risk of trafficking and exploitation.³³ Particularly at risk were IDPs, refugees, and those trapped at the border—who were unable to return home, or to work locally. Consequently, IDPs and migrants stranded on their journeys are likely to face targeted recruitment for trafficking and labour exploitation.

³⁰ Pervis (2020); 'COVID-19: A Catastrophe for Children in Sub-Saharan Africa' (2020).

³¹ US Department of State (2020); US Department of State (2019); US Department of State (2018)

³² Ibid

³³ UNOCHA, 'Global Humanitarian Overview 2021' (UN Doc, 2021), see [here](#).

The conclusions broadly are that Sudan confronted the crisis from a position of structural weakness caused by economic instability, climate crisis, conflict, and food insecurity. Within this context, a culture of criminalized migration and patriarchy led groups to be more vulnerable to economic loss and subsequent reliance on negative coping mechanisms. Women, migrants, refugees, IDPs, children, and pastoralists have been more likely to be affected by bordering processes and to have lost their livelihood and security and as a result have become more precarious. They have therefore been more likely to experience exploitation, targeted solicitation, violence, and trafficking. For many IDPs, these vulnerabilities do not end when they reach refugee/IDP camps but rather they encounter a different set of challenges characterised by their status and the conditions in the country of reception.

6. The challenges of preventing slavery and protecting victims

What are wider challenges in preventing contemporary forms of slavery among displaced persons and in protecting victims?

Refugee and migrant camps are overcrowded and underfunded, making it difficult to prevent slavery and exploitation. Refugees are increasingly vulnerable to abuse due to poverty, insecurity, and a lack of resources. Three key challenges in preventing contemporary forms of slavery among displaced persons are:

- **Rule of Law:** IDP camps are difficult to police and are often located in countries where security forces are already under-resourced. Establishing and maintaining rule of law is complex and local police have been implicated in corruption—specifically receiving bribes in exchange for ignoring criminal behaviour. There is also a lack of accountability for perpetrators when crimes have been committed, for example, gendered crimes such as sexual and gender-based violence, forced marriage, and labour exploitation. Crimes are often committed with impunity as laws (where they exist) are inadequately enforced.
- **Lack of resources:** Food shortages are common due to delays in supply chains, as well as corruption. This causes individuals to seek other methods of attaining much needed resources, such as exchanging sex for food. Further, resources such as water or toilets can be located far away from the main campground, leaving women (who disproportionately use such resources) at risk of abduction or sexual abuse.
- **Pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours:** Patriarchal beliefs such as men being the head of the household and family decision makers can increase risks of exploitation of women and children. Parents are often implicated in the early and forced marriage of daughters. This can be a result of pre-existing attitudes surrounding child marriage and the belief that girls belong to their family and do not have the right to refuse. Women and girls who refuse to follow their husband/father's orders may be cast out, depriving them of the protection that a male often provides in IDP contexts.

Emerging best practice in prevention in Sudan

The transitional government of Sudan has reduced the number of migrant detainees in detention centres, enhanced coordination between government agencies, and prepared health isolation centres for migrants. This may help to ease the circumstances driving exploitation and trafficking amongst communities of migrants and displaced persons.⁷⁶

New communication and awareness strategies using non-traditional methods like *Telling the Real Story* (TRS) have been lauded as successful interventions. TRS is an awareness campaign used to educate migrants of the perils associated with migratory routes. Elsewhere new approaches are being deployed, including the use of technology to circumnavigate the barriers presented by COVID-19. These include a hotline for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, which provides psychological support and legal advice. This can help to identify situations of exploitation and trafficking. A targeted mass media campaign focusing on positive masculinities has also been launched to encourage social norms change.³⁴

7. Conclusion

Contemporary forms of slavery and other forms of exploitation thrive in situations of insecurity, such as internally displaced persons and refugee camps. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the level of insecurity in these camps, and it is projected that the number of displaced persons and refugees who are exploited and held in contemporary forms of slavery has increased. SDG 8.7 requires governments to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour and modern slavery. Refugees and internally displaced persons encounter a unique set of challenges that are shaped by their displacement and greatly increase their vulnerability. It is imperative that governments, international and local non-governmental organisations, and intergovernmental actors coordinate to ensure that the specific support needs of displaced persons are fulfilled.

Responses must take into consideration the role that gender inequality plays in creating a context that allows contemporary forms of slavery and exploitation to flourish. Rule of law must be strengthened in camps, with police or community protection officers trained to identify potential victims of contemporary slavery and other forms of exploitation, and respond effectively. Responses should be varied, context specific, and focused on upholding human rights, particularly Article 3 and 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—namely, the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right to freedom from slavery.³⁵

³⁴ 'COVID-19: UNFPA Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Humanitarian Operations in Arab Region' (2020), see [here](#); 'How a Phone Number Is Preventing GBV in Sudan - Sudan' (UNFPA, 2020), see [here](#).

³⁵ See [here](#).