

POLICY BRIEF: The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Trafficking in Uganda

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CRC	Committee on the Rights of the Child
EEMIS	External Employment Management Information System
ILO	International Law Organisation
KNOMAD	Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TMEA	TradeMark East Africa
TVPA	Trafficking Victims Protection Act
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAERA	Ugandan Association of External Recruitment Agencies
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Funds for Population Agency
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UPF	Ugandan Police Force
USA	United States of America
UYDEL	Ugandan Youth Development Link
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organisation

1.0 Background and Context

In a media briefing on the 11th of March 2020, Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus announced that the WHO “*had made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterised as a pandemic.*”¹ According to WHO data, currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected over 213 countries and territories around the world, and as at the 13th of July 2020, there have been over 12.3 million confirmed cases and 556,335 confirmed deaths globally.² Since the elevation of COVID-19 to pandemic status by the WHO, States around the globe have swung into action in efforts to combat the spread of the virus and flatten the curve of infections.³ Measures such as enforced quarantine, curfews, lockdown and travel restrictions, and restrictions on non-essential parts of economic and public life have been adopted by Governments in the fight to stem the rise of infections.⁴ These adopted measures have contributed to reduce the spread of the virus, but they also carry negative consequences that have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable in our society, including victims and survivors of human trafficking, and other exploited persons. Production has been halted or considerably reduced in various countries, severely affecting global supply chains.⁵ Economic activity at global, regional, and local levels have been significantly affected, resulting in widespread loss of livelihood and income. These resulting effects of the pandemic carry the risk of exacerbating the vulnerabilities of persons at risk of human trafficking.⁶

1.1 COVID-19 in Uganda

On the 13th of March 2020, the Ugandan Government issued the Public Health (Notification of COVID-19) Order 2020⁷ (Notification Order), which recognised the COVID-19 pandemic as a “*notifiable disease for the purposes of the Public Health Act.*”⁸ Order 3 of the Notification Order extends the provisions of Section 11 (Power to make rules); Part IV (Prevention and Suppression of Infectious Diseases); and Section 36 (Power to Enforce Precautions at Borders) of the Public Health Act to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ This began the process of what can be described as a creeping lockdown. Furthermore, on the 21st of March, the Ugandan Government issued Public Health (Prohibition of Entry into Uganda) Order 2020,¹⁰ which prohibits the “*entry into Uganda by any person ... through any border posts*”¹¹ Uganda announced its first confirmed COVID-19 patient on the 22nd of March, and on the 24th of March, the government further issued the Public Health (Control of COVID-19) Rules 2020¹¹ (Control of COVID-19 Rules). Rule 9 of the Control of COVID-19 Rules temporarily restricted public gatherings such as schools, bars and movie halls, concerts, marriage ceremonies and religious events.¹² Uganda fully went into lockdown on the 31st of March, stopping all public transport, private cars, and non-essential movement. However, although some restrictions have been relaxed and the movement of private cars and public transportation have resumed, restrictions banning public gatherings, shutting borders, and closing schools still remain.

1.2 Human Trafficking in Uganda

Uganda has been identified as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking.¹³ Human trafficking in Uganda occurs on both transnational and internal levels. Victims of internal trafficking are

mostly trafficked from rural and underserved communities to major cities, and are exploited in domestic service, street begging and vending, sexual exploitation including forced marriage and commercial sexual exploitation, and labour exploitation especially in the agricultural industry.¹⁴ Transnational trafficking in Uganda is multifaceted. Despite serious reports of ongoing human trafficking related exploitation, significant numbers of Ugandan nationals emigrate primarily to the Middle East and other Gulf countries yearly due to high levels of poverty and unemployment.¹⁵ There have also been reports of the trafficking of Ugandan nationals to neighbouring East African States like Kenya for various forms of exploitation including labour and sexual exploitation. In addition to the trafficking of Ugandan nationals, nationals of other East African countries are trafficked into Uganda for exploitation in the agricultural sector, sexual exploitation, and domestic service.¹⁶

The Ugandan Government has developed important legislative and policy frameworks to combat human trafficking, but legal and policy gaps persist, and implementation remains inconsistent. This has contributed to **Uganda's Tier 2 Watch List rating on the recently released 2020 USA Trafficking in Persons Report (a rating reserved for countries that do not meet the minimum standards of the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) but are making efforts to do so).**¹⁷ This Policy Brief aims to contribute to Uganda's anti-trafficking efforts by assessing the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human trafficking in Uganda.

This Brief examines how the pandemic could affect victims / survivors of human trafficking and the potential of the pandemic to heighten the risks and vulnerabilities to human trafficking. It further pays specific attention to the impact of COVID-19 on child trafficking, and the possibilities of the pandemic to exacerbate vulnerabilities of Uganda's refugee population to human trafficking.

2.0 Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on human trafficking in Uganda

While the primary focus of COVID-19 responses are the public-health and safety implications of the pandemic, other factors such as the political, economic, and social implications cannot be ignored. The implementation of lockdown restrictions in Uganda has helped flatten the curve of infections and as at the 13th of July 2020, Uganda had recorded just over 1000 COVID-19 cases with reportedly zero casualties.¹⁸ Although the measures that have been implemented in Uganda have so far helped slow the rate of infections, and prevented any COVID-19 related deaths, the socio-economic implications carry the potential of exacerbating risks that can lead to human trafficking. These include poverty, unemployment, and inequality.¹⁹

2.1 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Victims / Survivors of human trafficking.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures that have been implemented to curb the spread of infections can disproportionately impact on victims and survivors of internal and transnational human trafficking.²⁰ This section will examine the risks that lockdown and other restrictive measures carry for victims and survivors of human trafficking in Uganda.

A. Risks associated with the identification of victims of human trafficking.

Identification of victims of trafficking is one of the key components in anti-trafficking. In regular circumstances, victim identification is a difficult task owing to the clandestine nature of human trafficking, the ability of human traffickers to hide their illicit operations, and the inability and lack of willingness of victims to report their victimisation and exploitation to law enforcement.²¹ Uganda has been criticised in the recently released 2020 US TIP Report for its inability to identify more victims of human trafficking – having only identified 455 victims in 2019.²² The pandemic carries risks of further intensifying the difficulty in identifying victims of human trafficking.

Since the implementation of lockdown and other restrictive measures, there has been a reported increase of law enforcement on the streets of major Ugandan cities like Kampala to enforce restrictions and curtail the potential spread of crime.²³ However, for clandestine operations like human trafficking that thrive on the physical, social, and emotional isolation of victims, this could have the effect of driving trafficking networks further underground or drive the increase of other forms of exploitation such as online exploitation, making identification more difficult. Confinement measures may also make the identification of victims of trafficking for exploitation in domestic service more difficult.²⁴ Whereas normally, victims may have to leave the house to run errands or attend religious events, lockdown measures would result in longer periods of confinement with their traffickers or exploiters, which may increase difficulties associated with identification.

Although the closure of airports and implementation of travel restrictions may reduce transnational human trafficking, Ugandan nationals who have been trafficked for exploitation abroad still face risks associated with identification. According to the 2020 US TIP Report, foreign governments assisted in the identification of 2,384 Ugandan nationals who were victims of transnational trafficking abroad.²⁵ Victims

of transnational human trafficking may have no means of subsistence or access to family and friends.²⁶ **The implementation of lockdown and other restrictive measures in destination countries, may increase the isolation of victims of trafficking, especially victims that live with their abusers and traffickers, further limiting chances of identification by law enforcement.**

B. Risks associated with reduced access to support services.

In addition to the increased difficulty in the identification of victims of human trafficking, the pandemic also carries the risk of limiting the access of victims / survivors of internal and transnational human trafficking to support services.

The Ugandan Government collaborates with civil society actors and international organisations to provide support services to victims of human trafficking through referrals. NGOs in Uganda provide services such as education and vocational skills training, sheltering and accommodation, family tracing, psychological counselling, medical treatment, reintegration, and resettlement support.²⁷ In the wake of restrictions, utilising existing referral mechanisms may become more challenging. While NGOs may initially implement lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus within the shelters, there is no information on when the lockdown will be lifted.²⁸ Additionally, survivors who have been integrated into the community, but travel to the shelters for counselling, vocational, educational, and other forms of support services may face challenges with benefiting from those schemes. This could lead to increased isolation and (re)traumatisation of survivors. Furthermore, community outreach and victim rescue programs may be hindered due to the travel and lockdown restrictions, and without access to care services, survivors may be left open and vulnerable to exploitation and revictimisation by traffickers.²⁹

Although the Ugandan Government collaborates with NGOs to provide support services, the 2020 US TIP Report finds that **Government funding to NGOs are very limited and organisations involved in anti-trafficking are mostly self-funded or benefit from international and local donors.**³⁰ Access to vital funding, which is important to the success of victim services may drastically reduce in the wake of the pandemic. Grants and donations may be refocused to the public health sector, and this could adversely shorten the reach of anti-trafficking organisations that provide care to victims and survivors of human trafficking.³¹

C. Risks of alternate forms of exploitation

Rule 9(1) of the Control of COVID-19 Rules placed a temporary restriction of public gathering in bars, cinema halls, indoor and outdoor concerts and sports events, and other large gatherings.³² Additionally, the Public Health (Control of COVID - 19) (No. 2) Rules, 2020³³ imposed a nationwide curfew from 19:00 till 06:30 and further extended the 'public gatherings' ban to hotels, lodging houses and massage parlours.³⁴

The closure of bars, massage parlours, hotels, and lodging houses may drive human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation further underground. Furthermore, traffickers may devise new means of

exploiting victims such as online sexual exploitation, and due to lockdown restrictions, victims may be forced to endure sexual and other forms of exploitation for longer hours.³⁵ Restriction of movement and the physical and social isolation of victims is already a major feature of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, and this is exacerbated by travel restrictions and lockdown measures. This could result in increased difficulty of victims of sexual trafficking to access help, increasing their risk of vulnerability especially if they are housed in the same premises as their abusers or traffickers.

Victims of labour trafficking also face the same risk of increased exploitation. Persons who are trafficked for exploitation in street begging and vending will receive reduced patronage due to the implementation of lockdown, curfews, and other restrictive measures, which could put them at risk of further abuse from their traffickers. Lockdown restrictions could reduce labour inspections in Uganda, which could disproportionately affect victims of labour trafficking in the agricultural and mining industries as victims may be forced to work for longer hours or face reduction in pay. The global reduction in production and demand could lead to job losses, especially in the informal sector where most Ugandans work.³⁶ This could drive victims of labour trafficking to accept reduced wages, which could limit the ability to pay back debts, increasing the vulnerability to debt bondage.

D. Vulnerabilities related to effective investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases.

According to the 2020 US TIP Report, the Ugandan Government reported investigating 120 human trafficking cases in 2019 compared to 286 cases in 2018.³⁷ The implementation of lockdown and other restrictive measures on non-essential part of economic and social life carries the risk of hindering effective investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases.

Ugandan law enforcement agencies have been mobilised to enforce lockdown restriction, curfews, and coordinate the effective delivery of COVID-19 relief packages. While this is necessary for safeguarding public-health and ensuring adequate social welfare provisions to cushion the impact of the pandemic, this could also result in the redeployment and refocusing of essential law enforcement resources from the investigation of human trafficking cases. Lockdown and other movement restrictions may also hamper the participation of victims / survivors of human trafficking in investigation procedures. Under these current circumstances, it is unclear if anti-trafficking remains a priority for the UPF or the Ugandan Government.

In addition to reduced investigations, the measures that have been implemented to curb infections could result in the disruption of criminal justice systems. On the 19th of March 2020, the former Chief Justice of the Ugandan Supreme Court, Chief Justice Bart Katureebe issued a circular suspending all court hearings and appearances (except for bail applications) for an initial period of 32 days. During the suspension, courts will continue to hear “*certificates of urgency*” and take pleas for “*serious cases of bail applications*”, and judgements and rulings “*may*” be issued to the parties online or via E-mail. This suspension, although

important for the maintenance of public health and safety, negatively impacts access to justice for victims and survivors of human trafficking. While a switch from in-person to remote and online services is necessary to ensure the continuity of judicial services, online services may not be available to everyone and this may lead to an increase in the backlog of cases or a deprioritisation of human trafficking cases.

These circumstances can lead to a climate of impunity, where human trafficking rises, and traffickers can operate freely with a much lower risk of detection, arrest, prosecution, and conviction. More importantly, victims and survivors could be made to wait for longer to access criminal justice remedies, if they are not denied.³⁸

2.2 Increased Risks of Human Trafficking Due to COVID-19.

As aforementioned, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic goes beyond the public health and security sectors. The pandemic has triggered a global crisis that has plunged the world economy into a global recession with the potential for short- and long-term damages.³⁹ The global crisis that has emerged as a result of the pandemic has deepened social inequalities that can exacerbate risks to human trafficking.⁴⁰

A. Risks associated with rising unemployment

COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on the global workforce. The effects of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic have resulted in the loss of jobs in both formal and informal sectors of the global economy.⁴¹ According to ILO data, an estimated 155 million and 400 million jobs were respectively lost globally in the first and second quarters of 2020.⁴² The rising rate of unemployment carries the risks of pushing more people into poverty than previous times.⁴³ Reports from the UN state that the economic impact of COVID-19 risks undoing the progress that has been made in fighting poverty and inequality over the past 3 decades.⁴⁴ Additionally, the World Bank predicts that the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy “will push 71 million into extreme poverty, measured at the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day.” Further downside scenarios may increase the estimate to 100 million.⁴⁵ The sharp increase in the number of people falling into poverty could exacerbate risks of vulnerability to human trafficking.

Poverty has been identified as a root cause and driver for human trafficking and the shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic may push more Ugandans into poverty. Since the start of the lockdown in Uganda, there has been a sharp increase in the loss of jobs in both the formal and informal sector. A substantial proportion of Ugandans work in the informal sector to escape poverty and unemployment, and COVID-19 has been projected to disproportionately affect over 2 billion workers in this sector globally.⁴⁶

An Economic Policy Research Centre Survey on the impact of COVID-19 on Ugandan businesses reported that business activity has reduced by more than 50 percentage points since the start of the lockdown.⁴⁷ As decline in economic activity continues, businesses will reduce the number of employees and this will lead to a rise in unemployment. Already, some Ugandan private schools are reportedly unable to pay teachers due to school closures and the uncertainty of resumption dates.⁴⁸ Additionally, the closure of hotels and lodging houses has led to massive job losses and doubts in job security for over 400,000 Ugandans working in the hospitality sector.⁴⁹ This could drive more people into unemployment and poverty, making them less resilient to human trafficking.

B. Risks faced by Ugandan migrant workers

To fight unemployment and control labour migration, the Ugandan Labour Externalisation programme encourages Ugandan youths to seek employment abroad through accredited labour recruitment agencies.⁵⁰ The Ugandan Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA) estimates that there are over 165,000 Ugandans currently working in the Middle East.⁵¹ Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE account

for the largest number of Uganda's externalised workforce, and the Ugandan Government has signed bi-lateral labour agreements with all three countries to protect the rights of Ugandan migrant workers. Other countries like Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Afghanistan, and Somalia also host many Ugandan migrant workers, but there are no bi-lateral agreements in place to protect the rights of Ugandan migrant workers in those countries.⁵²

The economic crisis that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic has deep and pervasive implications for migrant workers, and Ugandan migrant workers face risks of unemployment and poverty.⁵³ In destination and host countries, lockdown measures could adversely affect sectors that are reliant on migrant workers, such as security, retail, tourism, food and hospitality, and low skill manufacturing.⁵⁴

While the pandemic negatively affects low-skilled migrant jobs, it increases the demand for high skill migrant jobs in health care and information technology. In a global economic crisis, migrant workers can mitigate shocks from job losses by engaging in intersectoral labour migration to other booming sectors.⁵⁵ However, the peculiarities of this crisis make it harder for cross-sectoral mobility of migrant workers, especially lower skilled workers. This is applicable to Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East. Information from the Ugandan External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS) shows that most of the jobs available to Ugandan migrant workers are jobs in domestic work, security, and hospitality and leisure.⁵⁶

As there have been reports of widespread job loss among Ugandan migrant communities in the Middle East, the inability to engage in intersectoral labour migration increases the vulnerability of Ugandan migrant workers to unemployment and poverty. This is increased by the lack of access to government social safety nets or family or other social structures to help cushion the shocks of the pandemic.⁵⁷ The loss of jobs has been worsened by the restriction on air travel and the closure of the airport in Entebbe, making repatriation to Uganda difficult, if not impossible. In a statement from the UAERA to the Ugandan Parliament on Ugandans stranded abroad, the organisation stated that

“In the Middle East, where many migrant workers got laid off from their jobs due to economic slowdown brought on by COVID-19, many Ugandans were unable to return home despite obtaining air tickets from their former employers”⁵⁸

The job losses Ugandan migrant workers face in host countries, further exacerbated by the difficulty to return home due to restrictions on international travel, greatly increase their vulnerability to victimisation. Additionally, when restrictions ease and the economy slowly opens in host countries, the job losses incurred during the lockdown may result in an oversaturation of “cheap migrant labour” in the labour market, which will be disproportionate to the number of available opportunities. This could create a situation that encourages human trafficking for labour exploitation. Vulnerability to human trafficking

is further exacerbated when the immigration status of migrant workers is tied to their jobs or employers, which is obtainable in the Kafala system¹ operated in some Middle East countries.⁵⁹

C. Risks associated with reduced inflow of diaspora remittances.

The loss of jobs in the migrant workforce due to the COVID-19 pandemic also affects the situation at home in Uganda. According to TradeMark East Africa (TMEA) Ugandan migrants remitted over \$6.28 billion between 2013 and 2018,⁶⁰ and reports estimate that Ugandans abroad remitted around \$1.312 billion in 2018 alone.⁶¹ Diaspora remittances contribute to poverty alleviation in lower to middle income countries. Recipients, usually close relatives, use money obtained from remittances to augment earnings to increase spending power on basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and debt reduction.⁶²

Remittances also reduce financial strain on lower to middle income families and this may reduce chances of child labour in families where children may otherwise be required to contribute to family income. The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) estimates that 90% of global remittances are sent by migrants that work in countries where COVID-19 cases have been recorded.⁶³ Due to the aforementioned challenges faced by migrant workers due to COVID-19, the World Bank estimates a 20% drop in the flow of remittances globally.⁶⁴ Additionally, the Ugandan Central Bank has revised its projections for the inflow of remittances for the 2020/2021 financial period, from \$1.93 billion to \$238.8 million.⁶⁵

A sharp drop in the inflow of remittances would have a direct impact on the local population. The effects of unemployment, and the possibility of a shrinking Ugandan economy due to the COVID-19 induced global economic crisis, would be exacerbated by such a sharp drop in remittances. This will affect families' ability to cushion the effects of the pandemic and may heighten the risk of more families falling into extreme poverty, making them less resilient to human trafficking.

¹ The Kafala system is a migrant worker sponsorship system operated by some member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The system requires migrants working in 'unskilled and low-skilled' jobs to have an in-country sponsor who is usually their employer, to whom their migration and visa status is usually tied. The practise perpetuates a system where migrant workers are left vulnerable to exploitation as employers may seize the travel documents of their workers. It also creates unfair power balance between employer and employee, which could lead to the exploitation of migrant workers.

2.3 Children at Risk in Uganda

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching direct and indirect impacts on children in Uganda. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic on Ugandans has reduced the livelihoods of families through unemployment, making it increasingly difficult for families to meet basic needs, including providing for children. According to UNICEF Uganda, many families are having to live on one meal a day due to increased food prices.⁶⁶ The effects of COVID-19 and the implementation of lockdown restrictions in Uganda creates important child protection gaps that could exacerbate the vulnerability of Ugandan children to exploitation by traffickers.

The closure of over 51,000 learning institutions has left over 15 million Ugandan school-going children at home for four months and counting.⁶⁷ The prolonged closure of schools, although necessary to protect Ugandan children from infection, may deprive children from access to basic protection and support networks, which could leave them more vulnerable to exploitation.

For many Ugandan children, especially children from underserved communities and neighbourhoods, school attendance means access to subsidised meals and safe drinking water, which reduces the burden of care placed on their families. School attendance is thus a vital piece in the child protection framework, providing children with access to child protection professionals such as teachers and carers, and activities such as sports and academic work. This contributes to protecting children from physical and sexual abuse, child labour, forced marriage, hazardous and exploitative work, and reduces vulnerability to human trafficking.

Media reports show that in the first few weeks after the implementation of lockdown measures in Uganda, there was a sharp increase in the number of community reports of child abuse, including neglect, gender based-violence, and rape.⁶⁸ Lockdown measures, including the dusk-to-dawn curfew, have also reduced the ability of child protection officers to respond to cases. Additionally, due to curfew restrictions, 24/7 children helplines have been reduced to working only during the day-time.⁶⁹ The lockdown has also made it difficult for care and service providers to follow-up on cases, further increasing difficulties in identifying and rescuing children from possible child trafficking situations.

The pandemic also carries the risk of exacerbating child labour situations in Uganda. Uganda has one of the world's youngest populations with 49.3% being children less than 15 years. Furthermore, according to the ILO, there are over 2 million children aged between 5 and 17 engaged in child labour in Uganda alone.⁷⁰ Closure of schools and the loss of family income could drive more children into child labour in sectors such as agriculture to help their families survive the impact of the pandemic. A survey on child labour in Uganda carried out by Save the Children in May 2020, reported that over 56% of respondents to the survey noticed an increase in child labour since the start of lockdown in Uganda.⁷¹

The loss of livelihood also has implications for child-headed households. Children who already had to work prior to the COVID-19 outbreak are finding it more difficult to find work. Save the Children reports that most youths in northern Uganda that rely on informal work to survive and provide for their

households find it increasingly difficult to find work and earn. Unable to support their households, young household heads are borrowing and getting into debt to provide essentials for their families.⁷² This could increase the possibility of debt bondage, which can lead to human trafficking situations.

In other parts of the country, there have been reports of an increase in the number of girls drawn into commercial sexual exploitation and exchanging sex for basic necessities. According to the Executive Director of the Ugandan Youth Development Link (UYDEL) children trying to cope with the pandemic have been sexually exploited in exchange for food. UYDEL further reports that 60% of the over 1500 children that they support have faced sexual exploitation during the lockdown.⁷³

There are also fears that the difficulties that have been experienced as a result of the pandemic will result in an increase of child marriages. The United Nations Funds for Population Agency (UNFPA) notes that COVID-19 is likely to significantly impact intervention to reduce child marriage, resulting in an extra 13 million additional child marriages globally.⁷⁴ Save the Children has reported seeing an increase in child marriage, especially in the northeast region where adolescent girls are being married off in exchange for dowry or bride price.⁷⁵ These increases Ugandan children to risks of child trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The vulnerability of children in street situations to human trafficking for forced begging and hawking has been at the fore of child protection and anti-trafficking discourse in Uganda since before the pandemic. However, the pandemic increases the risks faced by street children to human trafficking as an increase in the number of children engaged in street begging and hawking in Uganda has been reported by the ILO.⁷⁶ To cushion the effects of the economic crisis, more children have been pushed to street begging and hawking to supplement the family income.⁷⁷ The effects of the lockdown and the economic crisis will undoubtedly reduce the amount of money street begging and hawking will generate, making the situation more desperate for children and their families. This could exacerbate already high risks of trafficking as street children may be forced to find other ways of increasing their earnings, which could leave them vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. Street children may also be in violation of lockdown and curfew restrictions, which may leave them open to abuse from law enforcement, resulting in the revictimisation of possible child trafficking victims.

Although the measures that have been put in place by the Ugandan Government have spared Ugandan children from the public health implications of the pandemic, the socio-economic implications may leave children much more vulnerable to child trafficking.

2.4 Risks for Forced Migrants

According to UNHCR data, 79.5 million persons were forcibly displaced in 2019, 26 million of whom are refugees. Data further show that 85% of displaced persons are hosted in developing countries, and 80% live in countries or territories affected by malnutrition and food insecurity.⁷⁸ This means that the majority of the world's refugee population are hosted in countries that are at risk of suffering huge economic shocks from the pandemic.

Moreover, forced migrants and other displaced persons face an additional protection crisis⁷⁹ that carries the risk of increasing pre-existing vulnerabilities of forced migrants to human rights violations, including human trafficking. This is the case with refugees in Uganda.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the response of the Ugandan Government to the outbreak could have a disproportionate effect on refugees. Uganda hosts the largest refugee population on the African continent and the third largest globally, with 1.4 million refugees. About 60% of these refugees are under the age of 18. The majority of refugees in Uganda (about 92%) are hosted in settlements alongside local communities, while a minority (8%) are hosted in urban centres, especially Kampala.⁸⁰

Regional conflict continues to impact upon how Uganda handles the pandemic and its refugee population. Despite the closure of borders, recently Uganda temporarily re-opened its borders to receive refugees fleeing from recurring conflict in the DRC. Over the course of three days between 1-3 July, 3,000 refugees, 65% of whom were children, crossed over the border into north-west Uganda at the Golajo and Mount Zeu crossing points. They were fleeing resurgent conflict in the Ituri region. They were quarantined for 14 days before being moved to refugee camps by the UNHCR. Such a large movement of children further highlights their vulnerability to risks such as trafficking and other forms of exploitation like child labour.⁸¹

While the labour market shrinks in Uganda and unemployment and poverty levels increase, refugees and asylum seekers will be forced to compete for scarce resources and jobs with host communities, particularly due to the recent UNHCR-sanctioned 30% cut in refugee household income and/or rations. This is particularly the case with urban dwelling refugees in Uganda.⁸² The refugee policy adopted by the Ugandan Government requires all refugees and asylum seekers to reside in official settlements in order to access material support and protection.⁸³ With little or no access to Government palliatives and relief packages, urban refugees face increased risks of falling into extreme poverty with no real chance of alleviation.

Additionally, refugees living in settlements are also vulnerable to shocks from the pandemic. The implementation of lockdown restrictions has limited the ability of refugees in settlements to access alternative sources of income. This comes at a time when the World Food Program has reduced its food rations by 30% due to uncertainty over the sustainability of food supplies.⁸⁴ This also coincides with the hike in food prices in Uganda since the start of the pandemic.⁸⁵ These conditions create a situation where

refugees are at risk of food shortages and hunger with no means to supplement income, which could greatly reduce their resilience to human trafficking.

Asylum seekers on the move may also be impacted by the closure of borders globally. Unable to cross borders, irregular migrants on the move will be forced into situations of immobility - unable to continue their journey and unable to return home as well. Increased immobility especially under unforeseen circumstances, such as this pandemic, increases the vulnerability of irregular migrants and asylum seekers to human trafficking. This is especially applicable to migrants who are forced to earn or pay their way through their journeys, and migrants whose smugglers finance their journeys in part or whole.

Refugee children living in large camps and settlements also face increasing risks of human trafficking. The living conditions of some of the camps, settlements, and other places of institutional living where refugees and asylum seekers are confined make social distancing and other COVID-19 prevention measures difficult. This puts refugees and asylum seekers at serious risk of infection should outbreaks occur. Additionally, the lack of access to adequate healthcare could greatly limit chances of survival, putting forced migrants at greater health risks. This could put children in danger of losing one or more parents, thus increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking.

Finally, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) face serious risks of increased vulnerability to human trafficking. UNHCR data suggests that Uganda hosts over 40,000 UASCs.⁸⁶ The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises that UASCs are “*vulnerable to various risks that affect their life, survival and development such as trafficking for purposes of sexual or other exploitation or involvement in criminal activities which could result in harm to the child, or in extreme cases, in death*”.⁸⁷ The CRC also notes that UASCs regularly face discrimination and are denied access to food and other services including health and education.⁸⁸ This could increase during the pandemic as the reduction in food rations and the breakdown of economic activity may lead to increased struggle for resources, and without familial and other forms of protection, UASCs may be left without adequate access to provisions. The lack of access to adequate provision may make UASCs more desperate for work or even lead to the exchange of sexual favours to make ends meet. This could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities to exploitation by traffickers for labour and sexual exploitation.

3.0 Conclusion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has multifaceted implications for the world. The pandemic is likely to lead to an increase in human trafficking for various forms of exploitation in our societies. As countries around the world struggle to cope with the spread of the virus, the consequences of the virus and the implemented measures to fight the spread of infection have highlighted inequalities in our societies, which could in turn exacerbate vulnerabilities to human trafficking.

For countries like Uganda that have been relatively successful in implementing measures to limit the spread of the virus, these measures thus far embed the risks of increasing the suffering of the most vulnerable in the society, including victims and survivors of human trafficking. The pandemic also comes at a time when the Ugandan Government has been judged to have relaxed on their anti-trafficking efforts. Victims of human trafficking may be left in a situation of emotional, physical, and social isolation due to measures that have been adopted, further intensifying their suffering at the hands of their abusers.

Issues such as rising poverty and unemployment without any real access to social safety nets and government social structures create situations where already vulnerable members of the population could become more susceptible to human trafficking. This is also exacerbated by the closure of schools, which has kept more children at home and increased the burden of care placed on parents and guardians. Increased hardship could result in the development of negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour, forced marriage, and the sale and sexual exploitation of children, which create situations where children are vulnerable to human rights violations including human trafficking. Prolonged absenteeism from schools could result in an increase in dropout rates, which will deprive children of a vital pillar in the child protection framework thereby increasing risks of vulnerability to human trafficking.

Forced migrants in Uganda also face serious risks of increased vulnerability to human trafficking. A drop in food rations and support by the WFP and UNHCR respectively increases the difficulties faced by Ugandan refugees. The slowdown in economic activity and implementation of lockdown measures have made it more difficult for both urban and settlement dwelling refugees to find other means of augmenting their earnings. Refugee children are at even greater risk of dropping out of schools or engaging in child labour to contribute to family income. Unaccompanied and separated children also face increasing risks of vulnerability to exploitation due to the lack of familial and social support.

Although mostly overlooked, the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic also affect criminal networks and human traffickers in particular, forcing them to intensify efforts in order to make profit amidst a global recession. This, coupled with the potential increase in the supply of victims, could result in a surge in human trafficking incidents in the near future. It is still yet impossible to clearly state how the pandemic will affect human trafficking in Uganda. However, the Ugandan Government should examine its anti-trafficking policy and practice to adapt it to the current global situation. Policies that are developed to respond to the crisis should be human rights centred to ensure that no one is left behind. The public health implications of the pandemic should remain of primary concern but it is also important

for anti-trafficking stakeholders to begin to examine the potential social and economic impacts of the pandemic in addition to the much-vaunted public health impact.

4.0 Recommendations

Outreach support services are essential and should be considered as such. Lockdown restrictions should be relaxed for support workers to enable them travel and respond to complaints, especially for reports of child abuse or neglect.

NGOs performing community outreach services should be allowed to continue providing such services to reintegrated survivors, providing they maintain social distancing and other health and safety measures.

The Government should ensure that workers who have lost their jobs or have had their working hours reduced due to lockdown restrictions have access to social support or government palliatives such as food relief packages.

The Government should pay attention to informal workers who do not have access to social benefits and ensure that they are not left destitute and vulnerable to exploitation.

Funding and assistance to NGOs providing anti-trafficking services should be maintained during and after the lockdown period. Services such as educational and vocational skill training, psychological and medical services, and legal support should receive continuous support from the government and donor agencies.

NGOs offering sheltering services should be provided with adequate access to COVID-19 testing and other PPEs where possible, so they can resume accepting more victims / survivors into shelters.

The Government should ensure that victims / survivors of human trafficking maintain access to justice and participate in the investigation and prosecution processes.

Curfew restrictions should be relaxed to allow childcare helplines to resume 24/7 services.

Law enforcement outfits should maintain vigilance in the identification of human trafficking cases. Budgetary allocations for human trafficking in law enforcement should not be repurposed for non-anti-trafficking purposes.

The Ugandan Government should intensify efforts to identify and repatriate Ugandan workers who are stranded abroad after losing their jobs.

The Government and other refugee protection stakeholders should maintain material assistance to both urban community and settlement dwelling refugees in this period.

Ugandan embassies and consular offices in destination countries should ensure that Ugandan migrants, especially those working in the informal sector have access to safe shelter and medical assistance, should they wish to remain in the host country to wait out the pandemic.

More children may be forced into street begging and vending in order to contribute to family earnings. The Government should intensify efforts to identify, shelter, and rehabilitate children in street situations during this period. Children in street situations who are in violation of lockdown and curfew restrictions

should not be further victimised or criminalised by officials enforcing lockdown restrictions. The government should take a victim centred approach in dealing with children in this situation by ensuring that their rights are protected. Identification, rescue, and rehabilitation should be the primary response to children in street situations during this period.

The Ugandan Government and other child protection stakeholders in Uganda should make special effort to ensure that the lockdown and closure of schools does not result in the increase of dropout rates, especially for girls in disadvantaged homes and neighbourhoods. The Government should also monitor and respond to reports of child marriages in the communities.

Law enforcement should pay particular attention to the possible increase of online sexual activity such as online child sexual exploitation and the increased sharing of online child sexual exploitation material. The Government should increase awareness on the safe use of the internet for children and the dangers of online predators and abuse.

Refugee settlement officials and administrators should pay particular attention to the possible sale and exploitation of children for sexual purposes in camps and settlements.

The Government should intensify the monitoring of the activities of labour recruitment agencies during this period. As unemployment rates rise, dishonest recruitment agencies may seek to take advantage of vulnerable out of work youths who may want to partake in the labour externalisation program.

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