

Controlling COVID-19, compounding injustice:

The impact of pandemic control measures on modern slavery

ESSAY BY
**A SURVIVOR
COLLECTIVE
IN INDIA**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and amplified inequality and instability across the globe. The human impact has been catastrophic, with research revealing sharp declines in health, living, and working conditions, as well as mass unemployment. As shocks rippled through communities, vulnerabilities compounded and modern slavery spiked. While many communities continue to grapple with the health and social impacts of the pandemic, members of a survivors' collective in India have shared their experiences and recommendations on how to reverse the devastating rise in modern slavery. Their observations are summarised below:

Mass unemployment, high personal debt, and limited government support created opportunities for traffickers to prey on growing numbers of people who have been pushed into survival mode during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those desperate to stay afloat have been driven into forced and bonded labour, often in sex work and brick kilns. With many industries yet to return to pre-pandemic operations, pathways out of modern slavery remain limited. Even those who were able to stay in their existing jobs have seen their wages and working conditions plummet — meaning forms of employment that were previously safe became exploitative in nature.

“I know of people who had travelled to Bombay to work before the pandemic, who are now unemployed and homeless hundreds of kilometres from home. They are forced into exploitative work because they have no other choice. Employers say that workers can leave if they are unhappy, but they are trapped because there is nowhere else to go for better work.”

With financial insecurity spreading across India, digital lending apps exploded in popularity, followed by an increase in loan sharks using heavy-handed collection tactics and extortionately high interest rates that left borrowers in further desperation. Many borrowers have been forced into precarious forms of employment to repay their loans and to avoid violent repercussions. Others have fled their homes so as not to be found by lenders, making them vulnerable to even worse forms of exploitation as they attempt to carve out a new life in isolation.

Creating new risks and abuses

Global lockdowns to try to halt the spread of the virus caused widespread social isolation. For many, this led to a sharp increase in the amount of time spent online; a trend that has been capitalised on by those with criminal intent. Shielded by online anonymity, perpetrators were able to use deceptive job advertisements and targeted outreach using chat features to recruit vulnerable people into exploitative labour. Adolescent girls became a particular target for online perpetrators, with many being lured into forms of sexual exploitation under the guise of building a romantic relationship.

In some instances, criminals have used face mask mandates to their advantage by disguising their identity, or that of their victims, from law enforcement officials or eyewitnesses.

Heightened discrimination and reversing progress on social norms

Communities are experiencing indirect effects from the pandemic, including heightened discrimination that threatens years of progress, especially for women and girls. The shockwaves to family units and restrictions on mobility have brought about a sharp rise in domestic violence. There are fears that these trends may continue long after COVID-19 eases and impact future generations. In some cases, women have been driven out of their homes



by violence, where they become vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse. Additionally, school closures, social isolation, and rising poverty have increased the practice of child and forced marriage, with fears that this could impact millions of girls for years to come.

In India, migrant workers returning home due to COVID-19 restrictions were stigmatised for their heightened risk of carrying the virus. Despite government drives to ensure testing of all returning workers, access to facilities was limited, leading to entire households being forcibly isolated from their communities and thereby facing destitution and becoming easy targets for exploitation.

“Many parents are forcing their young daughters into marriages with older men to ease the financial burden at home. Some of these men have sold the girls into exploitation in another city, falsely claiming that she has run away. With these stories circulating, I know of situations where girls have run away from home to avoid this fate, only to then find themselves sold into exploitation on the streets.”

Looking ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example of how crises compound other crises. While it has not discriminated in its spread across the globe, as with many other disasters its effects have fallen disproportionately on the world's most vulnerable people. With the global economy still facing high levels of uncertainty, continued employment losses, and concerns of an uneven global recovery, there is an urgent need for more effective government responses.

The pandemic exacerbated the systemic economic and societal inequalities that are among the root causes of modern slavery. It is vital that this intersectionality become central to global responses. For example, solutions focused on addressing poverty, discrimination, and exploitation could prevent the proliferation of conditions that make people more vulnerable to modern slavery. Income generation schemes to help poor people earn a living, expanded access to education, targeted public awareness campaigns on gendered violence and child marriage, and tailored support to marginalised groups are examples of the responses needed to alleviate the effects of these compounded crises.

There are reasons to be hopeful. The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the experiences of those exploited by the global economy and the systems that are upholding the inequalities they face. There is a pandemic-induced realisation among governments, industries, and communities that they must reassess the way things work with a new awareness of and focus on global risks, vulnerabilities, and intersectionalities. All of this represents a renewed opportunity to galvanise commitments to action from both the public and private sectors and to mobilise resources for the task ahead.

**Delhi, India,
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Circles on the ground show where migrants can stand while waiting for food. The Indian government announced on March 24 that the country will go into lockdown with four hours' notice. This led to day labourers leaving major city hubs and returning to their communities, often on foot. Photo by Yawar Nazir/Getty Images.