

JOURNAL of MODERN SLAVERY

A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Human Trafficking Solutions

SLAVERY AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE
SUPPLEMENTAL

Volume 6, Issue 3, 2021

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consequence of human catastrophe**

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<https://doi.org/10.22150/jms/XGPH4676>

Older than Troy: slavery as a consequence of human catastrophe

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"I would like to express my particular and heartfelt thanks to the scholars who gave their time and expertise to review the papers submitted to this edition of the Journal of Modern Slavery. Their perspicacious observations and feedback were invaluable in strengthening the quality of this edition of the Journal and advancing learning on this crucial but frequently neglected aspect of humanitarian crises". - Aidan McQuade

At the outset of her extraordinary book, *The Silence of the Girls*, Pat Barker quotes from Philip Roth's novel, *The Human Stain*: "*All of European literature springs from a fight... 'Divine Muse, sing of the ruinous wrath of Achilles... Begin where they first quarreled, Agamemnon, the King of men, and great Achilles.' And what are they quarrelling about, these two violent, mighty souls? It's as basic as a barroom brawl. They are quarrelling over a woman. A girl really. A girl stolen from her father. A girl abducted in war.*"

Barker's breathtaking retelling of the Iliad strips away the facades of martial glory through which generations have viewed these legends and instead presents this as another universal story: of one young woman, Briseis, striving to survive her enslavement at the hands of those who murdered her relatives, just as millions have done in every war up to and including our present time.

This interrelationship between war and slavery was clearly understood in the aftermath of the Second World War. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, "*No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms*". A fundamental reason why this Article was included in the Declaration was that its authors had all lived through that bloodiest of human conflicts. They knew how the political leaders and war machines of the Axis powers had systematically enslaved Jews, Gypsies, gays and political opponents in Europe, and prisoners of war and "subject peoples", including Korean "comfort" women, in Asia, contemptuous of the humanity of those whose labour they forced and whom they sexually exploited.

Today thousands of girls and young women are subject to enslavement as a weapon of war by Boko Haram and Islamic State. The experiences of these women and girls are just as brutal and inhumane as anything Agamemnon or Achilles dreamt up. Thousands more, male and female, are subject to state-sponsored forced labour under the guise of military service in Eritrea, and at the hands of the military dictatorship of Myanmar.

Of course, humanitarian emergencies do not just originate from conflict. "Natural" events such as drought, earthquakes, pandemics or floods are also sources of disasters. Humanitarian

emergencies such as these create other slavery risks. An inept response to the tsunami which hit the coast of Tamil Nadu in India in 2001 failed to recognise the specific vulnerabilities of fishing communities arising from their caste, hence perpetuating their impoverishment and rendering them more vulnerable to debt bondage¹.

As humans continue to overstress the planetary environment, from the devastation of the world's oceans to the pollution of our atmosphere, such disasters are likely to grow and provoke further conflict over scarce resources. If "natural" disasters intersect with conflict or inept and brutal government, such as occurred in Ethiopia in 1984, then the consequences can be truly calamitous.

So, given that the history of conflict and "natural" disasters, and the history of slavery are so intrinsically bound together, one would perhaps imagine that humanitarian actors, those whose very professions includes the support and protection of the victims of war and other calamities, would be amongst the most perspicacious thought leaders and tenacious advocates on the policy and practice measures necessary to reduce the risks of slavery to the disaster affected.

The truth sadly seems something very different.

Viktoria Curbelo for her paper, "*Exploring the Relationship between Humanitarian Emergencies and Human Trafficking*", conducted a narrative review of databases for scholarly articles that address the issues of human trafficking and diverse forms of humanitarian crisis. "*An initial search,*" she writes, "*produced 59 articles, ... Once the duplicates were removed, 44 were screened to ensure they met all criteria... Only five articles fulfilled all criteria.*"

Curbelo acknowledges that a more comprehensive literature review may find additional material. Nevertheless, to find in a narrative review only five papers fulfilling all her criteria on human trafficking and humanitarian emergencies does indicate a remarkable lack of interest by scholars in the subject area. This in turn corroborates my own observations, as both a humanitarian practitioner and an anti-slavery researcher and advocate, that the humanitarian sector is strikingly uninterested in the issue of slavery in spite of it demonstrably being intrinsic to the sort of catastrophes to which they routinely respond.

When I worked on water supply and sanitation in Afghanistan in the 1990s I regularly purchased bricks from kilns that used forced labour without even questioning whether alternative supplies were possible. When I visited Cox's Bazar in 2018 I discovered that the slave economy was still being supported in exactly this way. Engineers from international organisations striving to provide secure camps with year-round access for the Rohingya refugees there were also routinely purchasing bricks from kilns staffed entirely by people enslaved through debt bondage.

The causes of the exploitation and trafficking in the Cox's Bazar camps are not limited to the manner in which humanitarian operations procure supplies. As Madmadul Hoque describes in his paper "*Forced Labour and Access to Education of Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh*" the risks arise from the conjunction of the refugees' vulnerabilities and how the humanitarian response addresses those vulnerabilities.

¹ See - <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/india0505/6.htm> - accessed 25 June 2021.

Hoque notes that, “*Rohingya children are engaged in harmful child labour and become victims of forced labour ... National and international agencies struggle to tackle the issue due to several key factors. First, existing social norms and lack of social sanctions make it easy for employers to engage children in commercial and household works. Second, legal and formal institutions fail to tackle the issue as Rohingya children, like many other Bangladeshis, work in informal sectors. Third, parents are forced to give up their children due to a wide range of reasons including lack of access to the formal labour market, limited economic freedom, uncertain future, and poor living conditions in the camps. Fourth, undocumented Rohingya children have become easy targets for forced labour, sex trade, and trafficking through Cox’s Bazar. Fifth, the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to making matters worse since national and international agencies have considerably failed to sustain their regular support.*”

Hoque quotes a local official stating that that “*Some Rohingya children, especially girls after going missing are often found to be forced in prostitution or domestic slavery. Recently, a senior citizen from Dhaka contacted me and asked if I knew any Rohingya family that may need support and wanted to send their any of their girl children to work as maid in Dhaka.*” This resonates with reports from other humanitarian crises across the world that indicate that daughters may be offered up for various forms of exploitation, including sexual, to enable the survival of other family members.

The humanitarian professionals that I spoke to in Cox’s Bazar described the various protection officers working in the camps as consistently very good, frequently identifying risks of trafficking to the senior humanitarian leadership who oversaw the refugee operation. However, all agreed that the concerns of the protection officers were rarely attended to at a senior level. The issues that Hoque identifies would pose a considerable challenge to any anti-slavery effort. But such efforts are negligible in Cox’s Bazar. They seem negligible in all humanitarian practice.

Hoque notes that “*Lack of access to education remains a grave concern and the crisis is now more than a mere humanitarian one. More than half a million children are growing up without formal education. The consequences will of course be long-lasting.*” Indeed, such a wholesale loss of education may render many in this population vulnerable to exploitation for the rest of their lives.

When I was in similar positions as those leading the humanitarian efforts in Bangladesh I know I found plentiful excuses for not thinking much beyond the tyranny of the immediate operations that I was tasked with. But whatever sympathy one may have for the plight of individual professionals in such contexts, it cannot be an excuse for an entire system turning a blind eye on the matter of slavery.

Curbelo concludes from her review that, “*Natural disasters and outbreaks were found to be highly predictive of increased human trafficking outflows. Not all types of humanitarian emergencies, however, showed positive correlations with human trafficking. One study interestingly suggested an inverse relationship between conflict and human trafficking, however, this was only based on one study, and the study did not look at interstate war. Some moderating*

factors were explored in the literature including regime type, economic factors, and quality of governance.”

There are overlaps in Curbelo’s conclusions with those of Kevin Bales’ paper “*What is the Link between Natural Disasters and Human Trafficking and Slavery?*” Bales notes that while initial analysis of data derived from the Global Slavery index and other sources on the relationship between trafficking and natural disasters did suggest a strong link, in the end it seems that any influence of natural disasters on the prevalence of slavery is more complex. The existing social, economic, and human rights situations within a country will set the stage for how the impact of a natural disaster will play out in terms of human rights in general and human trafficking in particular.

Natural disasters, Bales observes, can disrupt trafficking activities as the infrastructure upon which their operations depend is disrupted by the disaster. For example, the thousands of people who were killed during Cyclone Nargis in 2008 included many shrimp fishermen in bonded labour on Myanmar’s Gulf of Motama, hence disrupting the operations of their traffickers for the rest of the season².

However, as Bales notes, disasters can also “*increase the pool of people who might be exploited through reducing protections and safeguards,*” and traffickers may be quick to seize upon the opportunities that any chaos provides.

This is an observation that resonates with the paper by Kathryn van Doore and Rebecca Nhep, “*Providing Protection or Enabling Exploitation?*” which explores how a particular type of humanitarian intervention – the establishment of orphanages in post-disaster contexts – actually exacerbates the risks of trafficking.

Van Doore and Nhep note that “*It is currently estimated that there are between 2.7 million – 5.37 million children residing in institutions, or orphanages, globally with up to 80% of resident children having one or both parents alive, many of whom could raise them at home if they were supported... In addition, in countries where the population is experiencing, or impacted by, conflict, displacement, health crises, low socio-economic conditions or a combination of these, the number of orphanages is increasing.*”

On top of this Van Doore and Nhep note that in “*the United States Trafficking in Persons Report 2018, a special section entitled ‘Child Institutionalization and Human Trafficking’ highlighted how children are both trafficked into and out of orphanages outlining that the ‘physical and psychological effects of staying in residential institutions, combined with societal isolation and often subpar regulatory oversight by governments, place these children in situations of heightened vulnerability to human trafficking’.*

This is perhaps a particularly egregious example of what Bales calls the “*disaster ‘snowball effect’.* While the information coming from disasters is disjointed, meagre, and often confused, once a disaster is added to an existing situation of slavery and trafficking, and the number of persons highly vulnerable to enslavement is dramatically increased, then the volume

² See - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/nov/12/we-cant-allow-myanmars-slavery-tainted-shrimp-to-land-on-our-plates> - accessed 25 June 2021.

of slavery crime will increase over time, only to shrink when law enforcement, public safety, and personal security recovers. Put simply, disasters both terminate and initiate trafficking and slavery, and generally increase the amount and severity of exploitation over time.”

In other words, this “*disaster snowball effect*” suggests that consideration of slavery and human trafficking may not need to be an operational priority for humanitarian professionals in the *acute* phases of emergencies, that is, in the immediate aftermath of an emergency’s onset when life-saving interventions, such as food, shelter, water and sanitation are most urgent. However, as crises settle into their more drawn out, *chronic*, phases then consideration of trafficking prevention and protection must gain purchase in humanitarian thinking as traffickers grasp the opportunities for exploitation that are offered to them by refugee and displaced persons’ vulnerabilities, including those of children in orphanages.

So, while Bales acknowledges his research is exploratory, he is undoubtedly right, in my opinion, when he asserts that, “*A consideration of human rights, and human trafficking and slavery in particular, must be part of disaster planning.*”

Wieltschnig, Muraszkievicz and Fenton take up this challenge in their paper “*Without data we are fighting blind.*” In this they focus their discussion on how “*defense actors can use open data from the humanitarian sector to develop a holistic understanding of human security that can bolster their efforts to counter human trafficking and move from reactive to preventative responses.*”

It could be argued that Kathryn Bolkovac’s experiences in former Yugoslavia³, where she uncovered human rights abuses, including complicity in human trafficking, by military contractors working with the United Nations, is an egregious example of what can happen when defense actors do not make human rights intrinsic to their human security thinking. But this is an issue that is more general to the humanitarian sector than just the security professionals. Oxfam has also wrestled with some of these issues in its humanitarian operation in Haiti for example⁴ and that is unlikely to be an isolated example.

Wieltschnig et al recognize the way in which trafficking issues, from child soldiers to financing of conflict through the sale of human beings, to the enslavement of women and girls for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude, pervade the contemporary battlespace – and hence the contemporary humanitarian arena – just as they have done since time immemorial. Hence they also argue for the engagement by security actors with humanitarian actors to deepen mutual understanding of the challenges and potential anti-trafficking responses to promote their broad definition of human security.

Of course, that depends upon humanitarian actors recognizing that they also have an imperative to address human trafficking challenges.

³ See – The Whistleblower, by Kathryn Bolkovac with Cari Lynn, 2011, Palgrave MacMillan, New York

⁴ See - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jun/11/oxfam-abuse-claims-haiti-charity-commission-report> - accessed 24 June 2021.

“Between April 2020 and March 2021, Delta 8.7 convened a global expert Working Groups to produce a Policy Guide that seeks to assist policymakers in assessing “what works” to end modern slavery and achieve SDG Target 8.7 in the context of Crisis.” The resulting guide⁵, published in April 2021, is a robust document that could enrich the depth of understanding of any interested policy maker or practitioner of the risks of slavery posed by humanitarian crises.

Unfortunately, and if you have read this far it will probably be no surprise to you, the membership of the Working Groups that produced the guide are composed almost exclusively of long-term anti-slavery researchers and practitioners, Representatives of the big humanitarian policy-making or practitioner agencies are conspicuous by their absence.

This suggests a final, unfortunate, Homeric allusion: that the authors of that guide, and the papers in this issue of the Journal of Modern Slavery, myself included, seem to be amongst the inheritors of Cassandra, the princess of Troy gifted with prophesy but cursed that no word of warning that she uttered would ever be believed.

The humanitarian sector today seems as uninterested in the advice of anti-slavery scholars as the rulers of Troy were in Cassandra’s observation that it was definitely not a good idea to bring that army-sized wooden horse thing into the city. But it remains imperative, as the authors of these papers have noted, to maintain the research and to make every effort to share the learning.

In the 1990s the incorporation of gender analysis into development and humanitarian response led to a qualitative improvement in those disciplines. The papers in this edition of the Journal of Modern Slavery show that the incorporation of anti-slavery analysis and action into humanitarian response could also lead to qualitative improvements in its policy and practice.

This idea may be an irritation to those in corridors of humanitarian power who would prefer to expend their energy on other things within a more familiar set of priorities. But history and contemporary research both demonstrate the centrality of slavery risks to human catastrophe. Therefore, it must be recognized that neglecting human rights and anti-slavery protections in humanitarian response is as professionally negligent as ignoring war displaced people’s need for clean drinking water and shelter.

So, anti-slavery researchers must persist until the growing body of their learning, such as included in this edition, is properly acknowledged and incorporated into new approaches to humanitarian response. Ultimately it is those at the sharp end of war and disaster who will benefit, and that is something worth striving for.

⁵ See - http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8065/Delta87_CrisisPolicyGuide.pdf - accessed 25 June 2021.