



JOURNAL of MODERN SLAVERY

A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Human Trafficking Solutions

COVID-19 SUPPLEMENTAL ISSUE

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020

ABSTRACT

Fluid Vulnerabilities: Narratives of Modern Slavery in India during Lockdown

Dr. George Byrne

University of Portsmouth

Professor Tamsin Bradley

University of Portsmouth

Elizabeth Khumallambam

Gauhati University

Dr. Sutirtha Sahariah

Sulabh International

Fluid Vulnerabilities: Narratives of Modern Slavery in India during Lockdown

Dr. George Byrne

University of Portsmouth

Professor Tamsin Bradley

University of Portsmouth

Elizabeth Khumallambam

Gauhati University

Dr. Sutirtha Sahariah

Sulabh International

This article considers the ways in which COVID-19 has made visible the limitations of ‘ending modern slavery’ as an overarching goal of global development. On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable, meaningful, and clear objective. But it also raises difficult questions that have been further complicated by the pandemic, not least how and where can it be tackled most effectively? We address this question using qualitative data collected in India over an eight-week period from April to July 2020, during which we conducted interviews with ten stakeholders working in INGOs and CSOs and listened to the accounts of twenty ‘community narrators.’

Community narration is an innovative methodological tool, which involves using an intersectional lens to identify individuals who represent a cross section of those who may be especially vulnerable to exploitation. Researchers then conduct face-to-face, in-depth, monthly check-ins that allow changes to the situation of the community narrators and the challenges they face to be better understood. These narratives offer a longitudinal lens through which to trace the experience of the individual, but they also provide insights into vulnerability and resilience at the community level. This includes revealing how communities and networks change and move over time, and the impact this has on the people who are most at risk.

Our rapid research into the impact of COVID-19 on modern slavery in India was carried out amidst the chaotic circumstances that emerged during the country's initial response to the outbreak. The aim was to ensure that, rather than being lost, the experiences and narratives of the people whose lives were being most affected were being heard and documented in order to inform policy responses as quickly as possible. But the outbreak brought with it many obstacles that needed to be addressed. For example, to overcome the restrictions on travel and face-to-face contact in both the UK and India, the research interviews were conducted either remotely from the UK or by researchers who were already located in India. This allowed for most of the community narrators to be interviewed at least twice, even during the different stages of the national COVID-19 lockdown.

We found that, in most cases, working with researchers already in India and/or conducting remote check-ins was possible, though our concern is that the most vulnerable might also have been the least able to make contact. In some instances, proved to be more effective and efficient. It also strengthened international cooperation between researchers, and led to engagement with people who have expertise outside of academia. Researchers from women's organisation in India were recruited and trained, bringing with them local contextual knowledge and an ability to respond appropriately to the trauma and risks they would encounter. For example, when these researchers encountered sex workers who had experienced violence or were without food, they had the necessary knowledge of and access to services to intervene. In some cases, participants themselves have also been trained in collecting community narratives and taking an active role in the research, which presents a possibility of expanding the scope of the research to understand the broader, and longer-term, impact of COVID-19.

The narratives presented in this article provide insights into the varied impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerability and resilience to modern slavery over a short but critical period. In doing so, it builds upon previous research conducted in 2019 as part of the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery's (GFEMS) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Unit (MELU). This allows us to identify which challenges remain how they have changed, and which new challenges are emerging. The initial findings of our eight week rapid review have already been instrumental in informing policy responses, and are now being used to guide the next stage of our ongoing longitudinal study as part of a Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project, which will allow for the community narrators to be revisited up until July 2021.

Among these initial findings is that, although specific sectors (such as the garment industry or domestic work) are a useful entry point through which to

identify people who may be at risk, a sector-based approach to understanding modern slavery is not sufficient. COVID-19 has highlighted the fluid nature of vulnerability, bringing into focus both the extent and complexity of the risks people face. This raises many questions, such as how can the experiences garment workers be understood when the garment factories have closed? And how can interventions that focus on domestic workers account for a person's shift into sex work?

By focusing on the person and their narrative, rather than the sector, the community narrator approach allows for qualitative research to continue over an extended period of time, regardless of whether a person moves into or out of particular industries or localities. As such, it provides nuanced qualitative data that contributes to a more robust longitudinal analysis of the rapidly changing and highly complex challenges that are emerging as a result of COVID-19. This is particularly important at a time when long-term ethnographic research may not be possible (or could be unethical) for the foreseeable future. Social intimacy, as opposed to social distancing, is at the heart of much qualitative research (Fine, Johnson and Abramson, 2020), especially in anthropology of development. As such, understanding the impact of COVID-19 is hampered by the virus itself, meaning that confronting these limitations and overcoming them represents a critical step toward addressing the crisis.

Our analysis so far of the data we have collected has begun to provide insights into the changing landscape of modern slavery in India, as well as the new challenges that the community narrators face. It has highlighted that, contrary to the views associated with the neoliberal humanitarian resilience paradigm, vulnerability and resilience are not simply personal or community characteristics. Narrow understandings of resilience can potentially shift responsibility from the state to the individual, fitting the narrative of particular forms of governance that seek to decentralize the state's functions in favour of non-state actors (Hilorst, 2018). But conversely, placing the emphasis entirely on the state overlooks the crucial role of local and grassroots organising and the potential for 'entrepreneurship of resilience', which is dependent upon a level of social-cultural embeddedness that 'facilitates access to local resources and legitimacy, and creation of social value in the community' (Vlasov, Bonnedahl, and Vincze, 2018).

A person's vulnerability and their resilience, then, depend on where they are positioned within a web of interconnected and overlapping social, cultural and economic factors at multiple levels from the individual to the global. The social-ecological perspective emphasises the collective nature of resilience, while simultaneously reaching beyond 'place-based analyses of people bound to a specific resource' (Brown, 2015). But during our research we found that the social-

ecological context is changing more rapidly than ever, with narrators shifting between high risk sectors, such as garment work, domestic work, and sex work. Many found themselves in no sector at all, dislocated from support networks, and with little hope of finding any work at all in the near future. This can leave particular people highly vulnerable to exploitation in general by limiting their access to the various resources that might otherwise strengthen their resilience.

We argue that in order to address this more effectively and to better serve the most vulnerable groups and individuals in India and elsewhere, the typical sectoral approach of interventions that seek to end Modern Slavery must shift towards programming through a vulnerabilities lens, and must do so in a way that takes into consideration the fluid and intersectional nature of vulnerability.

In that sense, effective Modern Slavery programming might begin where it ends. That is to say, building resilience and ending slavery in all its forms means addressing the structural inequalities that make it possible (and profitable). This means acknowledging and seeking to better understand how and why people flow into, out of, and between different high-risk contexts, rather than simply seeking to address incidences of abuse and exploitation in specific sectors where and when they take place. The community narrator approach seeks to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge while providing a channel through which the support networks of vulnerable people can be expanded and strengthened.