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ABSTRACT

The Impact of COVID-19 on Survivors of Modern Slavery in Kenya

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We are a collaborative team of researchers from the UK and Kenya, working with survivors of modern slavery in Kenya to understand their experience, specifically of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how we might use their insights to tackle modern slavery. Initially, we were interested in their general experience as survivors, but after COVID-19 made us pause the project, on re-starting we followed the lead of survivor-participants, and are focussing on the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. In response to these requests to re-start from survivors,

we decided it would be ethical to proceed with a “remote” version, taking precautions to ensure the health and well-being of participants and researchers, and the continued ethicality of the process. In response to COVID-19, we have changed the focus of our research to ask:

- What unique perspectives can survivor narratives and photography offer those committed to fighting modern slavery, especially in the context of COVID-19?
- What unique perspectives can survivor narratives and photography offer those committed to fighting, and mitigating the impact of, COVID-19
- What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the lived realities of survivors of modern slavery in Kenya?
- Can a new methodology for engaging with survivors, which combines both ethical storytelling and participatory photography be used to effectively raise awareness of modern slavery and the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of human trafficking?
- How can we use technology to further ethical research with survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery in a period affected by COVID-19, and in similar periods in the future?

Significantly, this research is survivor-led both in terms of its methodology and its output. This paper will therefore share both how survivors themselves shape the methodology in response to COVID-19, enabled in part by participatory research practices, and offer an analysis of their outputs and what they reveal about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives.

This impact is likely to be severe. Factors such as increased economic instability – as early reports suggest that demand for crucial exports (fruit, herbs, flowers, tea and coffee) has dropped, and the tourism industry is on the brink of collapse – are likely to increase instability in the region. In addition, survivors are likely to be cut off from the vital support networks that have been assisting in their recovery. This risks exacerbating issues surrounding survivor support in Kenya, as the Trafficking in Persons Report (2020) noted that, despite some improvements, “Kenyan authorities continued to treat some victims as criminals and the availability of protective services for adult and foreign national victims remained inadequate” (292). Although this research will focus on Kenya, the global nature of the pandemic and the worldwide shift to virtual spaces means that the findings may be extrapolated onto other global contexts. Our original project was based on the

understanding that gaining survivor perspectives on modern slavery is fundamental to understanding its impact. Yet in the time of a global pandemic, these perspectives gain an additional timeliness and urgency, as the unanticipated impacts affect survivors in real time. It is therefore vital to assess the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of modern slavery, yet it is important that this is done within a framework that is empowering, community-orientated, and supportive.

Our methodology is a survivor-led participatory research practice, which combines participatory photography with ethical storytelling. Participatory photography combines taking photographs, subsequent discussion, and distribution of imagery to empower survivors, as “the photograph’s narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, community discussion, and action” (Singhal et al, 2007, 217). Ethical storytelling naturally complements this, as it grants the survivors who choose to tell their stories ultimate agency over them. Gready (2010) states that “the ‘responsibility to the story’ is not a one-off event, but a process spanning the telling and the representation and the reception of the telling” (184). We felt that bringing these methodologies together has the power to create a new mode of ethical, survivor-orientated representation. This is still our primary concern, though COVID-19 has revealed new challenges (technical and theoretical) for both.

In order to answer our research questions, and understand the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of modern slavery, we will conduct a series of remote workshops with 16 survivors of modern slavery in Kenya. Through the workshops, participants will be invited to engage thematically with ideas that will explore the impact of COVID-19 on their lived experience as a survivor of modern slavery. Participants are already known to, and working with, one of the NGO project partners, and a trained counsellor in the research team has determined that they are at a suitable position in their recovery to benefit from participation in this project. Workshops will be facilitated by expert survivor-researchers, and experts in participatory photography and in story-telling.

Participants have previously been equipped with smart phones as part of our partner NGO’s work: we have realised we will need to supply data bundles and phone credit, as well as needing to build in time for our photography expert to learn about the phone’s camera so they can teach the participants how to use it to the best advantage.

We have adapted our usual procedures for securing informed consent to online/“on-phone” working, via one-to-one phone and WhatsApp conversations with a trained counsellor, and WhatsApp group discussions among participants and researchers. Workshops are planned for the whole group. In addition, we have set

up three WhatsApp groups based on participants geographic proximity to each other. These groups will serve as the primary forum for discussion amongst participants, allowing them to reflect on and share their experiences adapting the “subsequent discussion” of participatory photography. This will provide a written record for survivors to reflect on their own changing attitudes to the project. Depending on public health advice during the project, it also means meeting in person for some participants may be possible.

We had originally planned an exhibition of the photographs in Nairobi. We cancelled this because of COVID-19. However, discussion with participants has revealed that physical copies of their photographs are important, and so we are now planning how to print and safely distribute these to participants. Our original plan for project partner World Readert to host the narratives on their reading app continues. This is designed to work on most phones. As we are now assured participants have a suitable phone, and have incorporated credit/data into the project, participants will definitely be able to access their own stories on their own phones, an unexpected benefit of making this project “remote”.

This research is survivor-informed, so our process is yet to be finalised. However, our initial reflections with participants suggest the following workshop structure:

1. Meeting between research team and survivors discussing and establishing informed consent.
2. Individual meetings training survivor participants on how to use their camera phones and practice storytelling techniques.
3. Individual meetings wherein survivors are given a theme, and take photographs and create stories in response.
4. Meeting where survivors reflect on the project, and offer feedback.
5. Follow-up meeting to check-in on survivor well-being.

After the workshops end, we will analyse the stories, images, and participant and researcher reflections on the project. Specifically, we will apply close-reading techniques to analyse what the body of literature and photographic work reveals about the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of modern slavery in Kenya. In addition, we will consider the ways in which survivors moulded the methodologies to accommodate both their artistic visions and their lived realities of working within the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial engagement with survivors suggests this will reveal: (1) increased emphasis on their communities, rather than individual experiences, (2) use of fictionalised accounts to achieve a

more universal experience, and (3) a focus on the activist function of these stories and photographs. We further surmise that these participants will further adapt the methodologies of participatory photography and ethical storytelling to empower their communities. This project, therefore, will not just assess the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of modern slavery in Kenya – it will assess the impact of COVID-19 on survivor-led methodological approaches, the outputs they produce, and how they intend for these outputs to function.

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Research Timeline

August 2020: Online workshops with survivor participants begin.

December 2020: Online workshops with survivors participants finish.

December-January 2020: analysis of stories, narratives and reflections from research team (including survivor-participants).

January 2020: preparation of photographs and stories for publication via project partner and other online channels (e.g. podcasts, relevant websites). Collect reflections from research team (including survivor-participants) on efficacy and effects of changes to methods due to COVID-19, and overall success of project in terms of revised aims and research questions.

February-March: co-author article.

April 2020: submission of full-length article to JMSS.