# 'Now More Than Ever, Survivors Need Us': Essential labouring and increased precarity during COVID-19

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## Abstract

During the earliest waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, much media and public discourse focused on the effects of increasing precarity on already vulnerable populations. As in-person work added a layer of viral risk and unemployment drastically exacerbated economic precariousness, the category of 'essential worker' gained new prominence in these conversations. In this paper, we focus on the complicated relationship between two groups of workers depicted as marginalised and exploited to different degrees during COVID-19: trafficked persons and anti-trafficking service providers. Though media coverage did not conflate these groups, it applied a capacious understanding of precarious labour and structural inequalities that encapsulated different types of essential work. We draw on media produced by frontline anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights organisations between March and May 2020. Even with renewed attention to macro-level harms, many publications still emphasised individualism over collectivity. This emphasis on singular organisational representatives—frontline workers—as heroic rescuers mirrored larger, normative anti-trafficking discourses. At the point at which the 'new normal' was nowhere in sight, COVID-19 served as a flashpoint to reconsider current intervention strategies and instead emphasise a critique of precarious labour along multiple vectors.

**Keywords:** essential labour, precarity, COVID-19, inequalities, critical trafficking studies

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## Introduction

On 30 July 2020, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched their annual campaign for the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons. For their first COVID-19-era campaign, UNODC highlighted first responders in the anti-trafficking sector, those 'committed to the cause' through medical, therapeutic, legal, and carceral work. Their introductory materials foregrounded this frontline work as essential work: 'During the COVID-19 crisis, the essential role of first responders has become even more important. Particularly as the restrictions imposed by the pandemic have made their work even more difficult'. Even during the early stages of a global pandemic, these service providers continued their work to support trafficked persons and 'challeng[e] the impunity of the traffickers'.[1]

The UNDOC might have been the most prominent voice in framing essential labour thusly, but they were not alone. A range of anti-trafficking organisations with national and international reach also emphasised the place of anti-trafficking work in essential work discourses. In this paper, we build upon this narrative, focusing on two groups of workers: labourers identified as 'vulnerable' to exploitation or human trafficking and service providers directly working with this population. Though these groups differed with respect to power and institutional authority, they represented sectors of 'essential work' during COVID-19. Low-wage, piecemeal, migrant, and undocumented workers faced increasingly fraught, dangerous conditions in factories, fields, and fisheries, for example, as forced labour could or would not halt. Anti-violence work never stopped during the pandemic, even as service providers imposed social distancing caps on shelter residents and shifted to remote work.

We analysed media produced by mainstream anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights organisations, groups we define as having some degree of authority to shape or respond to anti-trafficking narratives, narrowing on the early stages of the pandemic from March to May 2020. This period—before vaccinations—highlights the initial visibility of precarity induced by border closures, stay-at-home orders, and the unavailability of personal protective equipment.

Our analysis of these organisations' publications revealed how their media thoughtfully attended to the complex role of structural causes of violence. Organisations across ideological lines encouraged a more macro-level understanding of workers' safety needs and a more complex framing of 'essential' labour. Simultaneously, organisations positioned themselves as critically necessary to address this structural violence. While these assertions were potentially accurate,

[1] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Committed to the Cause: Working on the frontline to end human trafficking', UNODC, 2020, retrieved 6 November 2022, https://www.unodc.org/endht/en/index20.html.

their claims echoed heroism narratives that came to frame certain essential workers' sacrifices by masking structural precarity.

With no 'new normal' then in sight, this moment revealed the importance of understanding workplace structural inequalities along multiple vectors. Precarious labourers face inhumane working conditions, and the service providers tasked with providing assistance may not have enough resources or staff to remedy those conditions. Thus, we conclude by encouraging a broader reconsideration of current anti-trafficking apparatuses that attempt to ameliorate the consequences of structural violence. Instead, we imagine transformative futures that directly target these systems, preventing harm from occurring in the first place.

## The Polarity of Anti-Trafficking Discourses

Before we explore pandemic-era discourses of vulnerability, exploitation, and trafficking, we first want to briefly frame the polarisation that already shapes these conversations. We can distinguish between two major schools of thought in the anti-trafficking space: what Jennifer Musto calls critical trafficking studies and what Sophie Lewis defines as sex worker-exclusionary anti-trafficking discourses. Research in critical trafficking studies argues for a more encompassing understanding of human trafficking beyond the crime framework, thinking broadly and holistically about trafficking into forced labour as a consequence of systemic oppressions and structural inequalities.[2] At the same time, sex worker-exclusionary anti-trafficking discourses often rely upon an exceptional, singular moment of trafficking for (almost exclusively) sexual exploitation that can be easily identified by a singular hero and incarcerated away.[3]

While these are not the only ways to frame human trafficking, they are the most potent, immediately visible in mainstream, public-facing discourses. The gulf between these two approaches is apparent in the organisational media we analysed. These discourses ranged from sex workers' rights collectives pushing

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2 K Kempadoo, 'The Modern-Day White (Wo)man's Burden: Trends in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns', *Journal of Human Trafficking,* vol. 1, issue 1, 2015, pp. 8–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1006120; J Musto, 'Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking and the Detention-to-Protection pipeline', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 37, issue 2, 2013, pp. 257–276, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-013-9295-0.

3 E Koyama, *War on Terror & War on Trafficking: A sex worker activist confronts the anti-trafficking movement*, Confluere Publications, Portland, 2011; S Lewis, 'Defending Intimacy against What? Limits of antisurrogacy feminisms', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 43, issue 1, 2017, pp. 97–125, https://doi.org/10.1086/692518; C Schwarz and T Grizzell, 'Trafficking Spectacle: Affect and state power in Operation Cross Country X', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 41, issue 2, 2020, pp. 57–81, https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2020.a765265.

against dehumanising narratives that were still thriving during a global pandemic to anti-trafficking abolitionists (aligned with sex worker-exclusionary discourses) arguing for more carceral responses to trafficking. Anti-trafficking abolitionists assumed there would be an increase in exploitation during the pandemic, while more critical organisations foregrounded the exacerbation of violent labour conditions and anti-migrant policies. We do not attempt to strike a third way here—our orientations align with a systems-focused critical trafficking approach—but we are most animated by the ways in which labour itself emerges as a moral good or a social evil in these discursive spaces.

Sex worker-exclusionary anti-trafficking discourses rarely engage with trafficking outside of non-sexual forms of labour. This myopic focus on sexualised labour runs the risk of valorising other forms of precarious labour as better, solely on their perceived non-sexual nature. For example, many policy recommendations and NGO-guided interventions redirect victim-survivors back into formal economies that involve flexible, piecemeal, or low-wage work—sectors that can mirror labour trafficking. In addition to workplace harms, like abusive co-workers or wage theft, these labour sectors are not immune from sexualised elements, like harassment, abuse, or rape from employers or patrons on the basis of gender identity or sexuality. However, because the exploitation in precarious labour is not aligned with the social evil of commercialised sex, these jobs are positioned as somehow more dignified.[4]

Critical trafficking studies opens space to interrogate the broader ways in which work itself can be exploitative and constrained under larger oppressive systems. This is especially visible when juxtaposed with feminist anti-work theorists who centre sex, work, and sex work in their analyses. For example, the structural violence of racism, sexism, xenophobia, gender-based violence, economic precarity, and housing insecurity—and the ways these systems link up and accumulate—shape everyday conditions of living and labouring, regardless of whether that work is sexualised.[5] As Juno Mac and Molly Smith succinctly note,

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4 M B Alvarez and E J Alessi, 'Human Trafficking Is More Than Sex Trafficking and Prostitution: Implications for social work', *Affilia*, vol. 27, issue 2, 2012, pp. 142–152, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109912443763; D Brennan, *Life Interrupted: Trafficking into forced labor in the United States*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014; Lewis.

5 Alvarez and Alessi; R Bhuyan *et al.*, 'Responding to the Structural Violence of Migrant Domestic Work: Insights from participatory action research with migrant caregivers in Canada', *Journal of Family Violence*, vol. 33, issue 8, 2018, pp. 613–627, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-9988-x; Kempadoo; J Quirk, C Robinson, and C Thibos, 'Editorial: From Exceptional Cases to Everyday Abuses: Labour exploitation in the global economy', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220151; C Schwarz *et al.*, 'The Trafficking Continuum: Service providers' perspectives on vulnerability, exploitation, and trafficking', *Affilia*, vol. 34, issue 1, 2019, pp. 116–132, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918803648.

'When sex workers assert that *sex work is work*, we are saying that we need rights. We are not saying that work is good or fun, or even harmless, nor that it has fundamental value'.[6] Critical trafficking studies shares this orientation towards eradicating the structural oppressions that might make consent fuzzy—what is freely consented to when faced with the need to pay for rent, food, visa applications, or outstanding debts?—while simultaneously advocating for the immediacy of harm reductionist policies, like the decriminalisation of sex work, that are collectively understood to decrease precarity and violence.[7]

## Labour Discourses During COVID-19

These critical conversations about the morality and precarity of labour were mirrored in media framings of pandemic-era workplace conditions. Essential work was laid bare, with traditional frontline workers, like medical providers and teachers, joined by those whose invisible, dirty, or devalued labour was necessary to maintain basic infrastructures: waste workers, grocery store cashiers, construction workers, or meatpacking plant workers. Labour conditions were already troubling in many of these sectors, from waste pickers regularly encountering hazardous materials to underage workers losing limbs in poultry plant equipment.[8] But COVID-19 heightened 'the quality of assuming high risk as an everyday reality of frontline work'. This heightened risk flattened certain differences between expertise, educational training, and wages, with degree-credentialed professionals providing essential public services alongside lower-wage, migrant, and informal economy labourers. Even though workers in these lower-wage, less prestigious fields were disproportionately harmed by viral exposure, the discursive depictions of pandemic-era labouring 'feature[d] a symbiosis between frontline professionals and low-wage earners' that provided the perception of a closer-to-equal level of risk.[9]

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6 M Smith and J Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The fight for sex workers' rights*, Verso, London, 2018, p. 55.

7 E Albright and K D'Adamo, 'Decreasing Human Trafficking Through Sex Work Decriminalization', *AMA Journal of Ethics*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2019, pp. 122–126, https://doi.org/10.1001/journalofethics.2017.19.1.sect2-1701; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers*, 26 May 2016.

8 M Grabell, 'Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant', *The New Yorker*, 1 May 2017; F Parra, 'The Struggle of Waste Pickers in Colombia: From being considered trash, to being recognised as workers', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 122–136, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220157.

9 M Musheno, B Vencill Musheno, and M Austin, 'Exploring the Prevalence and Meaning of Frontline Work in the COVID-19 Era: Implications for policy analysis', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, vol. 23, issue 1, 2021, pp. 30–40, p. 36, https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2020.1846123.

## Research Methods

This project emerged from our overarching interest in labour discourses and COVID-19. As critical trafficking studies scholars, the first and second authors were particularly intrigued by the discursive tools used by anti-trafficking organisations in their pandemic-responsive messaging. The third author joined with an interest in critical social theories, power, and marginalisation. The fourth author was interested in media narratives increasingly positioning sex work as a response to COVID-19-induced financial precarity—without considering the long history of sex, work, and sex work. We connected our interests within the following thematic questions: How is the pandemic affecting the dominant narrative of human trafficking? How are stakeholders discussing the shifting terrain of precarious labour, sex work, and human trafficking under COVID-19? How do organisations with a range of ideological orientations to exploitation understand COVID-19 in the context of their larger mission statement? To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of media self-published by mainstream anti-trafficking organisations and sex workers' rights organisations. Given local and international lockdown orders, we expected organisations to comment publicly on how COVID-19 was shaping their work and client-facing interventions.

These groups, though serving different constituencies, shape the discursive terrain of 'human trafficking'. Anti-trafficking organisations frequently lobby and promote policy recommendations at various governmental levels; run public awareness campaigns; and generate (sometimes questionable) data to quantify the problem of human trafficking.[10] Sex workers' rights organisations can attest to the harms of local labour laws and social stigmas, as well as carceral humanitarian anti-trafficking interventions that mislabel them and funnel them into criminal legal systems.[11] Their power to shape the discursive terrain around 'human trafficking' is constrained by the tokenising or limited instances when they are

[10] J A Chuang, 'Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 108, issue 4, 2014, pp. 609–649, https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.108.4.0609; C Cojocaru, 'My Experience is Mine to Tell: Challenging the abolitionist victimhood framework', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 12–38, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121772.

[11] D Blunt and A Wolf, *Erased: The impact of FOSTA-SESTA & the removal of Backpage*, Hacking//Hustling, New York, 2020, https://hackinghustling.org/erased-the-impact-of-fosta-sesta-2020; C A Jackson, 'Framing Sex Worker Rights: How U.S. sex worker rights activists perceive and respond to mainstream anti–sex trafficking advocacy', *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 59, issue 1, 2016, pp. 27–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416628553; C M Sacco, 'Victim-Defendant: Women of color complicating stories about human trafficking', in N West and T Horn (eds.), *We Too: Essays on sex work and survival*, Feminist Press, New York, 2021, pp. 60–71.

invited to the policymaking table.[12]

First, we looked for media published between 1 January and 31 May 2020 to control for the emerging narrative of COVID-19. By the end of May 2020, some states and countries were planning reopening strategies, and others had a firmer control over viral transmission. We wanted to capture the strategies and conversations that informed initial policies, lockdown practices, and quarantine orders. Since the terminology of the pandemic began in March 2020, after the WHO declaration, our sample more accurately reflects publications from 13 March to 31 May 2020.

We developed a purposive sample of organisations that broadly fell under the umbrellas of anti-trafficking and/or sex workers' rights groups. We began with a Google search for terms ('anti-trafficking'/'sex worker'+'organisation') informed by previous scholarship on advocacy and service provision.[13] We then compared our findings against public listings found on the websites for End Slavery Now and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, globally recognised organisations that host large virtual databases with contact information for directory members. This allowed us to develop a purposive sample of diverse organisations that are broadly working under the rubric of 'trafficking' or 'sex work'—but are also 'mainstream' enough to be recognisable actors.

By the end of this process, we identified forty-nine organisations across the anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights sectors. Because of our team's language expertise, we could only analyse media published in English. Thus, we removed one Spanish-language organisation from our sample, leaving us with forty-eight organisations.

Out of these forty-eight organisations, twenty-one primarily focused on sex work and twenty-seven primarily focused on human trafficking. Within the trafficking

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[12] J Doezema, 'Now You See Her, Now You Don't: Sex workers at the UN Trafficking Protocol Negotiation', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 14, issue 1, 2005, pp. 61–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663905049526; K Hahn and A Holzscheiter, 'The Ambivalence of Advocacy: Representation and contestation in global NGO advocacy for child workers and sex workers', *Global Society*, vol. 27, issue 4, 2013, pp. 497–520, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.823914; Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), *Nothing About Us Without Us!: A brief guide on meaningful involvement of sex workers and their organisations in Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA)*, 2019, https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs_ENG_web.pdf.

[13] A Ahmed and M Seshu, '"We Have the Right Not to Be 'Rescued'..."*: When anti-trafficking programmes undermine the health and well-being of sex workers', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, pp. 149–165, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219; Jackson; Kempadoo; Musto.

category, seventeen organisations worked on issues related to both trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, while nine exclusively focused on trafficking for sexual exploitation and one exclusively focused on labour trafficking. Though this may appear to overrepresent trafficking for sexual exploitation at the expense of labour trafficking, the anti-trafficking sector is known for its emphasis on 'sex trafficking'—especially when sex worker-exclusionary anti-trafficking discourses almost exclusively represent and discuss sexual exploitation.[14]

Twenty-four organisations were international, meaning they operated in multiple countries. Seventeen were national, based exclusively in the US. The remaining seven were national organisations located outside the US, including India, Thailand, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK. Given the outsized role of US and international organisations in the anti-trafficking sector—and the importance of transnational organising within sex workers' rights movements—our sample reflects this political and geographic context.[15]

Twelve organisations—nine sex workers' rights and three anti-trafficking organisations—did not have any COVID-19 publications within our time frame. This does not mean that these organisations were not sharing information about the pandemic. Rather, they may have used different communication strategies to share their COVID-19 messaging.

In total, we accumulated 139 pieces of media from thirty-six organisations. We uploaded PDF versions of these into Dedoose, a qualitative coding platform that allowed us to work remotely and simultaneously. We used an inductive coding strategy to facilitate the deductive creation of an initial codebook. We added terms and recoded our data as needed after team meetings, where we confirmed inter-coder reliability and collaboratively determined if new codes were unique or fit more effectively in a predetermined category.

When developing our codes, we took organisational media on their own terms, including the conflicting, sometimes overlapping, terminology for 'human trafficking' and 'sex work'. When we mobilise terms like 'migrant labour' or 'precarious work' in our findings, we are not seeking to conflate all forms of labour with trafficking or erase the nuances between categories. Rather, we see

14 Alvarez and Alessi; Brennan; Lewis.

15 E C M Kinney, 'Appropriations for the Abolitionists: Undermining effects of the U.S. mandatory anti-prostitution pledge in the fight against human trafficking and HIV/AIDS', *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, vol. 21, 2006, pp. 158–194, https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38S17SS0N; K Lerum *et al.*, 'Using Human Rights to Hold the US Accountable for its Anti-Sex Trafficking Agenda: The Universal Periodic Review and new directions for US policy', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, pp. 80–103, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201215; SWAN.

this simultaneous use of certain words and phrases reflecting an understanding of work as a continuum, where 'good', moral work is only thinly separated from 'bad', exploitative labour.[16]

Though we quote from public-facing media in our findings, we do not refer to organisations by name. This is an intentional choice in line with Ran Hu's similar analytic and ethical orientation towards content produced by New York-based anti-trafficking groups. Since websites 'by nature, are dynamic and ever-changing', naming these organisations could fix these complex narratives 'in […] static text representation, running the risk of stigmatisation'. Like Hu, we do not want to punch down at these frontline organisations—even when our own perspectives on sex, work, and sex work might misalign with theirs—but rather punch up at the systems and structures that perpetuate vulnerability, social exclusion, and human trafficking.[17]

In the following sections, we explore our findings through an examination of two main themes. First, we explore how the pandemic broadened how organisations discussed labour exploitation, acknowledged precarious work, and defined essential labour. Next, we examine how organisations variously framed their labour as part of individual, atomised interventions or collective moments towards a shared good.

## Labour: Exploited, economically precarious, or essential?

In our analyses, we found that descriptions of the work itself—commercial sex, trafficked labour, and service provision—felt almost slippery at times. COVID-19 exposed various forms of 'unfree labour' that have long existed but remain obscured.[18] Work could be exploitative to the extremes, even meeting the legal conditions of trafficking in a state, but still defined as essential to supply chains; work could feel coercive without adequate protective equipment but still be

[16] K Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism: Marxist feminism, migrant sex work, and labour unfreedom', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 26, issue 1, 2018, pp. 65–92, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-018-9370-7; Schwarz *et al.*; S Yea *et al.*, 'Funnels of Unfreedom: Time-spaces of recruitment and (im)mobility in the trajectories of trafficked migrant fishers', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 113, issue 1, 2023, pp. 291–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2022.2084016.

[17] R Hu, 'Examining Social Service Providers' Representation of Trafficking Victims: A feminist postcolonial lens', *Affilia*, vol. 34, issue 4, 2019, pp. 421–438, p. 425, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919868832.

[18] G LeBaron and N Phillips, 'States and the Political Economy of Unfree Labour', *New Political Economy,* vol. 24, issue 1, 2019, pp. 1–21, p. 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2017.1420642.

considered legal and even laudable. As organisations shifted between morality and legality as well as affective and legislative responses, the harm of labouring through COVID-19 remained persistent and pervasive.

*COVID-19 as Spotlight on Labour Exploitation*

One discursive strand alluded to labour conditions that pre-dated the pandemic. These narratives emphasised structural inequalities or systemic harms, demonstrating how COVID-19 highlighted and even exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. For example, an international human rights-based non-profit framed labour trafficking and trafficking for sexual exploitation as a hidden crisis that morphed into a collective issue: 'So while modern slavery is a problem often unseen, the Coronavirus makes modern slavery a direct problem for all of us'. By this logic, human trafficking was generally a problem of hidden populations and the service providers who worked with these individuals pre-COVID-19. COVID-19 illuminated the once-hidden reality of modern slavery, and that truth—deeper economic vulnerabilities and increased precarity—cannot be unseen in a post-pandemic world or contained within the realm of anti-trafficking. There seemed to be an implicit call for collective action here; if trafficking was now visible to all, it was a problem we all should now hold some responsibility in eradicating.

Similarly, an international organisation focused on migrant sex workers' health and rights linked the collective crisis of COVID-19 to the crisis routinely felt by sex workers: 'Coronavirus has thrown millions of people into crisis. For sex workers, forced by criminalisation, stigma and discrimination to live in the shadows, the crisis is more hidden and also makes their condition more dramatic.' This post directed sex workers to act against a policy intervention in Italy, which excluded sex workers from state-provided economic supports. Yet, this particular phrasing suggested an intentional choice to make the invisibility of commercial sex—and the threats of state surveillance and violence that shape this labour—visible.

The framing of crisis as a routine part of current labour structures emerged as a consistently salient discursive device. In a post to honour International Workers' Day, an international collective of anti-trafficking NGOs framed human trafficking as a problem of labour inequalities that predated COVID-19 *and* became more starkly visible in its aftermath: 'The injustice and discrimination in the world of work were not created by the virus. They were already there. They were the results of certain policy decisions that we have allowed our states to take. COVID-19 only made those imbalances in our world visible'. This international group named the unseen problem as exploitative labour practices under global capitalism. This post focused primarily on three sectors of precarious, underpaid, or unpaid work: 'care workers, migrants in low-paid jobs, and workers in the informal economy'. Pre-COVID-19, this labour was already devalued, and lockdown orders only illuminated the dire conditions under which these workers laboured.

A UK-based research and policy organisation focused exclusively on labour trafficking published a lengthy, explanatory post on the need for increased scrutiny on migrant labourers' increasingly unsafe, hostile working conditions. Due to the risks embedded in specific, Brexit-era visa programmes, agricultural labour was already exploitative, and COVID-19 exacerbated those conditions:

> People are forced to choose between returning home at significant risk to their health, continuing to work without the legally required documentation and therefore at heightened risk of labour abuses, or becoming destitute. […] As low-paid workers from other sectors lose their jobs or have their hours cut, urgency for new income may make them unable to say 'no' to abusive terms.

As with the anti-trafficking collective's post, this group focused on a structural critique of immigration policy and devalued agricultural labour.[19] Because frontline labour inspectors were not labelled as essential workers under COVID-19, cases of labour exploitation could remain invisible for longer, even under these extreme conditions.

*Un/safe Workplaces during COVID-19*

The phrase 'workplace safety' emerged alongside many organisations' detailed descriptions of remote work. Several stressed how they were moving to online work to prioritise the safety of their staff and workers. One anti-trafficking organisation focused on technology and stated, 'Through the support of our partners, we've been able to prioritize the safety of our staff by ensuring that our teams are well-equipped to telework and to continue working as hard as ever to find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent future victimization'. This was a common assertion from many organisations that had the ability to move to remote work, especially those whose labour easily translated to virtual contexts.

However, this did not address the hands-on nature of direct services that many organisations provide. A US-based anti-trafficking non-profit described how, even though 'the majority of [their] services are being provided remotely' to follow local guidelines, their 'doors remain open', including their shelter. Similarly, a US-based anti-violence organisation listed which of their programmes were fully closed, virtual, or in-person for specific cases. For example, their anti-trafficking division was 'still processing [i]ntakes and doing very limited in-person work related to financial assistance'. Even if some frontline workers were able to pivot, like lawyers and case managers who could connect with clients over the phone or video platforms, others could not avoid the direct contact of emergency, outreach, or shelter services.

[19] See also LeBaron and Phillips, pp. 7–10.

A global faith-based NGO described their in-person involvement on a 'rescue' project during this risky time of viral transmission. The 'raid and rescue' model is roundly and powerfully critiqued.[20] But this organisation foregrounded overcrowding, border closings, and limited access to healthcare as a rationale for their practices. They described an 'urgent rescue' with local law enforcement and NGO-affiliated staff extracting migrant labourers from a brick kiln. In media covering the 'rescue' and a post describing educational efforts to share information about COVID-19 mitigation in rural communities, this NGO did not talk about the risk these in-person interventionists faced or the protective efforts they were taking to maintain staff health and safety.

Sex workers' rights groups spoke in very direct terms about the risks connected to in-person labour. The snapshot of the pandemic in our study lined up with a global shortage of personal protective equipment. As one migrant sex workers' rights organisation stated, 'Marginalization and vulnerability have increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 because some are not able to stay home, physically distance, or stop working altogether'. Sex workers had to assume a high degree of risk to maintain their income, especially when they were excluded from many governmental fiscal interventions, discussed further in our second theme. Though they were not categorised as 'essential', many sex workers simply could not stop working due to this exclusion—implying their health, safety, and lives were not essential to support.

*Solidarity Across Sectors*

Though organisations took care to separate the challenges of essential anti-trafficking workers from the violence of trafficking, some media explicitly identified the multiple vectors that shape workplace conditions. One anti-trafficking NGO described the 'fragility of our systems' that touch everyone, specifically naming the legal and healthcare responses to COVID-19 that are felt most acutely by migrant workers: 'This pandemic highlights the importance of protecting the most vulnerable, irrespective of what papers they happen to have. If we're unable to protect those who need it the most in this crisis, we are unable to protect all of us. It's time to truly stand together'. If the most vulnerable were forced to continue labouring while ill, incarcerated in public facilities while awaiting deportation, or denied medical treatment until the last possible moment, they could have potentially spread COVID-19—all in completely avoidable contexts.

This NGO did not use the exploited migrant labourer or trafficked person as a monstrous figure, demonised as a carrier of disease. Rather, caring for them

[20] Ahmed and Seshu; A Hill, 'How to Stage a Raid: Police, media and the master narrative of trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 39–55, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121773; Schwarz and Grizzell.

was part of caring for the collective, more aligned with a politics of solidarity in health.[21] Making sure that migrant workers—be they exploited under the standard conditions of late capitalism or legally fitting a nation's definition of trafficking—can shelter in-place safely with adequate resources was the bare minimum for maintaining a greater social health.

A global faith-based NGO took a different angle when demonstrating how COVID-19 exacerbated exploitation and trafficking. In a post on migrant labour in the Asia-Pacific region, they described travel restrictions, unsafe living conditions, and limited access to food and water that, unabated, could increase labour trafficking. Though these examples seemed to emphasise issues of financial precarity and exploitative conditions experienced by labour migrants—stranded garment workers or fishermen—this faith-based group pivoted, asserting that the issue was one of ineffective criminal legal systems. They wrote, 'Modern slavery largely occurs and thrives in countries where law enforcement and justice institutions are underfunded and overburdened.' Even in a blog post that showed the need for more robust social supports outside policing efforts, they emphasised the importance of 'the consistent identification of victims, enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and engagement of victim support services at the community and local levels'. This claim seemed at odds with the idea of preventing exploitation through assistance or support services, rather than policing labourers, to ostensibly prevent trafficking from occurring within marginalised groups of migrant workers. Yet, this was where the post focused its strongest assertions.

## Organisational Missions and Necessary Interventions

Our analysis identified a tension between the individual and the collective, reflecting both the pandemic-era discourse of heroic, singular actors in the face of the virus and the stereotypical anti-trafficking story of lone saviours against vast trafficking networks. But even though these frameworks are powerful shaping forces, they could not erase moments where connection and solidarity came to the fore. In these spaces, where COVID-19 severed in-person ties and fostered disconnection, collectivity emerged as essential to surviving viral contagion and unsafe workplaces.

### *Individualism and Heroism*

Another strategy that organisations used to position the importance of their mission, salience, and purpose against the threat of COVID-19 was to show how

[21] B Adler-Bolton, '"Deaths Pulled From the Future": A brief argument for still giving a fuck about the pandemic', *Blind Archive Substack*, 3 January 2022, https://blindarchive.substack.com/p/deaths-pulled-from-the-future.

the pandemic intensified the necessity of their work. As a US-based anti-trafficking non-profit stated across multiple publications, 'Now more than ever, survivors need us'. They used this framework to emphasise the need for accessible, secure housing, which they stressed in a fundraising appeal labelled #NotSaferAtHome:

> There has never been a time when survivors need us more. Victims of human trafficking are facing new barriers to safety, health services, housing, and employment. They are trapped with their traffickers and vulnerable to even greater abuse. We cannot turn our back on survivors at a time when they need us most. They need safe shelter now.

As this appeal stated, these barriers to safety were not new situations but only made visible by COVID-19. For example, the safety of home has always been problematic for trafficked persons, and this non-profit responded to this through their ongoing shelter services. Rather, they were asserting that the intensity of these barriers had deepened, and these concerns were worsened and made particularly fraught by city-level shelter-in-place orders.

The necessity of organisations, especially those within the anti-trafficking space, lent itself to particularly intense narratives. For example, this same non-profit described its ongoing hotline services through the story of one recently assisted victim-survivor who found support in accessible emergency housing:

> Just a short time ago, we received a call on our 24-hour hotline from a survivor who was homeless and escaping from a trafficker. Running for her life, she could not afford to worry about the coronavirus. Our expert team responded immediately and got her safely to our emergency shelter where she is recovering in the comfort of her new home. She now has access to the health care services that she was denied living on the streets.

The image of a victim-survivor on the run, escaping from exploitation, echoes dominant images of human trafficking in larger media landscapes. And similarly, the 'expert team' at this non-profit drew on the anti-trafficking apparatus's emphasis on singular 'saviours'. Even when anti-trafficking work successfully operates in coalition, the collaborative labour to identify and assist victim-survivors can get reduced to the lone 'rescuer' or vigilante.[22]

Even when anti-trafficking organisations used this strategy—employing affectively charged stories to demonstrate the necessity of an organisation's fiscal solvency—

[22] Kempadoo; E O'Brien, *Challenging the Human Trafficking Narrative: Victims, villains, and heroes*, Routledge, London, 2018.

it was not without risk. A global anti-trafficking collective published a powerful rejoinder to the anti-trafficking movement, especially those groups 'linking the widespread disruption of lives and livelihoods to trafficking and "modern slavery"' without regard for the systems that already fuel exploitation. Though this narrative could maintain an individual group's longevity, it could also reinforce the 'comfortable silo' that separates some movement actors from larger projects 'demand[ing] for a system change'.

The individualistic impulses of these narratives resonated in the discursive context of the pandemic, specifically the framing of frontline healthcare workers as 'heroes' labouring during COVID-19. Just as anti-trafficking interventions often devolve into 'repeated stories of bad men, big guns, and bolted chains' that can only be halted by one almost superhuman saviour, frontline healthcare workers were reduced to similarly flat symbols.[23] This framing emphasised the selflessness and sacrifice of frontline work over the material conditions of their labour. These 'heroes' had limited personal protective equipment that needed to be reused; fewer colleagues with whom to balance work, leading to longer hours 'on the clock'; and increased care work responsibilities at home that failed to register as relevant. Instead of resolving these conditions, the 'hero' label offered an affective solution to a structural problem.[24]

One US-based anti-trafficking organisation with limited global reach demonstrated the power of these two joined narratives in a post about workplace modifications to maintain social distancing:

> While the [hotline] team has been working with service provider partners to ensure that our systems are kept up to date and reflect changes as they happen, they have to do even more thinking on their feet than usual. More service providers are suddenly full or unable to accept new clients and […] advocates have had to do a lot of thoughtful safety planning and brainstorming with people who are reaching out and need support. As one member of the

[23] E Bernstein, 'The Sexual Politics of the "New Abolitionism"', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, issue 3, 2007, pp. 128–151, p. 140, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-013.

[24] C L Cox, '"Healthcare Heroes": Problems with media focus on heroism from healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 46, 2022, pp. 510–513, https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2020-106398; R Einboden, 'SuperNurse? Troubling the hero discourse in COVID times', *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, vol. 24, issue 4, 2020, pp. 343–347, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459320934280; B Leap, K Kelly, and M C Stalp, 'Me? A Hero? Gendered work and attributions of heroism among volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Sociology*, 2022, pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221136035.

> team put it, 'in these extraordinary circumstances, we're having to be extraordinarily creative to meet the most basic needs of people who call us.'

The 'extraordinarily creative' navigation of resource limitations came from the larger challenge of doing anti-trafficking work within defunded social service sectors. The service providers mentioned here may have been doing more with less like the healthcare 'heroes' of the pandemic. Individual advocates served as a bridge between victim-survivors' resource needs and the reality of labour conditions in the anti-trafficking apparatus. And on a meta-level, this post raised the question as to whether this anti-trafficking organisation was offering their own 'extraordinarily creative' advocates the resources they needed to adequately perform this labour.

*Labour Rights Through Collective Action*

Interestingly and unsurprisingly, the quotes above that lean heavily on individualism came from US-based organisations. In contrast, a global anti-trafficking NGO collective carved out a unique platform more aligned with workers' rights perspectives than the 'hero' and 'rescue' narratives. Rather than asserting, 'now more than ever, survivors need us', this collective insisted, 'Now, more than ever before, worker organising is crucial'. They went on to describe how such labour organising could look different during the pandemic:

> … such organising will need to happen without congregating in large numbers. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) safeguards must not undermine freedom of association and collective bargaining. We call on states to make OSH standards fundamental labour rights applicable to all workers, regardless of their nationality, sector of work or immigration status. We call on states to create more public sector jobs rather than contracting and outsourcing services. In the name of ease of doing business, outsourcing enables employers to evade responsibilities while contractors continue setting abusive working and living conditions away from state regulation and scrutiny.

This was a markedly different position, where labourers are seen as agents of their own action and protection. Across sector, status, and state borders, all workers—exploited, economically precarious, and essential—were positioned as part of a collective force against harmful practices that only 'ease' managers' and owners' capital accumulation. It would not be the singular actions of one heroic resister but the communal impact from organising efforts.

While many organisations used the pandemic to justify their continued existence and generate increased funds, others echoed this appeal for collective action. These

published media were less about maintaining the solvency of the organisation itself and more about directly providing for community members outside of formalised non-profit mechanisms, including mutual aid efforts, bail funds, or donation drives. For example, a migrant sex workers' health and rights group shared an emergency fund, 'No-one left behind!', created by Italian sex workers for fellow sex workers with limited access to COVID-19-related subsidies. A US-based sex workers' rights group published an expansive guide on resources for sex workers with nearly four full pages of links to mutual aid funds in US states, national campaigns, and international projects.

Dean Spade argues that mutual aid works outside the state, often addressing those community members whose identity somehow forecloses them from resources or support. In the COVID-19 context, this often applied to undocumented persons unable to apply for government-disseminated funding due to a lack of formal documentation or individuals engaged in criminalised or informal economies—like sex workers—who lacked any proof of income reduction. While mutual aid is a necessary measure against loopholes that exclude the most marginalised communities, and while many groups use mutual aid to circumvent the surveillance and bureaucracy that can accompany formal resource distribution,[25] it is not without concerns.

As a global collective of NGOs and sex workers' rights groups, for example, asserted in their appeal for donor support during COVID-19, 'Without any support from governments, sex workers are left to both find ways to survive and help other community members to survive by organising fundraisers or simply sharing whatever resource they have personally'. Their mutual aid and community support reflected the selective abdication of responsibility by the state, as citizens labouring in other sectors could access financial relief. Again, this is not to downplay the importance of mutual aid, especially in resisting projects that set parameters around deserving and undeserving recipients of assistance, but to emphasise how these efforts may be unable to match community needs.

Ellie Vainker thoughtfully writes against Spade's mutual aid framework, as it 'does not take into account how survival work for so many necessitates imbrications with the state'. Her words resonate with this collective's post, which does not valorise the state but directly acknowledges that, without access to 'very limited government protection measures in the region', sex workers were left with 'only the meagre support organisations are able to provide'.[26] Without state support, sex workers were rendered more precarious through this era of COVID-19

[25] D Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next)*, Verso, New York, 2020.

[26] E Vainker, *Funding Disability: Ambivalences in nonprofit fundraising in the United States*, Rice University, Houston, 2021, p. 230.

conditions; imbrications with the state will continue to be necessary in the face of limited or overburdened organisational resources.

## Conclusion: Is the pandemic a portal?

In April 2020, author Arundhati Roy posed a powerful directive to think about COVID-19 not solely in terms of its destruction but also its potential: 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next'.[27] If COVID-19 and its continuing reverberations show the ways that normalcy is tenuous—making the invisible structures of violence painfully visible—then there is a way to think about life post-COVID-19 as a life that does not replicate the same unequal distributions of power, justice, and liveability.

With respect to both anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights movements, the pandemic could thus be a moment to think about the transformative potential of these projects beyond the state (or imagining a different version of the state). States are often constructed to be the 'vehicles for responses to forced labour, rather than as actors who play a causal role in shaping the conditions that give rise to it.'[28] Within the anti-trafficking apparatus, the state is required to identify trafficked persons as deserving or undeserving of assistance under certain criminal legal regimes. For sex workers' rights advocacy, the state offers limited legibility, with decriminalisation projects globally underrepresented compared to legalisation and criminalisation. What if, instead of turning to institutionalised processes of inclusion and exclusion, we instead reimagine work—what the state might encourage us to define as 'free' or 'unfree', 'constrained' or 'agential'—along different, sometimes colliding vectors.

Labour precarity exists to different scales and scopes for both the workers targeted by certain anti-trafficking or anti-sex work interventions as well as the frontline saviours fuelling these interventions. Coalitional possibilities exist that would not collapse all labour under a singular rubric that erases the fine nuances between vulnerability, exploitation, and trafficking. Nor would these possibilities continue to place structural responsibilities onto singular actors to rectify state-sanctioned violence and state-induced economic precarity.

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27 A Roy, 'Arundhati Roy: "The pandemic is a portal"', *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

28 LeBaron and Phillips, p. 2.

We conclude here not with naïve optimism but with urgency. COVID-19 could be a portal to a world with a different orientation to justice, a commitment to eradicating structural inequalities that could bring together divergent stakeholders. We want to resist the normative pull of an approach that returns to ignoring the forms of structural violence illuminated by COVID-19. Taking a cue from an NGO collective's blog post, which quotes a slogan from Chilean political protestors, 'We won't go back to normal, because normal was the problem'.

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