

**Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination:  
Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Pandemic  
Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery  
2 December 2020, 12:00 – 13:30**

**Intervention Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata**

**Question 1: Reflecting on the above testimonies and your global experience, what is the impact of COVID-19 on specific groups subjected to contemporary forms of slavery**

It is an honour for me to speak at this event at the occasion of today's International Day for the Abolition of Slavery and I would like to thank the UN Voluntary Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery for inviting me. This day has been commemorated for the past 71 years, since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first Convention to fight human trafficking in 1949. And yet, today's anti-slavery day has renewed importance in the current context.

As you may be aware, I dedicated my first report to the Human Rights Council to the impact of COVID-19 on contemporary forms of slavery. I received multiple submissions raising concerns about the worsening situation of people who were at risk of contemporary forms of slavery before the outbreak.

Globally, the hardest hit by both the disease and by a lack of income caused by the lockdown measures have been the poor. Workers in the informal economy, including day laborers, were hit hard by the collateral effects of the pandemic due to their often non-existent social or labour protection. Women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, for example as domestic workers as described by the panellists from Lebanon or in the garment sector in which there have been massive layoffs and loss of livelihoods

Other workers may incur debts in order to survive, a trend already observed in countries such as India and Pakistan. Hence, more people may become trapped in debt bondage.

Not only women and informal workers, but also children and young people have been deeply affected: Temporary school closures, combined with pressure from the sudden loss of livelihoods, food shortages and a breakdown of community safety nets, have pushed many children into child labour and other practices such as child marriage. As you may be aware, 2021 marks the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour which will shed a light on this practice only 4 years before child labour needs to be eradicated under the SDGs.

I would now like to turn to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority groups and people affected by caste-based discrimination, an issue which I also addressed in my recent report.

In many countries, people from marginalized racial and ethnic minority groups have been employed in high numbers in transport, health and cleaning sectors that carry an increased risk of contracting COVID-19, particularly when employers fail to provide protective equipment or introduce adequate safety measures.<sup>1</sup> Some countries have witnessed an increase in discrimination and violence against minority groups, such as Roma communities in Europe<sup>2</sup>, as indicated by the panellist from Bosnia and

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<sup>1</sup>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities needs to be urgently addressed – Bachelet", press release, 2 June 2020; and submission from Nagorik Uddyok Citizen's Initiative, Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup>European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, "Persistent Roma inequality increases COVID-19 risk, human rights heads say", press release, 7 April 2020.

Herzegovina and Dalits in Nepal.<sup>3</sup> In India, many of the more than 100 million internal migrant workers who were forced to return home due to the pandemic, were reportedly subjected to police brutality and stigmatized as virus “carriers”.<sup>4</sup> Other workers who delivered essential services such as cleaners, manual scavengers and waste pickers have been exposed to a greater risk of catching the virus due to a lack of adequate protection equipment. If they get sick, there's no social safety net to ensure they don't fall even deeper into poverty. Poverty makes lower castes more vulnerable during emergencies and activists fear the coronavirus will again reinforce inequality in India and elsewhere.

In many countries including Mauritania, for example, the confinement measures have further intensified the social exclusion and discrimination of certain ethnic groups.

While demand for assistance in accessing shelter, psychosocial and medical care and food security has been increasing,<sup>5</sup> civil society organizations, who are the primary providers of these services, have in some cases had their resources further limited. As a result, it has become more difficult for victims to leave exploitative and abusive employment.

In conclusion, there is undoubtedly a close interconnection between the rising levels of poverty, the unprecedented unemployment, deepening inequalities and the vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. It is of utmost importance that States put in place adequate measures now to mitigate the increasing risks of contemporary forms of slavery in the longer term.

## **Question 2: What is the role of special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council for addressing this?**

The Special Procedures are often called the eyes and ears of the Human Rights Council”, as we receive first-hand information from survivors. By exposing the impact of COVID-19 on specific groups, we give visibility to the issue and provide specific recommendations to States and other actors on how to address the current challenges. As for my mandate, I will continue to examine this issue in the foreseeable future, provide updates in thematic and country reports and work with all relevant stakeholders to promote appropriate measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on contemporary forms of slavery. I will also seek more synergies among human rights mechanisms combatting slavery, such as the joint statement we issued on Monday to commemorate the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery.

Finally, the support provided to civil society organizations by the UN Voluntary Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery is more important than ever. I have called upon States to support the Fund at the Human Rights Council and at other occasions. I would like to thank the Fund once again for its invitation to this event and look forward to close continued cooperation.

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<sup>3</sup>OHCHR, “Nepal: Bachelet condemns Dalit killings, calls for independent investigation”, press release, 29 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Submission from Anti-Slavery International, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Submission from Rights Lab.