

Stop Trafficking!

AwarenessAdvocacyAction

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FOCUS: The nexus between modern slavery, environmental destruction and climate change.

Climate change is one of the causes of poverty and forced migration, which make people vulnerable to human trafficking . . .

. . . forced labor, prostitution, and organ trafficking. Human trafficking is always exploitation of a vulnerability and those displaced by climate change, both internally displaced people and migrants, are among the most vulnerable populations. This vulnerability can arise in an instant, as a result of a natural disaster such as a typhoon, hurricane, or flood.

While all refugees are at risk for human trafficking, those displaced by natural disasters, sometimes referred to as environmental refugees, are at particular risk because, under current international refugee agreements, people displaced by environmental disasters do not qualify for international aid or protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention. As of December 2019, there were almost 20.4 million officially designated refugees under the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) — however, this omitted an additional group of 21.5 million people who flee their homes as a result of sudden onset weather hazards each year.

Natural disasters have always been a part of the weather cycle. But with climate change, the cycles of floods and droughts are both more frequent and more severe. As disaster activity rises, human trafficking increases. The number of extreme weather events has doubled globally since the 1980s to an average of over 800 events per year during the past decade.

As severe climate change displaces more people, the international community may be forced to either redefine “refugees” to include climate migrants or create a new legal category to protect climate migrants. With no international effort to supervise the migrant population, these desperate individuals go where they can, not necessarily where they should, which makes them vulnerable to traffickers.

Sudden-onset disasters are unexpected and produce instant losses in terms of human lives, land, and livelihoods. In events like tsunamis or cyclones, homes are destroyed and jobs lost, suddenly forcing people into poverty and displacement. Displaced and living in poverty, they are vulnerable to human traffickers who appear to offer them financial stability but instead may exploit them.

It was not until the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that primarily affected Indonesia, India, Burma and Thailand that people began to make a connection between the internal displacement of people because of environmental disasters and an increase in human trafficking. Child protection agencies noticed an increase in child abductions for adoption or exploitation. Today the United Nations and those who work in the field recognize that human trafficking will increase by 20 to 30 percent during disasters. The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) warns that the risk for human trafficking of women and children increases as families become separated during environmental disasters.



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Free Wind 2014 / Shutterstock.com

Dahia was a 10-year-old living in Somalia during a famine and food crisis wherein an estimated 258,000 people died. In an attempt to flee the famine, her family placed their faith in smugglers who made promises of a better life elsewhere. However, after traveling hundreds of miles, stuffed in vans full of strangers, Dahia was sold into prostitution.

In 2019, a record 22 million people were displaced just by sudden weather events. The World Bank estimated that three regions--Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia--will generate 143 million more climate migrants by 2050. Many of them will be from the coastal population because of rising sea levels and storms. If the population continues to increase and climate change continues at the same rate, migration will only increase.

Meanwhile, climate change is also contributing to slow onset events that take place over a period of time and are sometimes referred to as climate processes. Examples include desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, air pollution, rain pattern shifts, and loss of biodiversity.

While the impact of slow-onset events is not as clear-cut as sudden-onset disasters, the consequences can be equally devastating. Populations that are highly dependent on natural resources risk losing their livelihoods, which forces them to seek new means to earn money and survive.

In August 2016, the worst drought in India in decades forced thousands of people to migrate from rural areas in search of water, food, and jobs, increasing their risk for trafficking. Reportedly, over 330 million people, almost a quarter of the country's population, were affected by that drought. Destitute women, children, and older family members were left behind in the villages, making them vulnerable to trafficking.

The area that is currently most affected is Africa since more than 90 percent of the economy depends on a climate-sensitive natural resource, like rain for growing food. Millions migrate, many becoming displaced people within their country with loss of economic, social, and political power, increasing their vulnerability to traffickers.

When irreversible damage due to slow-onset events occurs, such as repeated droughts, families may face increased debt and poverty, making them vulnerable to traffickers. At times they collude with traffickers as in cases when men have sold their wives or other female relatives and parents have sold their children due to losses associated with a changing climate.

The relationship between climate-driven migration and human trafficking was brought to public attention by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, 'Laudato Si'. This relationship has since been substantiated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which reports that both sudden- and slow-onset climate disasters lead to increased risks of trafficking. The IOM report highlighted the role of the state in reducing those risks. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has also pointed out climate change, natural disasters, and poverty as factors that exacerbate the vulnerabilities and desperation that enable trafficking to thrive.

What makes this situation even worse from a moral perspective is that it is the poorest countries, those least responsible for causing climate change, that are bearing the greatest burden and are the first to deal with forced migration. These countries usually are the least likely to have the resources to protect their citizens. The same pattern replicates itself on a local level. Whether it's in the United States or Bangladesh, those in poorer neighborhoods, those already most vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking, suffer more from environmental disasters.

The 2020 Trafficking in Persons Annual Report linked human trafficking to natural disasters in several country narratives

Indonesia

Child sex tourism is prevalent in the Riau Islands bordering Singapore. Bali is a destination for Indonesians engaging in child sex tourism. Indonesians, including children, whose homes or livelihoods were destroyed by natural disasters in 2019 are vulnerable to trafficking; this is also true for four million children deemed by the government to be “neglected,” and for approximately 16,000 homeless children estimated to be living in urban environments.

Vanuatu

Natural disasters and climate-induced displacement significantly increases Vanuatuans’ vulnerability to trafficking, particularly as a majority of the population relies on small-scale and subsistence agriculture. As many as 11,000 Vanuatuans evacuated from active volcanic areas in 2018 are at higher risk of trafficking due to the economic hardships ensuing from their ongoing displacement. Women and girls may also be at risk of debt-based coercion in sex trafficking and domestic servitude via the customary practice of bride-price payments. The incidence of bride-price payments is linked to broader economic hardship and vulnerability, particularly in the context of the country’s frequent natural disasters.

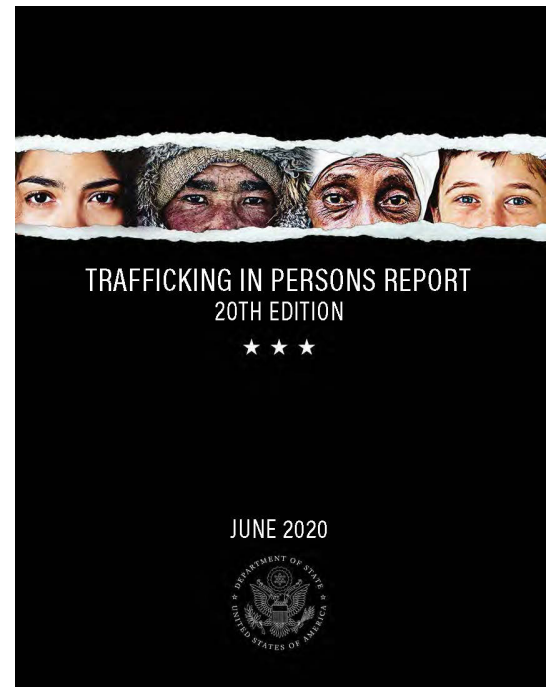
Cambodia

The proprietors of brick kilns subject more than 10,000 Cambodians, including nearly 4,000 children, to multigenerational debt-based coercion, either by buying off their preexisting loans, or by requiring them to take out new loans as a condition of employment or to cover medical expenses resulting from injuries incurred while working. Nearly 100 percent of brick kilns surveyed throughout the country featured indicators of forced labor via debt-based coercion.

An extensive, largely unregulated network of predatory microfinance organizations and private creditors contributes to this arrangement by proactively advertising loans to families in vulnerable communities and connecting them with the kilns. Rural farming families are at higher risk of this form of forced labor due to economic hardships ensuing from climate change; unseasonal rain patterns and subsequent loss of crops push many farmers to take out large loans for new irrigation or pesticide systems, and brick kiln owners often purchase these loans as a means of securing and retaining their labor.

Extended rainy seasons also delay the brick-drying process, reducing these bonded kiln workers’ pay and forcing many to become further indebted to the kiln owners. In order to dissuade workers from fleeing abusive conditions, some kiln owners reportedly allow only select members of family units to be absent for public holidays or to seek medical care at any given time. Some workers report continued confinement and forced labor in the kilns long after they have repaid their debts.

Click [here](#) to read the complete report.





Awareness

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a low-lying delta with a large network of rivers. It is also home to 160 million people, around 40 percent children. It is among the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and the World Bank has warned that the number of people displaced by climate change could reach 13.3 million by 2050. Bangladesh has been subjected to natural hazards, regardless of climate change. But as warmer temperatures cause the Himalayan glaciers to melt, a rising sea level and deadlier disasters threaten more lives. Extremes of heat as a result of climate change have the potential of destroying livelihoods in Bangladesh. Major droughts affect the country almost every five years, with the north-western part being most vulnerable.

Children are less able than adults to adapt to heat and other climate-related impacts. Children have lower functional immunity and are at higher risk for contracting deadly vector-borne and diarrheal diseases as well as undernutrition.

It is during the time of disasters that children are most vulnerable to dislocation, sexual exploitation, child labor, trafficking and unsafe migration. Also, in Bangladesh, the social norms affect girls and boys very differently and, based on the age and sex of a child, the extent of vulnerability becomes diverse and sometimes quite pronounced, particularly for girls.

India

In India, the effects of climate change have presented as erosion, floods, seawater inundation, and severe storms. These disasters, along with the extreme poverty among many citizens, make it easy for traffickers to ensnare women and children into forced prostitution, marriage, and child labor.

The remote Sunder ban delta (UNESCO world heritage site) in Eastern India's West Bengal is accessible mostly by boats. With the Sundar ban coastline retreating about 650 feet a year and the land being at an average elevation of only three feet above sea level (MSL), scientists predict much of the Sundar

bans could be submerged in 15 to 25 years. This remote area has become a hub for human traffickers who manage to prey upon the villagers who are dependent on climate dependent industries such as fishing, agriculture, collection of firewood and honey.

The scale of the problem has grown with massive erosion, which stands at an average rate of 8,000 hectares every year with a total of 427,000 hectares of land having been washed away since 1950. From 2010 to 2015, 880 villages were completely lost due to erosion, 67 villages were partially lost, and 36,981 families lost their homes. Meanwhile, regular flooding is not only eroding people's land and livelihoods but the social fabric of communities.

These climate related events force many families to send their young children away, to work in factories or in cities. The traffickers take advantage of the situation, pose as job recruiters, or lure women and girls into prostitution. Some also end up as domestic help and are abused; some are sold to families as far away as the Middle East.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



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Vulnerabilities After a Climate Disaster

Natural disasters compound vulnerabilities that are already present in a community or a family. When natural disasters strike, families can lose their homes, jobs, and transportation all in an instant. Family breadwinners can be injured or lose their lives. It may require capital that a family or individual does not have to rebuild, purchase basic necessities, tend to ongoing medical needs, and start their lives over.

The trauma alone would be enough to significantly impact a disaster survivor's future. However, when families are faced with few options for meeting their immediate needs, they can become desperate. Instability after a disaster can make people especially vulnerable to trafficking. People may be more vulnerable because they are dealing with:

- Being displaced from their homes (temporarily living in a shelter)
- Being unable to safely earn income and be self-sufficient
- Lack of money, food, shelter



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- Economic, social, physical insecurity
- Missing identity documentation; sometimes lost due to natural disaster
- Lack of community, family, social structures and networks and other supportive services
- Hopelessness—the International Organization for Migration identifies as a determining factor in victim recruitment
- Trauma—may dispose them to be less self-protective and enable them to be easily coerced as victims of trafficking. They may be alone; when missing, nobody knows and nobody goes looking for them
- Social isolation or other negative consequences resulting from sexual violence
- Lack of legal protection

People who do not speak a local language may be more vulnerable because they:

- Cannot communicate to authorities
- Are afraid of physical harm or stigma
- Have no access to assistance, services, or protection provided by local laws

Some populations are at higher risk for human trafficking. Children and youth who are orphaned by natural disasters or are separated from their caregivers are even more vulnerable to human trafficking. Separated or orphaned children are highly traumatized and especially trusting of adults during and after the crisis. It would be nearly impossible for a child or youth to discern when an adult did not have his or her best interest at heart if that person is making false promises of finding the youth's family. Additionally, illegal adoptions are common during

disasters. Traffickers utilize mobile technology to send photos of children offering them for adoption to remote families who believe they are helping a child in need. Traffickers collect an “adoption fee” and the child is sold to a new and unknowing family, without hope of being reunited with their birth family.

While anyone can be affected by human trafficking, some populations are at higher risk:

- Migrant and seasonal workers, refugees, or asylees
- Disconnected or homeless youth or runaways
- People with physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities
- Native persons
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex (someone who has natural bodily variations), and Two-Spirit (Native American or Alaskan Native who combine activities or traits of both men and women) individuals
- Persons with a substance use disorder or with a history of substance use
- Those transitioning out of child welfare, foster care, or juvenile justice and prison systems
- Members of lower socio-economic groups
- Survivors of other forms of violence

Traffickers gain control over victims by exploiting their vulnerabilities. During environmental or public health disasters, traffickers can control victims through their need for basic resources such as food, water, and shelter. Other control methods include:

- Physically assaulting or threatening serious harm
- Psychologically manipulating or shaming



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- Providing false promises about work or living conditions
- Pretending to have an intimate relationship
- Pretending to provide protection
- Withholding wages or debt bondage
- Isolating the victim

The dangers of human trafficking in the wake of natural disasters are amplified by an inability for authorities

and rescue workers to prioritize anything other than saving lives and rescuing survivors. Especially in countries without strong centralized city or national governments, relief responses can be uncoordinated. Law enforcement workers who would ordinarily be tasked with protecting vulnerable populations and prosecuting criminals are often navigating literal life and death situations themselves, making them unavailable for other needed services. Click [here](#) to learn more.



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Refugee Camps

Many of those who survive the journey find themselves in refugee camps. These camps for refugees and internally displaced persons are prime targets for traffickers. The concentration of vulnerable, displaced people, combined with a lack of security, services, and oversight make them ideal locations for traffickers to operate. In long-standing camps, traffickers can build relationships with corrupt camp officials and establish trafficking rings.

In *Climate Change and Human Trafficking After the Paris Agreement*, Michael Gerrard reported on interviews conducted by the International Organization of Migration of people who migrated and live in refugee camps. In one such interview, 79% of the interviewees answered “yes” to at least one of the four indicators of human trafficking and other exploitative practices. Over 65 percent of those interviewed stated that they were held “against their will during the journey by armed individuals or groups other than . . . government authorities.” Moreover, 47% had worked without getting the expected payment while 36% were forced to work. Also, 75% suffered physical violence of some kind, while 0.3% were approached by someone with offers of an arranged marriage.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Labor Trafficking After Natural Disasters

Natural disasters lead to the victimization of people beyond those directly impacted by the disaster. In the aftermath of a disaster, there is increased demand for manual labor and low skill workers from outside of the community.

Governmental and local resources are overwhelmed, the infrastructure is devastated, and law enforcement is overextended. The need for external support becomes essential. Traffickers can take advantage of this need by recruiting foreign guest workers to assist with the disaster response effort. The guest workers can easily be exploited as human security safeguards within the community are overwhelmed with supporting disaster recovery efforts.

After Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the Department of Labor suspended health and job safety standards for counties in Louisiana that had been devastated by the hurricane while the Department of Homeland Security placed a 45-day suspension on requirements for worker eligibility and identity. Following this suspension, because of the national emergency and need for urgency, the President also suspended the Davis-Bacon Act, which ensures fair wages for repair workers on federal contracts. The combination created the perfect storm for exploitation and human trafficking of migrant workers. Thousands of temporary guest workers flooded the city, eager for construction jobs. Over half were undocumented workers. At least nine cases involving more than 3,750 victims are documented as human trafficking. One of the largest labor trafficking cases in United States history resulted from human trafficking that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.



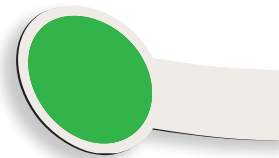
Climate Change and Conflict

In June 2020, the International Committee of the Red Cross released *When Rain Turns to Dust*, a report on climate change and conflict that explores how countries embroiled in conflict are disproportionately affected by climate change as their ability to adapt to climate disasters is weakened by conflict.

Meanwhile, some researchers report that severe climate change will lead to more conflict in the future. Climate change may not directly cause armed conflict but may indirectly increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing social, economic, and environmental factors. Climate and security experts often cite the impacts of the extreme drought in Syria that preceded the 2011 civil war. Michael Gerrard of Columbia University observes that the persistent drought forced as many as 1.5 million Syrian farmers to move, contributing to tensions that fueled the civil war. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens attempted to migrate to Europe, among them women and girls who were vulnerable to trafficking.

There may also be a connection between climate change and terrorism. Experts cite the decline of livelihoods based on farming in countries experiencing drought to the success of recruiting strategies by al-Qaida.

Action



What Can Be Done

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina displaced more than 400,000 people in New Orleans. We will never know the number of people who were trafficked after this natural disaster. Local traffickers used the internet to negotiate shelter and relief in exchange for sex. Sex trafficking rings from around the United States relocated to New Orleans to capitalize on devastated areas. Labor trafficking was also a problem after Hurricane Katrina. An estimated 3,700 workers from ten countries were victimized.

By the time Hurricane Harvey hit Texas in 2017, displacing more than 30,000 people, the country was more prepared. Before the hurricane, the Houston police put up signs warning people of human trafficking that occurs after a major disaster such as hurricanes. The mayor's trafficking team and volunteers also went cot to cot in shelter centers to place notes in English and Spanish, warning residents about sex trafficking and false job offers that may lead to labor trafficking. Information about human trafficking was displayed in the halls on all monitors and screens. Authorities also provided displaced people information on where to find help should they find themselves in these situations. Despite this, there was an increase in online ads advertising "shelter for sex" posted days after Hurricane Harvey.

The United States Government Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration client and behavioral health providers and state disaster behavioral health coordinators are one of the first lines of defense against human trafficking after disasters. They work to include information regarding trafficking recruitment practices in responder training. Responders need to know where the at-risk populations are located and build relationships with leaders in those communities in order to proactively conduct outreach. Print materials with information about trafficking, the tactics that traffickers use, and national referral resources such as the National Human Trafficking Hotline and the Unaccompanied Minor Registry for reunification are now available to disaster medical responders.

Aside from taking steps to mitigate climate change such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, advocating for climate change research and policy, and empowering communities in adapting to climate change, disaster preparedness is essential in decreasing the vulnerability of people due to natural disasters. The global community needs to work together to ensure adequate support services following disasters for vulnerable groups, such as women and children, plan in advance for orderly relocation and safe passage of people who have been displaced, including advance agreements on which countries will accept migrants.

Action

Awareness training, such as mandating human trafficking emergency responder training and certification programs, strategically posting awareness and educational materials in communities impacted by a disaster, and increasing awareness through other multi-media platforms, will better protect communities and workers linked to a natural disaster from human trafficking. Proactive awareness and education available before the disaster through government and community initiatives, and awareness materials for survivors and workers present at the site of the disaster, help better prepare and protect communities from human trafficking actions in post-disaster scenarios as they did after Hurricane Harvey. Finally, U.S. human trafficking legislation does not mention natural-disaster related trafficking. Legislation should be amended to include harsher penalties for trafficking crimes occurring in the wake of a natural disaster.

Identifying Risk Factors for Human Trafficking After Natural Disasters

HEAL and the Department of Health and Human Services present a webinar on "Identifying Risk Factors for Human Trafficking After Natural Disasters" which may be accessed by clicking [here](#).

A Gathering Storm: Climate Change Threatens Lives and Futures

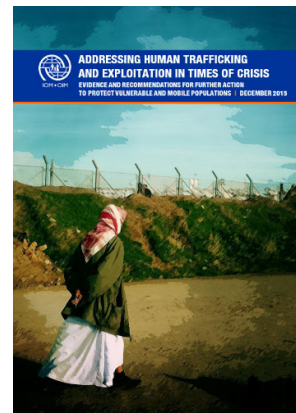
Devastating floods, cyclones, and other environmental disasters linked to climate change are threatening the lives and futures of more than 19 million children in Bangladesh. A new UNICEF report details how Bangladesh's flat topography, dense population, and weak infrastructure make it uniquely vulnerable to the powerful and unpredictable forces that climate change is compounding. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Peru

Since the 1970s, one-third of the glaciers in Peru have melted. Many rural peasants have been impacted by floods and water scarcity. Residents of the Nor Yauyos-Cochas Reserve of central Peru have experienced a significant impact on their way of life after the Wacra glacier melted, forcing farming onto the lower levels of the mountain and placing strain on the available farmland. Many Peruvians, especially young people, have been forced to migrate to urban areas to find work, putting them at risk for trafficking while leaving a shortage of workers in rural areas. This has led one Peruvian farmer to sue Europe's largest carbon emitter, German energy company RWE, for its contribution to climate change.

Plant With a Purpose

is a nonprofit organization that works in developing countries around the world to improve the quality of the lives of people living in extreme rural poverty. Plant With Purpose's programs equip farming families to increase farm yields, heal damaged ecosystems, improve nutrition, and increase household savings and opportunities. This integrated approach solves two major root causes that make people vulnerable to human trafficking: environmental degradation and rural poverty. Click [here](#) to learn more.



"Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of Crisis"

was released by the International Office on Migration in 2015 which reports efforts as a matter of life and livelihood for victims of trafficking. These efforts should therefore be considered with as much priority as for any other crisis-affected population and be addressed at the outset of a crisis. The report recommends that human trafficking in times of crisis be urgently included in the humanitarian community, with support from both emergency and development donor communities. Click [here](#) to download the report.

Websites

[ASPR Human Trafficking Infographic](#)

[Center for Disease Control information and resources for shelter operators: Human Trafficking in the Wake of a Disaster](#)

[City of Houston Emergency Disaster Response Toolkit](#)

[Get a Game Plan: Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Application to support preparation before a storm - available in a smartphone app form.](#)



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