

## United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery

### Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination: Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic

Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery  
2 December 2020

#### SUMMARY REPORT



### Introduction

More than 40 million people are trapped in contemporary slavery today, including 24.9 million in forced labour. Slavery victims are often from ethnic minorities, indigenous and other specific groups in vulnerable situations, subjected to some form of racial discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the myriad vulnerabilities of such groups and the racial bias in the global response.

On 2 December 2020, to commemorate the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery convened its 5<sup>th</sup> annual expert panel (remotely via webinar) entitled "*Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination: Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic*". The Geneva Human Rights Platform co-hosted the event and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva sponsored.

### Overview

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights opened the panel with a video message. Representatives of four civil society organizations from Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Lebanon, as well as UN experts and staff delivered statements, alternating local and global perspectives. Discussions focused on the interrelatedness between racial discrimination and contemporary slavery and on how COVID-19 has exacerbated social inequalities linked to structural racism - causing people belonging to minority groups to suffer disproportionately.

The Director of the Geneva Human Rights Platform and the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and International Ambassador for Human Rights co-moderated the event. Over 270 participants attended, including representatives of 39 Member States, 22 civil organizations supported by the UN Slavery Fund and numerous UN experts.

## Summary statements

**Director of the Geneva Human Rights Platform, Mr. Felix Kirchmeir**, introduced the event with a note of appreciation for the valuable contributions of expert panellists.

**The UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and International Ambassador for Human Rights, Ms. Rita French**, reaffirmed UK's commitment to the eradication of all forms of contemporary slavery by 2030 (SDG 8.7). Noting the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the marginalized groups in our society, Ms. French welcomed the opportunity to participate in constructive dialogue with various stakeholders and learn about what can be done collectively to better serve persons at risk.

**Chairperson of the Fund, Mr. Danwood Mzikenge Chirwa**, opened the event highlighting the further deterioration of the precarious situation of slavery survivors during the global pandemic, recalling that through projects supported by the UN Slavery Fund, thousands of survivors across the world receive medical, psychological, social, legal, vocational and humanitarian services. Since its establishment, the Fund has awarded more than \$8 million USD via more than 730 grants in 104 countries.

The **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet**, delivered a video message in which she condemned "*pervasive and long-standing racial discrimination [...] deeply connected to unequal access to justice, education, health services, land, livelihoods or decent employment opportunities*", as a key driver of people becoming victims of contemporary slavery. She highlighted the crucial role of the UN Slavery Fund in supporting civil society organizations around the world that have responded to slavery survivors' increased humanitarian needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Bachelet encouraged everyone to engage in efforts to end slavery, care for the survivors and empower them to live a life of dignity.

**Ms. Tsigereda Brihanu** (Ethiopian survivor of domestic servitude; co-founder and project manager, **Egna Legna, Lebanon**) addressed the discrimination of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, who are exploited by their employers with impunity under the Kafala (sponsorship) system. "*As a former domestic worker myself, I have seen what it is to be under the sponsorship system and I keep seeing it every day. Employers literally control our freedom....They don't pay our salaries on time and sometimes they don't pay us at all. We do not have the freedom of choice to quit or change our jobs....*" She also described how their situation has deteriorated quickly as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds: many have lost their jobs and accommodation and have no resources to support themselves and their families, or to return to their home countries. She informed that Egna Legna, a survivor-led NGO, has supported the repatriation of more than 300 women so far and is currently fundraising to assist more with crisis support and legal return.

**Ms. Rahaf Dandash** (Case Worker, **Anti-Racism Movement, Lebanon**), added that the more than 250,000 migrant workers in Lebanon are excluded from labour law and are offered no protection from the Ministry of Labour, the police or the judicial system. Migrant workers “pay high fees to the agencies before they travel, placing themselves in debt before even arriving [...] many agents threaten and intimidate workers to continue working for abusive employers; they force them to work for free for several houses [...] even when the worker’s wish is clearly to travel back home”. The Anti-Racism Movement, that receives project funding from the UN Slavery Fund, provides safe spaces to migrant domestic workers through Migrant Community Centres, empowering women migrant domestic workers to become leaders and agents of social change in Lebanon and in their home countries. Ms. Rahaf Dandash further explained that “the goal of these centres is to provide a safe space for women workers to come and use it in whatever way that allows them to build their capacity, and to have access to the resources they don’t have access to outside because of structural racism.”

**Ms. Tina Stavrinaki** (member of the **UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**) highlighted that slavery and racial discrimination are mutually strengthening. Racial discrimination facilitates contemporary slavery, since it makes individuals vulnerable to exploitation on the grounds of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin. In addition, contemporary slavery dehumanizes people involved and nullifies their recognition as rights-holders. Ms. Tina Stavrinaki also referred to the central role of UN treaty bodies in collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data that expose inequalities and can potentially bring to the surface “hidden” populations and vulnerable groups. She also stressed the importance of strong cooperation between UN treaty bodies and civil society, noting that the UN relies on its civil society partners to monitor the implementation of UN recommendations in Member States.

**Ms. Irma Šiljak** (Programme Officer, **Medica Zenica Association, Bosnia and Herzegovina**), presented the work of her organization, a grantee of the UN Slavery Fund, to provide safe shelter and rehabilitation to victims of contemporary forms of slavery in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She noted that 80% of the victims they assist are women and children from the Roma community, pointing to racial discrimination as one of the key factors leading to social inequality, and ensuing vulnerability of this population to trafficking and exploitation. Ms. Šiljak also highlighted that the systemic racism against Roma groups manifests in public policy, law enforcement and the criminal justice system. She described how social workers, law enforcement and even the Prosecutor’s Office often overlook that Roma are victims of contemporary slavery, because they often consider that forced and early marriages, domestic servitude, forced labour and begging is part of their culture. Perpetrators are therefore judged for domestic violence or neglect, which carry milder prosecution and sentencing, than the crime of trafficking.

**Mr. Tomoya Obokata** (**UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery**) dedicated his first report to the Human Rights Council to the impact of COVID-19 on contemporary forms of slavery. He evaluated the impact of the pandemic on minority groups and people affected by caste-based discrimination, finding that they “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 [...] if they get sick there's no social safety net to ensure they don't fall even deeper into poverty". He noted examples of migrant workers belonging to discriminated groups facing police brutality and stigmatization as virus "carriers" during the pandemic. The Special Rapporteur urged States to put in place adequate measures to mitigate the increasing risks of contemporary forms of slavery and called upon them to support the UN Slavery Fund.

**Mr. Roque Ronato Pattussii** (General Coordinator, **Centro de Apoio e Pastoral do Migrante - CAMI, Brazil**), addressed the role of racial discrimination in the context of forced labour in the textile industry in Brazil and spoke about his organization's work to assist survivors, thanks to the support of the UN Slavery Fund. He estimates that more than 93% of women rescued from forced labour are immigrants, most of them of African descent or belonging to indigenous or other minority groups. Those trafficked into forced labour within the clandestine textile industry face a high risk of contracting COVID-19, because of working and living conditions: large numbers work and eat together in small, clandestine sweatshops, sleeping on mats behind their sewing machines. When the health crisis started, many migrant workers lost the little they had, and became unable to care for themselves or their families. CAMI has distributed more than 10,000 food baskets and hygiene kits for migrant workers and refugees left without an income.

**Ms. Vibhawari Kamble** (**OHCHR Associate Human Rights Officer** and a former Fund's Fellow) brought forward the role of women's empowerment in achieving social justice, reflecting on her own experience as a female Dalit community leader in India. She described her journey from grassroots' organizing in a group supported by the UN Slavery Fund to working for the UN Human Rights Office in Geneva thanks to the UN Humanitarian Funds' fellowship programme. Ms. Kamble described a national march in 2012 and 2013 for the eradication of manual scavenging, which led to the liberation of 50,000 women from this practice. She shared the testimony of one survivor: *"I have given up this 'dirty work' [...] I would receive 2 rupees each month from each family whose dry latrines I cleaned, a few 'rotis' daily and their old clothes [...] With the help of the 'Garima Abhiyan' social movement I have been able to get real title to the land that the government had supposedly allotted me nine years ago. Today I plant my own fields. I hold my head up high."* The role of the UN Slavery Fund is therefore to facilitate a bottom-up movement, led by local civil society and survivors, who are empowered to deliver change for themselves and for generations to come.

## Discussion

**Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh** (**UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children**) took the floor to thank panellists and to ask for inputs about how her mandate could best serve children from minority groups who fall prey to contemporary slavery.

**Ms. Dandash** stressed the importance of empowering survivors to become leaders in their communities in order to produce policy change and prevent further victimization. Survivors' stories should be heard, so that the tragic stories behind criminal acts lead to meaningful change.

**Ms. Brihanu** drew attention to the fact that many people fall victim to domestic servitude because of poverty and lack of information. She advocated for more awareness-raising campaigns in marginalized communities.

**Ms. Šiljak** added that it is everyone's responsibility to react when witnessing social injustice, in particular against minority groups, and encouraged broad public dialogue about their exclusion from prevention, protection and reparation policies. She noted impunity for public workers who refuse assistance to victims on racial grounds, appealing to UN representatives to hold States accountable for their treaty obligations.

**Mr. Obokata** expressed gratitude for the cooperation between his mandate and civil society actors. Often based on information that they provide, his mandate can further investigate human rights violations, deliver recommendations, engage in constructive dialogue with States and issue public statements.

## Conclusion

**Mr. Chirwa** extended appreciation to the webinar's partners, panellists and participants, inviting them all to join in commemorating the UN Slavery Fund's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021. He thanked the following member States for their contributions and pledges to the Fund in 2020: Australia, Germany, India, Holy See, Republic of Korea, Luxembourg, Saudi Arabia, Spain and the United Kingdom. He concluded with an appeal to solidarity and cooperation, in a time where joint initiatives are more necessary than ever before: *"I call on States and other international partners to bolster support to combatting the practice of slavery at this time of dire needs resulting from the social and economic impact of the pandemic, and to make contributions to the Fund to ensure that the thousands of slavery survivors we assist are not left behind."*

**Ms. French** joined Mr. Chirwa in acknowledging the Fund's instrumental role in global anti-slavery efforts and echoed the plea for State contributions: *"UK is hoping to increase its contribution to the Fund and I want to encourage all those States that might be represented on this call to consider making contributions as well; as you heard today, these funds do make a difference and they can change livelihoods – we all have a responsibility to join these efforts."*

For further information on how to contribute or apply to the UN Slavery Fund, please visit our website or contact us at [slaveryfund@ohchr.org](mailto:slaveryfund@ohchr.org).