


# Covid-19 as a multifaceted crisis and its implications on human trafficking or other forms of human exploitation<sup>1</sup>


## A covid-19 como uma crise multifacetada e suas implicações sobre o tráfico de pessoas ou outras formas de exploração humana

**André Aparecido Medeiros<sup>a</sup>**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6339-5180>

E-mail: andreapmed@hotmail.com, oandre@usp.br

**Maria da Penha Vasconcellos<sup>a</sup>**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2666-9485>

E-mail: mpvascon@usp.br

<sup>a</sup>Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Saúde Pública. São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

### Abstract

This essay aims to analyze to what extent the covid-19 pandemic and the approach given to it affect the dynamics of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, labor abuse, and the care received by victims. Human trafficking is contextualized in a scenario of global fragility, establishing additional risks related to the migrant reality, social class, gender and age, and acquiring its own aggravating factors as a result of covid-19, considering the reduction in investigating and offering assistance to those affected. Isolation measures have a serious impact on these individuals, as they fail to generate profits for their tormentors and remain in precarious environments, in a scenario conducive to labor exploitation and other forms of violence. Sexual exploitation becomes even more clandestine, exposing the victim to new forms of pressure and contamination. Health information and the possibility of prevention and treatment are modest or non-existent for trafficked people, who are commonly cut off from strategies related to health emergencies, without access to protection protocols, amid a lack of autonomy. The need for an inclusive socio-sanitary model, constantly observing the demands related to marginalized groups, is highlighted.

**Keywords:** Human Trafficking; Covid-19 pandemic; Socio-spatial Inequalities in Health; Population Dynamics; Human Exploitation.

### Mailing address

André Aparecido Medeiros

Av. Dr. Arnaldo, 715. São Paulo, SP, Brasil. CEP 01246-904.

<sup>1</sup> CNPq Fellow. Process: 140114/2022-0

## Resumo

Este ensaio se propõe a analisar em que medida a pandemia de covid-19 e a abordagem a ela conferida afetam a dinâmica do tráfico de pessoas, da exploração sexual, dos abusos laborais, e o atendimento recebido pelas vítimas. O tráfico de pessoas é contextualizado em um cenário de fragilidade global, estabelecendo riscos adicionais relacionados à realidade migrante, à classe social, ao gênero e à idade, e adquirindo agravantes próprios em decorrência da covid-19, considerando-se a redução da investigação e da oferta de assistência aos afetados. As medidas de isolamento repercutem gravemente sobre tais indivíduos, na medida em que deixam de gerar lucros para seus algozes e permanecem em ambientes precários, em um cenário propício à exploração laboral e outras formas de violência. A exploração sexual passa a ser ainda mais clandestina, expondo a vítima a novas formas de pressão e à contaminação. A informação em saúde e a possibilidade de prevenção e tratamento é modesta ou inexistente para as pessoas traficadas, comumente apartadas das estratégias referentes à emergência sanitária, sem acesso aos protocolos de proteção, em meio à ausência de autonomia. Realça-se a necessidade de um modelo socio-sanitário inclusivo, em constante observação às demandas relacionadas aos grupos marginalizados.

**Palavras-chave:** Tráfico de Pessoas; Pandemia de Covid-19; Desigualdades Socioespaciais em Saúde; Dinâmica Populacional; Exploração Humana.

## Introduction

Human trafficking occurs all over the world, with variable attributes according to time, space and context, combining shared and specific characteristics of each territory or criminal group involved. Among the common points of the different places are: bait, strength or money as a recruitment and dominance strategy; human exploitation used for personal gain; deprivation of access to public services; human exposure to various risks; the secrecy that hinders the identification of the practice; the recurrence of certain victim profiles for certain trafficking purposes; changes in the trafficking dynamics in the face of changes in the flow of people and monitoring scenario; and the greater propensity for trafficking in times of crisis. Among the particular aspects of each territory and criminal organization are: the types of trafficking and their quantity; victims' levels of deprivation; the survival conditions offered; levels of exposure to different risks; and the capacity for investigation, identification and related intervention. These peculiarities will be resumed throughout this text.

In order to analyze the repercussions of the pandemic on human trafficking and other forms of human exploitation, this essay comprises an evolution of topics related to the theme present in a master's dissertation, later resumed in a doctorate. Such research, with a broader focus, establishes an approximation of the scenario generated by the pandemic, and it is possible to highlight two considerations: there is enormous inequality in the context of confronting the coronavirus between different social strata and geographic territories; and it is noted that the damage caused by the pandemic goes beyond the illness caused by the infection, even having repercussions on human rights (Medeiros, 2021). Located among this range of socio-environmental problems aggravated by (and aggravating) covid-19, human exploitation related to human trafficking has its dynamics changed, and should be carefully considered within the field of health inequalities and social policies.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze to what extent the covid-19 pandemic and the approach given

to it by public authorities affect human trafficking and the exploitation connected to it (particularly labor or sexual abuse), as well as the vulnerabilities of victims. and the care they receive. Specialized reports, related research and informative texts from different States are analyzed, with the aim of addressing the theme in different spheres. At the same time, the mention of certain countries, given the impossibility of discussing them all, is due to their relevance to the central topics, as they are representatives of territories significantly affected by human trafficking (CTDC, 2021) and are among the most impacted by covid-19 (Leng; Lemahieu, 2021).

Concerning human conditions, due to their characteristics, there is, in this essay, an approach to childhood, migrant women and the difficulties experienced by less favored social classes - categories that, as demonstrated, are among the determinants of risk in the face of trafficking.

The first part of the text explains singularities and consequences of covid-19, situated as a pluridimensional, systemic and heterogeneous crisis that acquires features of poly pandemic and syndemic, worsening due to preexisting social problems. In the following part, we discuss human trafficking and other associated violence, especially sexual exploitation and abuse in the workplace, comprising a field of attention when reflecting on the vulnerabilities of migrant people. The third section, finally, discusses mainly sexual exploitation resulting from human trafficking, with the mention of global data and illustrative reports, relating the needs of social protection in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic.

## Covid-19 and the multifaceted crisis

Admitting covid-19 as a syndemic (neologism that combines pandemic and synergy), Richard Horton (2020) shows that interventions cannot focus only on reducing and eliminating viral transmission, since, together with the coronavirus, a series of chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) related to patterns of social and economic inequality interact within specific populations. The adverse effects of each illness are magnified, which implies a person's

susceptibility to falling ill and the worsening of their condition; thus, for the author, limiting the damage caused by SARS-CoV-2 requires attention to NCDs and socioeconomic inequality (Horton, 2020). The most important consequence of this perspective is to highlight the social determinants of covid-19 and recognize the additional vulnerabilities of different groups, requiring a nuanced approach to protecting the health of communities, given the inevitable failure of a purely biomedical solution (Horton, 2020).

As for the term syndemic, The Lancet Commission on Obesity (2019) explained its concept as a synergy of pandemics that coexist in time and space, interact with each other and share common key social factors. In the following year, covid-19 could be used to illustrate such a definition. Based on Horton, Emily Mendenhall (2020), understanding the breadth of interaction between covid-19 and pre-existing conditions, combined with the strength of political, economic and social factors, reinforces that the disease only manifests itself as a syndemic in certain regions, and may even include rich economies.

With covid-19, the world has faced multiple pandemics, including hunger, inequality and authoritarian regimes, constituting a poly pandemic that has undermined development progress, exacerbated state weaknesses and undermined international cooperation, disproportionately affecting populations that already were the most vulnerable (Eisentraut; Kabus; Miehe, 2020). Such a scenario is located in a crisis of globalization and the liberal international order that the international system has been going through since 2008, so that covid-19 has become a crisis within another crisis; a critical juncture that intensifies and aggravates already present dynamics (Sanahuja, 2020). Such a crisis was generated by a discrete event - the appearance of the virus -, however, the explanation for its rapid propagation and for the serious systemic consequences goes beyond the characteristics of the pathogen: it involves system failures and its low resilience, characterized by high interdependence and high connectivity, without the necessary mechanisms for management and prevention of inherent global

risks, situated in a “risk regime” lacking effective global governance (Sanahuja, 2020).

These are factors that made the coronavirus more serious: sharp inequalities between people and countries; international organizations lacking the necessary powers and resources; a weakened and delegitimized liberal international order (Sanahuja, 2020). Thus, in a few weeks, the pandemic became a poly pandemic, constituting a multifaceted crisis that confronts the world with more than a health emergency, causing a reversal of development and an increase in repression and violations of human rights (Eisentraut; Kabus; Miehe, 2020). This is very significant, since human rights provide the indispensable conditions for the efficiency of the global response to any international emergency (including the covid-19 pandemic), as well as the conjuncture for preventing new health catastrophes (Viegas; Ventura; Ventura, 2022).

Human rights are among the concerns of the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding the approach to the coronavirus. WHO recognizes that, depending on the group a person belongs to, covid-19 entails its own forms of threats and experiences, understanding the need for isolation measures to respect legal limits, without arbitrariness and discrimination (WHO; HRP, 2020). The organization stresses the importance of caring for marginalized groups (such as refugees and other migrants, the prison population and homeless people), reinforcing the need for joint international action (WHO; HRP, 2020).

Amidst existing weaknesses, human trafficking is among the phenomena that stand out in the covid-19 crisis, adding to this poly pandemic context, and being recognized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as a pandemic in itself (UNRIC, 2019).

## Trafficking and exploitation of people in times of covid-19

Poverty, human suffering associated with violent conflict, fragility, and risks related to climate and natural disasters have all contributed to a gradual increase in displacement levels, giving rise to the largest forced displacement crisis on record

(Eisentraut; Kabus; Miehe, 2020; Relatório..., 2020; UNHCR, 2020). This is a warning in terms of socio-sanitary weaknesses, since, already exposed to previous adversities, experiencing a risky phenomenon in itself, refugees and many other migrants, in their inadequate or absent access to social safety nets, are among the people most vulnerable in the face of the crisis generated by the covid-19 pandemic (UNHCR, 2020).

The problems faced by displaced people are magnified with the increase in xenophobia and the high risk of contracting infectious diseases, setting an additional contour on previously existing hostile arrangements - so that the world was already full of high-risk patients even before the pandemic (Eisentraut; Kabus; Miehe, 2020). As a result, risk conditions overlap. In another link of vulnerabilities, this structure of threats to integrity has an impact on the practice of trafficking, smuggling and other forms of exploitation of people.

People in a condition of socioeconomic fragility during the pandemic - a number that has risen, according to global data, with a variable increase according to the strength of each economy and the levels of inequality found -, as well as their family members, are more vulnerable to contracting the disease and suffering the attendant problems - for example, the impact on a family if the food provider or primary caregiver contracts the virus (HFJ, 2020). Taking into account the damage caused by the crisis, many stories result or may result in migration, as part of the search for conditions to maintain life, in a way that traffickers take advantage of the various losses and consequent vulnerabilities, being able to find ways to exercise the crime in any stage of the displacement and at any location (GPC, 2020). The measures to control the spread of the virus, together with the economic recession and the loss of job opportunities and self-sufficiency, have a serious impact on many displaced people, who become an easier target for trafficking (Kaplún Asensio, 2021).

The global suffering stemming from the ongoing covid-19 crisis has significantly increased vulnerability to trafficking. It becomes evident in the increase in extreme poverty around the

world, in the rupture of ties with school and work, and in the lack of social support, favoring the increase in the number of victims of the pandemic, due to emerging crimes (Waly, 2021). With the covid-19 pandemic, systemic economic and social inequalities, which are among the underlying causes of human trafficking, were exacerbated and exposed, simultaneously impacting the ability of state authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide essential services to victims (UNODC, 2020). The limited capacity of governments, families and communities to meet the basic needs of people is a factor that makes them even more vulnerable to trafficking, in addition to reduced options for protection, gender discrimination, and other aspects that lead to human rights violations (GPC, 2020).

For capture, traffickers target individuals and communities with vulnerabilities (which may be pre-existing) linked to: marginalization, poor economic or employment opportunities, poverty, lack of formal education, learning difficulties and disabilities, mental health conditions, bereavement, language, addiction to illicit drugs or alcohol, homelessness, precarious living conditions, repression or lack of religious freedom, irregular immigration status, violent conflicts, risk of statelessness, etc. (HFJ, 2020). In the pandemic, these vulnerabilities acquired new aggravating factors in the face of unprecedented travel and mobility restrictions, generating multifaceted effects that, together, promote an environment in which migrants, particularly refugees or those in an irregular situation, may be subject to abuse and exploitation, and difficulties in identifying, protecting and investigating cases (R4V, 2020). In short: if before such people were at low risk of trafficking, they may now become victims of this crime as a result of the pandemic; if they were already at risk of being trafficked, their vulnerability could be further exacerbated, as demonstrated by flows from Venezuela, including the case of women and girls, who have been disproportionately victims of trafficking (R4V, 2020). This ratifies the fact that the particular vulnerability of women and children, especially girls, is increased in crises such as the

current one (CTDC, 2021; GPC, 2020; HFJ, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

With regard to situations of vulnerability and capture mechanisms, it can be seen that the interruption of educational services or the separation of caregivers who become ill during the pandemic can leave children unsupervised, or make them be entrusted to traffickers with false promises (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). There is an increased risk of child sexual exploitation on the Internet, as children who have an Internet connection tend to spend more time online during confinement, a vulnerability that is aggravated by the possibility of feeling anxious or lonely (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). In addition, with the closing of schools, some have lost their place of refuge or access to food (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). The study by Kaplún Asensio (2021) was carried out in Spain, and the results presented here are also reproduced in other regions, as can be seen in different sources, such as publications by Human Rights Watch (Devastador..., 2020), UNODC (2020, 2021) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) with the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality, UN Women (ODIHR; UN Women, 2020), given the general vulnerability of children to dangerous situations when not supervised, without access to school and in a situation of helplessness and food insecurity, making them susceptible to domestic and sexual violence and recruitment by criminal groups.

Due to the need for subsistence, in different countries around the world, many children are forced to seek food and income on the streets, increasing their risk of infection by covid-19 and exploitation (UNODC, 2020). Just as teachers's ability to identify signs of abuse has been reduced, cases are also less likely to be detected in protection agencies, which, to prevent the spread of the virus, have limited their monitoring efforts (Devastador..., 2020). This factor also has an impact where adults are concerned: with priorities and actions aimed at limiting the spread of the virus (leading to the closure of NGOs and government offices), it is easier for traffickers to hide their operations, making victims even more invisible and making it difficult

to identify and refer them to protection services (UNODC, 2020).

The living conditions of many of the victims of human trafficking, especially those in a state of house servitude or sexual slavery, present a worrying indicator of the increase in levels of domestic violence, as reported by many countries (UNODC, 2020). The restriction or monitoring of mobility is a common feature of human trafficking, however, social distancing and confinement end up reinforcing the isolation of victims, drastically reducing any possibility of identification and may also aggravate mental health problems and make it difficult to access informal support networks, even for those who were already being served by the government or community services (UNODC, 2020).

The situation in rural communities may also force increased migration to urban areas. This includes people interested in a local job, or willing to hire the services of people traffickers and smugglers seeking to emigrate to other countries through illegal and precarious routes - sometimes the only possible path in times of restrictions, quarantines and closures (HFJ, 2020). This migration (internal or external) can leave individuals (especially children) exposed to exploitation and unable to escape, not knowing how to access resources or facilities in unfamiliar areas (HFJ, 2020).

The scenario formed by quarantines, curfews, confinement, travel restrictions, limitations on economic activities and public life and increased police presence at borders and on the streets, at first glance, seems to impede the activities of exploiters and deter crime, but it can also encourage secrecy (UNODC, 2020). This is the case of human trafficking criminals who adjust their business model to the “new normal” created by the pandemic, with, for example, the misuse of new technologies (UNODC, 2020). In addition to the increased capture of victims via the Internet, organized crime groups and traffickers find opportunities by incorporating false essential workers in certain territories, including false health professionals (HFJ, 2020).

With more precarious and dangerous routes and means of transport, and with the growing cost of

facilitating travel, there is a potential increase in debt bondage (HFJ, 2020). It is known that victims of trafficking are recruited to be exploited and then generate financial gain; however, just as the state of alarm brought obstacles to movement across borders, the confinement also led to the restriction of freedom of movement in each territory, affecting the exploitation of victims in open spaces, as in the case of sexual exploitation on the street (Mariscal de Gante, 2020). The impossibility of generating profits and earnings for the trafficker is serious (with regard to the victim’s condition), since victims who do not produce in the sphere of exploitation acquire aggravating factors for subsistence and, many times, observe an exponential increase in the cost of life and the debt of their travel, and they may suffer more violence and abuse by traffickers (GPC, 2020; Kaplún Asensio, 2021; Mariscal de Gante, 2020).

Faced with the impossibility of paying what they owe to traffickers and sending some money to their families, the exploited women can be forced to continue practicing prostitution, exposing themselves to the risks of covid-19 infection. This highlights the special vulnerability of victims and survivors of trafficking or sexual exploitation, as well as of women in contexts of prostitution, resulting in cases in which they were trapped in the places where they carried out the practice - sometimes confined together with the traffickers themselves (Kaplún Asensio, 2021).

Even with the end of the state of alarm, the situation does not seem to have improved for women subject to prostitution: many types of risks are related to the exposure of trafficked persons, subject to contracting covid-19 and suffering other complex situations resulting from the pandemic (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). The inability to isolate or socially distance oneself (when people are forced to work or provide sexual services), and confinement in the place of exploitation, without being able to ward off violence, are factors that reduce access to information, support and services related to the pandemic (GPC, 2020; Kaplún Asensio, 2021). Besides compromising health conditions and increasing the risk of vulnerability to serious

infections, the pandemic has led to restrictions on face-to-face interactions and the closure of clinics, shelters and service provider offices, which affects the help services available to trafficked persons, delaying support and increasing the likelihood of damage (GPC, 2020).

There are additional barriers to services, such as health services, regarding people whose documentation has been removed by traffickers, besides the risk of abuse, detention and revictimization by security agents/police officers who oversee quarantines and manage checkpoints (GPC, 2020; Kaplún Asensio, 2021). Covid-19 complications and other urgent, short- and long-term health problems can come from serious forms of physical and psychological violence, including: deprivation of medical treatment, kidnapping, imprisonment, rape, sexual slavery, prostitution, forced labor, organ removal, physical beatings, torture and starvation (GPC, 2020; Kaplún Asensio, 2021).

While women and girls trafficked across borders may experience increased abuse in the pandemic, the economic impact could disrupt the livelihoods of those internally displaced, potentially increasing their risk of trafficking and sexual violence (GPC, 2020). Migrants in an irregular situation and temporary workers, because they face more precarious working and living conditions, are part of the groups that may be unequally affected in the pandemic, being at greater vulnerability and risk of exploitation in the face of criminal networks (UNODC, 2020). Precarious environments with people vulnerable to exploitation, due to increased health risks and exposure to the coronavirus, include the sex industry and domestic work (UNODC, 2020).

With the pandemic and the reduction in income, living circumstances are even more precarious, especially for people who earn the lowest wages or belong to informal sectors (UNODC, 2020). Among the people most vulnerable to labor or sexual exploitation and abuse are domestic, cleaning, construction, tourism, hotel, bar and restaurant workers, caregivers, taxi drivers, street vendors and prostitutes (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). With the pandemic, millions of people who were already

living in mere subsistence conditions (working in the textile industry, food manufacturing, agriculture, livestock, manufacturing and domestic work, sectors in which human trafficking is continually detected) lost or had their only income reduced or, amid lower production costs, economic difficulties, weak inspections and controls, faced an increased risk of exploitation (as in the case of working for long periods, due to the removal of part of the team and the increased demand), risk of modern slavery and the difficulty of being identified, oriented, rescued and protected (Kaplún Asensio, 2021; UNODC, 2020).

There is a characteristic vulnerability among undocumented migrants, women, children and sex workers. Due to their personal needs and the conditions to which they are often subjected, refugees and other immigrants (particularly those who are in an irregular situation or have had their documents seized), in addition to the risks inherent to the virus, may be subject to abuse and exploration (Kaplún Asensio, 2021; R4V, 2020). Moreover, in many cases, the position of isolation and lack of knowledge of the local language or the specific circumstances of the atypical moment prevents the victim from recognizing the situation they are going through (Mariscal de Gante, 2020). Many of these people, even when symptomatically infected with the coronavirus, may be unable to recognize the symptoms, which further removes the possibility of seeking and finding help, showing that, just as they do not have access to the necessary health resources for prevention, the victims of human trafficking are also unable to access them for treating the disease (Mariscal de Gante, 2020).

The reduction in the capacity of state authorities and NGOs to provide essential services to victims is also among the problems arising from the risk of infection (UNODC, 2020). Some shelters for victims of trafficking have closed their doors or partially suspended their services due to contagion, and there have even been reports of denied places (UNODC, 2020). The lack of housing and access to health, legal and other services raises the risk of recidivism in trafficking and vulnerability to covid-19 contamination (UNODC, 2020).

Other aspects to note (Kaplún Asensio, 2021):

- Increased risks and difficulties that victims, once identified, may encounter in rebuilding their lives with regard to access to justice and support services, since these are now provided online or, when face-to-face, have now become difficult to carry out, resulting in delays and long waiting times;
- Increased difficulties for reintegration and recovery, including difficult access to documentation, restricted possibilities for assisted return and limited options for labor insertion that allow independence; and
- Delays in the resolution of cases that are already in court, which can make it difficult to access compensation and bring the offenses to the statute of limitations.

## Approaching realities and identifying challenges

Modern slavery is found in all countries, but human trafficking is a fundamental human rights issue in India, which has, according to estimates, 8 million people held captive by trafficking (Parker, 2022). South Asia and the Pacific comprise the region with the highest number of victims of human trafficking in the world today, placing India among the countries where this crime continues to thrive, which includes a high number of exploited children (Parker, 2022). After being deceived with false promises, the victims are condemned to work for more than 12 hours a day in brickworks, textile factories, agriculture, quarries, or are subject to sexual exploitation, accumulating debts with exorbitant interest, and there are even cases of work in intergenerational servitude regime, so that children, siblings or parents inherit the expenses of deceased workers (Parker, 2022).

Exploitation by forced labor and in the sex industry comprise the most widespread and denounced forms of human trafficking in most countries of the world, with changes according to region and period, also highlighting, in India, begging, criminal activity and forced marriage

(CTDC, 2021; MOD, 2022; Parker, 2022). In the south of the country, there have been reports of an increase in child marriage due to the economic despair stemming from the pandemic (UNODC, 2021).

In a perception survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF, 2018), with 550 specialists in women's issues, among the 193 member countries of the United Nations (UN), India was considered the most dangerous country for women in terms of health system, economic resources, traditional practices, abuse (sexual and non-sexual) and human trafficking. This is due, above all, to a patriarchal mentality, which sees women as inferior and as a group available for exploitation, for obtaining domestic, sexual or financial benefits, a situation that is aggravated by poverty, as stated by Monique Villa (2018), the foundation's president.

As a result, violations against women that occur around the world reach unmatched levels in India, with the dissemination of information favored by the fact that the country is a democracy and has an active media (Villa, 2018). Statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau indicate, in the country, almost a rape every 20 minutes and a crime against women every three minutes, showing that these risk their health and their lives daily in a country where gender violence has reached epidemic proportions (Villa, 2018).

In the case of a pandemic, covid-19 made drug dealers lure the unemployed with advance payments, trapping them in the debt cycle, increasing the number of bonded labor (Parker, 2022). Indians from lower social classes are more vulnerable to human trafficking, living in poverty, without a strong family structure and with low education, as is the case of women and girls from the dalit caste, considered the lowest, sometimes "married" with a local deity, becoming sex slaves to higher-caste villagers (Parker, 2022).

The restrictions that the government imposed to curb the spread of the virus deprived those who work in the sex trade from income (Redfern, 2020). With the pandemic, there was a lack of customers in brothels in India, not seen even in the history of economic downturn, bringing a new reality that makes women even more vulnerable to diseases,



in addition to the lack of money for them and their dependents (Pillai, 2020). Gupta (apud Redfern, 2020), director of Apne Aap, an anti-trafficking organization operating in the country, explains that sex workers or trafficking victims suffer from a lack of food and clean air; in addition, when they have covid-19, they cannot afford the costs of treatment. There is also a social stigma on people exploited for sexual purposes, leading them to experience ostracism in communities in different regions, having become responsible for spreading covid-19 (Pillai, 2020; UNODC, 2021).

Exposure to the risk of infection and lack of income for women and their dependents undermine survival and generate uncertainty about the future, which includes the risk of dying from poverty or illness (Pillai, 2020). After years of constant abuse, women and children trapped in India's sex industry already had little help and few opportunities to escape; however, since the pandemic, many of them expressed fear that the scenario would become more serious, with the possibility of the closure of brothels in the country and, as a result, the deprivation of their roof, given that the shelters were already full and they would have nowhere to go (Redfern, 2020).

People in the sex market, including human trafficking victims and transgender people, are even more neglected by the government than migrant workers from other sectors and people living on the streets, with worrying living conditions in prostitution or sexual exploitation spaces (Pillai, 2020). Gupta (apud Redfern, 2020) reports that an Indian red-light district during the pandemic was like a horror movie set or a war zone; he saw 12 women in a single windowless room, children weak to the point of not being able to ward off the flies that hovered over their heads, as well as women without strength lying in the streets. He found mothers who were forced to choose between recharging their phones to ask for help or feeding their children, so he does not understand how the government expects them to survive in such conditions (Gupta apud Redfern, 2020).

Research carried out in Spain reaffirms that, even with the limitations of the pandemic,

human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has not been paralyzed, but has only undergone operational changes, shifting from visible public spaces to virtual surroundings and closed environments, maintaining pressure and the persecution of victims by traffickers and pimps, including with regard to non-use of protective masks in exploitative environments (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). Women victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation and in contexts of prostitution, in addition to the lack of information about the disease (including denialist speeches on the part of some, a symptom of isolation combined with the misinformation received), began to face greater difficulty in their daily survival, without food or resources to support themselves (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). High levels of stress and anxiety were also identified, as well as outbreaks of post-traumatic stress in the surviving women who were being cared for in residential facilities, since sanitary confinement psychologically connects with experiences suffered during exploitation (Kaplún Asensio, 2021).

The most advanced women in their process of recovery and socioeconomic integration, close to a state of autonomy, were also impacted by the loss of jobs due to the lockdown, in the Spanish context, in addition to having seen the documentation processes paralyzed, essential for full access to rights (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). Faced with the difficulties of the period and the scarcity of resources, the teams that intervened in the situation had to adapt quickly to respond and alleviate the different statuses of human gravity, mobilizing their own resources, their personal time and, sometimes, citizen participation, with the indispensable recognition of humanitarian work by the government as an "essential service", avoiding fines during its development (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). With these adaptations, it became possible to respond to the humanitarian emergency situation. This process generated learning, with the identification of new ways to detect victims of trafficking, as well as new ways of approach (Kaplún Asensio, 2021).

In addition to the described scenarios, certain quantitative information was contemplated by the work of ODIHR, of the Organization for Security and

Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in partnership with UN Women (ODIHR; UN Women, 2020), covering data from 94 survivors of human trafficking from 40 countries, in the first half of 2020. From the responses of survivors, some results stand out (ODIHR, UN Women, 2020):

- 70% of women and 60% of men reported worsening mental health due to uncertainty and isolation;
- 68% of women and 67% of men declared that covid-19 had negatively impacted their financial well-being due to the lack of job opportunities and the economic recession - the latter was also identified as an aggravating factor that puts survivors at risk of revictimization, increasing the vulnerability of those who already faced greater risks;
- 44% of women and 34% of men reported worsening health status;
- Exploitation survivors were not well informed about changes in service delivery during the pandemic;
- Almost 50% had experienced delay in their formal recognition as victims of trafficking, affecting their possibilities to access safe accommodation, financial support and reunification with their children;
- They reported new difficulties in accessing basic and essential services (including medical services), good employment conditions, psychological services, legal assistance and covid-19 tests; and
- More than half believe the pandemic will increase human trafficking rates.

As a continuation of the same study, a survey was carried out with 385 workers on the front line of intervention on human trafficking, from 102 countries, also in the first half of 2020. As regards perceptions about human trafficking, the public served and the demands of their workplace (ODIHR; UN Women, 2020):

- They identified a greater vulnerability of women and girls to sexual exploitation and

increased trafficking of men into forced labor and children into forced begging;

- Most respondents noted an increase in survivors' difficulty in accessing jobs, medical services, social services, repatriation services, safe housing, legal assistance, and food and water;
- 77% said that their organization needed additional resources due to extraordinary expenses arising from the pandemic, 18% admitted that their organization could not cope with the increased demand and 5%, that they had already had to close since the beginning of the pandemic; and
- Explained that their organizations did not receive the required funding in 2020-2021, with only 25% of organizations predicted to remain fully operational, 50% to remain partially operational, and 3.6% to close.

The investigated results indicate that (ODIHR; UN Women, 2020):

- The emerging dynamics of human trafficking are gendered, compounded by pre-existing issues of gender inequality;
- Migrant people were considered one of the main risk groups for human trafficking during the pandemic, with migrant women being the majority of victims already identified before the period;
- Children have specific vulnerabilities, exacerbated by school closures, rising domestic violence, economic insecurity at home, and increased time online; and
- Racial and ethnic minorities are the most affected by the pandemic, which may increase their vulnerability to human trafficking.

The results obtained by ODIHR and UN Women are in line with the discussions of the other sources present in this essay. All reports reinforce the indissociability between quarantines and social protection measures, including political coordination mechanisms that warn of risks arising from economic inequality, among other factors,

in order to prevent the most vulnerable populations from being devastated or violated due to increasingly frequent pandemics (Viegas; Ventura; Ventura, 2022). It is clear that previous violence can lead to the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, crimes with serious implications in terms of human rights, aggravated in times of crisis (R4V, 2020).

There is a consensus that identifying victims of human trafficking is already difficult under normal circumstances (since, among other reasons, exploitation often takes place in illegal, informal or unregulated environments), so that the difficulties faced during the pandemic are increased, which is related to imposed restrictions and helplessness (Kaplún Asensio, 2021; UNODC, 2020). With the decrease in the number of inspections and other preventive interventions during the pandemic, the investigation of trafficking loses space and possibilities, expanding the different risks and difficulties that victims face (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). In this way, part of the analysis of measures to combat covid-19 is related to how such determinations can affect the fight against trafficking and the detection and identification of victims (Kaplún Asensio, 2021). From there, it is possible to highlight the health needs of these people.

Victims of human trafficking are the result of society's failure to protect the most vulnerable groups and enforce their rights, resulting in additional "punishment" during times of emergency (UNODC, 2020). Given the demonstrations of the special circumstances that make victims ideal targets for the coronavirus and make them subject to the exclusion of health, social and economic measures, essential for overcoming the crisis, it is necessary to ensure that the pandemic does not make them more invisible and that they are provided the means to receive effective protection (Mariscal de Gante, 2020). In times of the covid-19 pandemic, the intrinsic relationship between health strategies (including restrictions) and human rights remains: violations of human rights can have negative effects on health, and public health policies can positively or negatively impact human rights (Viegas; Ventura; Ventura, 2022).

Going beyond the imperative of containing the spread of covid-19, the political objective must also focus on containing the legal damage that the disease entails, with the need for a comprehensive approach to covid-19 that adopts human rights as an integral part of the public health response (Viegas; Ventura; Ventura, 2022; WHO; HRP, 2020). If public health is a priority, there must be a prevailing culture of the rule of law, maintaining support for combating trafficking, basing responses to the crisis on human rights, seeking to guarantee access to health care and social support for the different groups (UNODC, 2020). This makes room for ethical guidance in the midst of current difficulties, also representing a basis for future responses (WHO; HRP, 2020).

The fight against covid-19 must be continuously monitored so that, if the responses offered have a negative effect on trafficking victims or other vulnerable groups, adjustments are found that minimize the damage and allow their needs to be met (UNODC, 2020). In the task of identifying the demands of the pandemic, it is necessary to continue analyzing and discussing how the situation resulting from the disease crisis and the declaration of a state of alarm is reflected in the victims of human trafficking, a particularly vulnerable and fragile group (Mariscal de Gante, 2020).

Thus, new investigations and analyses on the subject must be developed, evaluating particularities and transformations of the different public health scenarios. As for interventions, one must take into account the panorama of the period and the particularities of cases of oppression or those vulnerable to it, which include: inequalities in access to health services, obstacles to legal and social protection, and the impacts of restrictive determinations. In times of crisis, groups such as victims or potential victims of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation require increased attention.

## Final considerations

The covid-19 pandemic should receive different categories of response. In all of them, concern

about coronavirus transmission is expected, so that the economic and social factor should not preclude the necessary isolation, according to the needs of the period. On the other hand, strategies aimed at public health through containment of virus transmission do not always take into account an inclusive look that considers multiple human realities; they can ignore and even have an inconsistent impact on the health of certain populations, especially when it comes to those who previously did not have adequate living conditions. As a result, the most vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by the disease and the repercussions of the pandemic.

It is evident that, respecting the microbiological dimension of fighting the pandemic (with the determinations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus), strategies for human protection and containment of transmission must also consider the particular needs of the most vulnerable groups. In addition to quarantines and vaccination, the socioeconomic factor must be taken into account in combating the pandemic and minimizing its damage. Thus, reflections and interventions related to the event must be accompanied by attention to the different living conditions, in order to identify urgent demands that are also part of the management of the health crisis, including violations of integrity through human trafficking and other forms of related exploitation.

Different dynamics of human trafficking and exploitation practices during the pandemic can be observed. Considering the identification of specific damage, sometimes excessive, related to social and health conditions in a period of global crisis, it is necessary to intervene in the face of social problems, so that the risk management of the pandemic goes beyond the purely viral factor. Human trafficking is a crime that requires attention given the previous vulnerabilities (which increase subjection) and the high risk of exposure of the populations involved, combined with reduced access to health services and other aggravating factors in the quality of life, health and security, derived from or accentuated by covid-19. It has grown to the point of being

categorized as a pandemic within a pandemic, acquiring particularities and adding vulnerabilities to the victims - such as the predisposition to the damage caused by the infection - and uncertainties to their families.

Given this excluding reality, besides the direct fight against the pandemic and crime, there remains the need to expand and humanize health practice and research, more forcefully incorporating systematically marginalized people, in order to increasingly avoid new victims of human trafficking, identify existing victims and integrate those already identified.

## References

Comissão de Obesidade The Lancet. *A sindemia global da obesidade, desnutrição e mudanças climáticas* - relatório da Comissão The Lancet. São Paulo: Alimentando Políticas, 2019.

CTDC - COUNTER TRAFFICKING DATA COLLABORATIVE. *Global data hub on human trafficking*. Geneva: IOM, 2021. Disponível em: <<https://ctdatacollaborative.org/>>.

Acesso em: 23 set. 2022.

DEVASTADOR impacto del COVID-19 para niños y niñas. *Human Rights Watch*, New York, 9 abr. 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2020/04/09/devastador-impacto-del-covid-19-para-ninos-y-ninas>>.

Acesso em: 10 maio 2022.

Eisentraut, S.; Kabus, J.; Mieke, L. Introduction: a world ill-prepared. In: Eisentraut, S. et al. *Polyandemic*: Munich security report special edition on development fragility, and conflict in the era of covid-19. Munich: MSC, 2020. p. 15-21. Disponível em: <[https://securityconference.org/assets/02\\_Dokumente/01\\_Publikationen/201104\\_MSC\\_Polyandemic\\_EN.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/201104_MSC_Polyandemic_EN.pdf)>. Acesso em: 30 maio 2022.

GPC - GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER. *COVID-19 Pandemic*: Trafficking in Persons (TIP) considerations in internal displacement contexts. Geneva: UNHCR, 2020. Disponível em:

<[https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/old/wp-content/uploads/GPC-Task-Team-on-Anti-Trafficking\\_COVID-guidance\\_final\\_SM.pdf](https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/old/wp-content/uploads/GPC-Task-Team-on-Anti-Trafficking_COVID-guidance_final_SM.pdf)>. Acesso em: 10 abr. 2022.

HFJ - Hope for Justice. *Covid-19 and potencial implications on human trafficking and other forms of modern slavery internationally*. Manchester, 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2020/07/Covid-19%20and%20potential%20implications%20on%20human%20trafficking%20and%20other%20forms%20of%20modern%20slavery%20internationally.pdf>>. Acesso em: 16 jun. 2022.

HORTON, R. Offline: COVID-19 is not a pandemic. *The Lancet*, London, v. 396, n. 10255, p. 874, 2020. DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32000-6

KAPLÚN ASENSIO, M. *El impacto de la pandemia de la Covid-19 en las víctimas de trata con fines de explotación sexual en España: la situación de las mujeres y la intervención de las entidades de la Red #ROMPELACADENA*. Madrid: Diaconía España, 2021. Disponível em: <<https://diaconia.es/desactivatrata/estudio-el-impacto-de-la-pandemia-de-la-covid-19-en-las-victimas-de-trata-con-fines-de-explotacion-sexual-en-espana/>>. Acesso em: 27 dez. 2022.

LENG, A.; Lemahieu, H. *Covid Performance Index*. Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2021. Disponível em: <<https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/covid-performance/>>. Acesso em: 12 fev. 2021.

Mariscal de Gante, M. V. Las víctimas de trata de seres humanos ante la crisis del COVID-19. In: BRITO SISÓ, C.; MAROTO CALATAYUD, M. (Ed.). *Derechos humanos ante la crisis del covid-19*. Madrid: Ilustre Colegio de Abogados de Madrid, 2020. p. 35-37. Disponível em: <<https://web.icam.es/bucket/Guia%20DDHH.pdf>>. Acesso em: 27 dez. 2022.

MEDEIROS, André Aparecido. *Acceso a la salud y vulnerabilidad socioambiental en tiempos de pandemia de coronavirus*. 2021. Dissertação (Máster Universitário em Estudos Internacionais de Paz, Conflictos y Desarrollo)-Instituto

Interuniversitario de Desarrollo Social y Paz, Cátedra UNESCO de Filosofía para la Paz de la Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana, 2021.

MENDENHALL, E. The COVID-19 syndemic is not global: context matters. *The Lancet*, London, v. 396, n. 10264, p. 1731, 2020. DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32218-2

MOD - MENINAS DOS OLHOS DE DEUS NEPAL. *O problema do tráfico humano*. Kathmandu, 2022. Disponível em: <<https://www.aogenepal.org/pt/o-problema-do-traffic-humano/>>. Acesso em: 26 set. 2022.

ODIHR - OSCE Office for DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS; UN Women. *Guía para abordar las tendencias emergentes de la trata de personas y sus consecuencias por la pandemia de COVID-19*. Vienna: ODIHR, 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/e/467712.pdf>>. Acesso em: 19 fev. 2022.

PARKER, L. Tráfico de pessoas na Índia. *The Exodus Road*, Colorado Springs, 16 maio 2022. Disponível em: <<https://theexodusroad.com/pt/human-trafficking-in-india/>>. Acesso em: 25 set. 2022.

PILLAI, S. Covid-19 update: HIV+, stigmatised, GB Road sex workers stare at an uncertain future. *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 30 abr. 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/hiv-stigmatised-gb-road-sex-workers-stare-at-an-uncertain-future-amid-covid-pandemic/story-LzXgI2yjkgINz17Iff6dIJ.html>>. Acesso em: 29 set. 2022.

R4V - RESPUESTA A VENEZOLANOS. *El impacto de covid-19 en personas refugiadas y migrantes de Venezuela vulnerables a la trata de personas y el tráfico ilícito de migrantes: mensajes clave para las autoridades gubernamentales y fuerzas de seguridad*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2020. Disponível em: <<https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/el-impacto-de-covid-19-en-personas-refugiadas-y-migrantes-de-venezuela-vulnerables>>. Acesso em: 16 fev. 2022.

REDFERN, C. Así complica la pandemia la lucha contra la trata de personas: “Es como estar en una zona de guerra”. *El País*, Madrid, 18 ago. 2020. Disponível em: <[https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/08/10/planeta\\_futuro/1597081803\\_328859.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/08/10/planeta_futuro/1597081803_328859.html)>. Acesso em: 25 mar. 2021.

RELATÓRIO global do ACNUR revela deslocamento forçado de 1% da humanidade. *ACNUR Brasil*, Brasília, DF, 18 jun. 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.acnur.org/portugues/2020/06/18/relatorio-global-do-acnur-revela-deslocamento-forcado-de-1-da-humanidade/>>. Acesso em: 15 fev. 2022.

SANAHUJA, J. A. COVID-19: riesgo, pandemia y crisis de gobernanza global. In: MESA, M. (Coord.). *Riesgos globales y multilateralismo: el impacto de la COVID-19*. Anuario 2019-2020. Madrid: CEIPAZ, 2020. p. 27-54. Disponível em: <<https://ceipaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/o.2020-ANUARIO-COMPLETO.pdf>>. Acesso em: 15 jun. 2022.

TRF - THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION. Exclusivo - Pesquisa revela os 10 países mais perigosos do mundo para as mulheres. *Reuters*, Londres, 26 jun. 2018. Disponível em: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/geral-mulheres-perigo-pesquisa-idBRKBN1JM1VO-OBTRP>>. Acesso em: 27 set. 2022.

UN WOMEN. *La pandemia en la sombra: violencia contra las mujeres durante el confinamiento*. New York, 2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.unwomen.org/es/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>>. Acesso em: 29 jun. 2022.

UNHCR - UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES. *Global trends: forced displacement in 2019*. Copenhagen, 2020. Disponível em: <[https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37/#\\_ga=2.53994344.1322504617.1630108369-1085960883.1630108369](https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37/#_ga=2.53994344.1322504617.1630108369-1085960883.1630108369)>. Acesso em: 13 fev. 2022.

UNODC - UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *Impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en la trata de personas*: hallazgos preliminares y mensajes basados en un análisis rápido. Vienna, 2020. Disponível em: <[https://www.unodc.org/documents/ropan/2020/Impacto\\_del\\_Covid\\_19\\_en\\_la\\_trata\\_de\\_personas.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/ropan/2020/Impacto_del_Covid_19_en_la_trata_de_personas.pdf)>. Acesso em: 23 fev. 2022.

UNODC - UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons and responses to the challenges*: a global study of emerging evidence. Vienna, 2021. Disponível em: <[https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2021/The\\_effects\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_on\\_trafficking\\_in\\_persons.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2021/The_effects_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_trafficking_in_persons.pdf)>. Acesso em: 1 out. 2022.

UNRIC - UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION CENTRES. Agência da ONU alerta para impactos de uma “pandemia de tráfico humano”. *Nações Unidas*, Bruxelas, 2019. Disponível em: <<https://unric.org/pt/agencia-da-onu-alerta-para-impactos-de-uma-pandemia-de-trafico-humano/>>. Acesso em: 14 fev. 2022.

VIEGAS, L. L.; VENTURA, D. de F. L.; VENTURA, M. A proposta de convenção internacional sobre a resposta às pandemias: em defesa de um tratado de direitos humanos para o campo da saúde global. *Cadernos de Saúde Pública*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 38, n. 1, e00168121, 2022. DOI: 10.1590/0102-311X00168121

VILLA, M. Abuse and violence: why India is the ‘most dangerous country for women’. *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 26 jun. 2018. Opinion. Disponível em: <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/abuse-and-violence-why-india-is-the-most-dangerous-country-for-women/story-a4i86pmPTEOgKLa3yo89pM.html>>. Acesso em: 28 set. 2022.

WALY, G. Preface. In: UNODC - UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*. New York: United Nations, 2021. p. 4-5.

WHO - WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION;  
HRP - HUMAN REPRODUCTION  
PROGRAMME. *Addressing human rights  
as key to the COVID-19 response*. Geneva,

2020. Disponível em: <<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/addressing-human-rights-as-key-to-the-COVID-19-response>>. Acesso em: 14 fev. 2022.

---

### **Contribution of the Authors**

Medeiros and Vasconcellos participated in the conception, design, analysis, revision and approval of the final version. Medeiros was in charge of writing and Vasconcellos of supervision.

Received: 07/08/2022

Resubmitted: 10/15/2022

Approved: 11/23/2022