



Building Back Safer from Violence
during the COVID-19 Pandemic

THE PARALLEL PANDEMIC



COVID-19 has exposed the lack of systemic protections for people most vulnerable to violence. As resources were diverted towards COVID-19 efforts and frontline responders were put at risk of becoming infected, additional stresses were placed on criminal justice systems. Women and girls were especially vulnerable to violence, with [emerging data](#) showing the rate of gender-based violence rising globally as domestic violence increased during lockdowns. Vulnerability to modern slavery was also exacerbated as millions more fell into extreme poverty. In order to build back better from COVID-19, we must also ensure that we build back safer, prioritising protection for the most vulnerable.

Through our work, IJM has seen that when justice systems are empowered and equipped to offer protection and secure justice, violence reduces. For example, IJM's 15 years of work in the Philippines led to a dramatic decrease in the prevalence of sex trafficking of children in bars and brothels – reductions ranging from [72% to 86%](#) in the cities where IJM partnered with local authorities.

With teams working throughout the pandemic across the world, IJM has seen firsthand the devastating effects COVID-19 has had on securing justice for victims and survivors of violence. In many respects, violence perpetrated against the most vulnerable individuals and communities has been the parallel pandemic to COVID-19.

A national and global recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity to strengthen protections and reduce violence. IJM offers the following recommendations to the UK Government to ensure that victims and survivors of violence are brought to safety and offenders brought to justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

UK AID ASSISTANCE TO STRENGTHEN RULE OF LAW

Building back safer means increasing investments which enable criminal justice systems to effectively protect people who are vulnerable to violence, thereby ending impunity. In order to maximise the impact of UK aid spending as we emerge from the pandemic, it is critical that aid is targeted at sustainable initiatives which strengthen and capacitate effective criminal justice systems. UK aid can build capacity for criminal justice actors by:

- Funding projects which provide practical support and mentorship to law enforcement agencies to improve investigation and prosecution of cases of violence against women and girls and modern slavery.
- Investing in research identifying gaps in service provision to and resources for victims of violence, as well as analysing effectiveness of law enforcement responses.
- Prioritising survivor inclusion in the design and implementation of criminal justice solutions to violence.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP:

The UK has the opportunity to establish itself as a global leader in ensuring that strengthening protections are central to the global recovery from COVID-19. Through international forums in years to come, the UK can lead collaborative efforts to bolster protections for the most at-risk individuals and communities by:

- Highlighting the need for systemic protections for the most vulnerable to violence and modern slavery as chair of 2021's G7 Summit.
- Ensuring that modern slavery and violence are foregrounded in related discussions, debates and forums, such as at COP26.

PROMOTING PROTECTION:

At a time when protections for the most vulnerable have been diminished, the UK has the opportunity to commit to promoting, investing in and measuring protection through aid provision. The development of sustainable models of protection and safety can ensure that justice is secured and vulnerable individuals and communities protected. Through collaboration, the UK could resource local authorities in partner countries by:

- Increasing the capacity of law enforcement to restrain perpetrators of violent crime.
- Increasing access for women and girls to specialist, trauma-informed services.
- Collaborating with community-based organisations, including survivor groups.
- Collecting, analysing and publicising data on victimisation trends.
- Establishing, developing and sustaining National Referral Mechanisms that link survivors of modern slavery to government and NGO service providers.

SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP:

Survivors must be central to efforts to build back safer. Members of the [Global Survivor Network's](#) Leadership Council recommend that governments invest in programmes that:

- Ensure justice for survivors of violence through increasing access to protection and effective prosecutions. Governments should invest in special courts for victims of violence and ensure that cases are heard in a timely manner.
- Protect survivors, especially women, who report violence. Importantly, governments should invest in temporary shelters for women and children.
- Engage survivor leaders to design trauma-informed services in order to ensure that survivors' needs are met.

PERSPECTIVES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Global Survivor Network leaders and IJM field staff share their experience of the impact of COVID-19 and offer their perspective on building back safer post-pandemic.

“As a survivor who works with survivors of violence, I believe immediate crisis care programmes must be informed and shaped by the survivors who use them. This will ensure that the needs of the survivors are being met and no additional harm is occurring during this delicate time. That includes immediate protection for women and children fleeing violence, and enforcement of restraining orders. Intake processes must be trauma-informed so victims are not being interviewed over and over. Doctors and nurses must be trained to properly examine and treat sexual assault victims, so they aren't re-traumatised by the experience.

“Donors providing aid and governments developing policy must seek out input from survivors of violence, especially women. In many parts of the world, women are the social adhesion which binds families and communities together. The many stakeholders working on programmes and policies to address violence need to measure whether their programmes are truly meeting the needs of survivors, especially women. To accomplish this, survivors need to be in places where decisions are made and policies are formed. This is the only way to ensure that the justice system is working for the people who need it the most.”

VICTORIA NYANJURA – *Global Survivor Network Leader and founder of Women in Action for Women*

“For too long women and girls have suffered abuse while their abusers have largely remained unaccountable. COVID -19 has led to a spike in violence and exposed the preexisting daily abuse that many women and girls face. Worse still, when essential services were restricted, making them unreachable or unable to comprehensively address operational challenges, ensuring protection and securing justice became near unattainable. The protection of women and girls should be one of the core solutions to existing national and global advancement interventions if we truly wish to leave no one behind.”

ALICE MUHAIRWE – *Director of Casework for IJM Uganda*

“The COVID-19 pandemic has increased vulnerabilities for victims of trafficking, making it more difficult to identify victims and hold perpetrators accountable. In our casework, we have seen the pandemic push services further out of the reach of survivors. Basic services, such as psychosocial support, have moved online and victim and witness support has been challenging. Travel to provide services to victims has been hampered and in many rural areas there is inconsistent communication.

“Excellent service provision is critical to maintaining engagement with the criminal justice system, so we need to innovate and double our efforts. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and necessary health and social restrictions have pushed victims further into isolation and into the control of traffickers, making it more difficult to identify victims in Romania and the UK. We know that in order to end human trafficking there must also be an end to impunity and the lucrative flow of proceeds. The traffickers are adapting and so must we.”

SHAWN KOHL – *IJM Director for Central and Eastern Europe*



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