

As UN Experts express alarm, coalition calls on the Government to end hostility towards survivors of trafficking and modern slavery

Today UN experts expressed alarm at the UK Government's increasing use of unsubstantiated claims and demonising and inflammatory rhetoric against survivors of trafficking and modern slavery and their legal representatives. Warning that such rhetoric and misleading statements not only imperil protection for victims of trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery, but may also embolden human traffickers, the UN experts cautioned that *"This has a chilling effect on those willing to come forward as victims and those willing to provide legal representation to victims, impeding efforts to identify and protect victims and persons at risk of trafficking and hold perpetrators accountable"*.

Welcoming this important intervention at a critical time for survivors of trafficking and modern slavery and their legal representatives, a coalition of 21 organisations warns that the Government's escalating hostile rhetoric is endangering survivors and their legal representatives.

Like the UN experts, we are deeply concerned by the current political environment in the UK. This includes:

- Significant regression in the legal and policy framework governing identification, support, and safety with further threatened roll-backs ahead
- Unprecedented safeguarding failings and discrimination against unaccompanied children in migration including child trafficking victims
- Escalating use of unevidenced claims and sensationalist language to demonise and discredit victims and justify narrowing of access to anti trafficking identification and support systems
- Disparaging and inflammatory language against legal representatives.

Victims and survivors need protection, support and assistance to recover from the terrible wrongs perpetrated against them and not this continual barrage of state suspicion. We urge the Government to heed the call of the UN experts: to refrain from inflammatory and spurious rhetoric that delegitimises survivors and their lawyers, to end the roll back of rights, and *"Focus instead on strengthening measures to protect these vulnerable populations"*. We urge the Government to recommit to the fight against trafficking and modern slavery: Future legislation must deliver protection, support, and justice to **all** survivors of this grave crime.

A roll-back of legal rights and protections

Only seven years after introducing the Modern Slavery Act, the UK Government has been steadily removing support and protections for victims. The Nationality and Borders Act (2022) created a more complex and hostile system, while the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner post has been left vacant for eight months, leaving a vacuum of oversight. Last week, the Prime Minister announced plans to ["significantly raise the threshold someone has to meet"](#) to be considered a victim of modern slavery. The same day, [changes were made to the Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance](#), without consultation with the anti-trafficking sector, including a reduction in the minimum recovery period. The Government repeatedly conflates trafficking with irregular migration. Its 'hostile environment' on immigration is driving policies, such as the Rwanda scheme, which reduce access to protection and safety and further traumatises victims.

Jo Baker, International Advocacy Manager, Anti-Slavery International:

"It's shocking that three top UN experts have felt compelled to issue public concern about the UK Government's approach to modern slavery so soon after landmark legislation was brought in. We're seeing years of painstaking progress being undone; years of work to make sure that we better prevent these crimes and respond in an effective and humane way. And this isn't going unnoticed outside of the UK, with UN experts, the [OSCE expert on trafficking](#) and various governments expressing formal concern. We welcome the UN's call to get back on track, and strongly urge the Government to take these recommendations seriously."

Discriminatory treatment of unaccompanied children

In July of 2021 the Government announced it would begin accommodating unaccompanied children in hotels outside of the child protection framework on an emergency basis. This is the only group of children

systematically excluded from care by children's services in the UK. What was intended to be an urgent response to the refusal of port local authorities to accept children into their care has now, over a year later, become standard operating practice. Extremely vulnerable children including child victims of modern slavery are left in hotels operated by a Government department without authority to care for children. As a result, over 220 children have gone missing and not been found.

Laura Durán, Head of Policy, Advocacy and Research, ECPAT UK:

"It is incomprehensible that an entire group of vulnerable children have been systematically excluded from the domestic protections offered to all children in need despite their immigration status. We remain alarmed at the number of children going missing, with many likely facing exploitation as well as other forms of significant harm. We welcome the UN's call to end hostility towards survivors, particularly children, and request the Government confirm an immediate exit strategy to end this harmful practice."

Unevidenced claims and sensationalist rhetoric putting survivors at risk

We have seen repeated unevidenced claims by Government officials about alleged 'misuse' of the trafficking and modern slavery identification and protection systems. These allegations bear no relation to reality nor the Government's own data. They have failed to evidence these claims, despite repeated requests, including at a recent [Home Affairs Select Committee](#) session, prompting the Office for Statistics Regulation [to publicly reprimand](#) the Home Office last week. This followed the UN refugee body stepping forward to [condemn legal errors](#) in a report that the Home Secretary herself endorsed. The UN experts said: *"There is little evidence to support these claims and generalising them is dangerous and regressive,"* while noting that requests for corroborating evidence by civil society had gone ignored on multiple occasions.

The inflammatory language used in recent months by some Ministers, MPs and even in an official Home Office press release, is alarming. Victims and survivors are being unjustifiably depicted as violent criminals seeking to abuse the system, rather than people who have themselves been victims of a terrible crime.

Such anti-migrant and anti-survivor rhetoric creates public resentment, hostility, and is endangering the safety of survivors. Survivors with a public profile are experiencing an increase in harassment and hate on social media which is often using the scapegoating phrases by government officials. The attack on the immigration centre in Dover by a suspect [who had a history of sharing far-right, anti-immigrant and racist content](#) should be a warning to us all. It has since been reported that the Home Secretary was [warned by senior government lawyers that her anti-migrant rhetoric could inspire far-right terrorist attacks](#).

A member of Survivor Collective said:

"It doesn't come as a surprise to us that people are now being attacked when this language that was once attributed to politically far right groups is now being normalised and spoken by our MPs and people in positions of power and support. The Government is attacking migrant survivors, driving racial tension, while ignoring the growing number of British survivors. All survivors, whether British or migrant, should be listened to and given the support they need."

It creates an environment in which slavery and trafficking survivors are less inclined to come forward to share their experiences due to fear of further judgement or victim blaming responses. When survivors feel unable to share their experiences or highlight failings in systems and practices that led to their increased vulnerability, it utterly undermines the likelihood that systems in place to support and protect them will be effective.

Marissa Begonia, Director, Voice of Domestic Workers:

"When the rights of migrant domestic workers were removed in 2012 despite being hailed worldwide as the best prevention and protection against slavery and trafficking, we were forced into an NRM system that treated us as victims instead of workers. The government should apologise to survivors and migrant domestic workers for abusing their power in these shameful accusations and work with us to improve the NRM system."

Lawyers at risk and the rule of law undermined

Lawyers who represent trafficking and modern slavery victims are also being targeted with disparaging and hostile language. Slurs such as “*small boat-chasing lawyers*” and “*anti-British activist lawyers*”, the latter dangerously framing legal representatives as enemies of the state, is putting legal professionals at risk.

Victoria Marks, Solicitor and Director, Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit:

“Independent legal advice is essential to help survivors to navigate bureaucratic systems that are overstretched and underfunded. The explosion of aggressive language and policy coming from our government punches down against survivors, and cynically attacks the lawyers who are fighting to improve their lives. Government ministers and MPs should be defending the rule of law as the basis of our democracy. It is unforgivable that they are instead choosing to demonise survivors and their lawyers.”

Time for action: We thank the UN Experts for their support at a very challenging time, and echo their call for renewed efforts to protect victims and survivors of trafficking and modern slavery.

Peter Wieltschnig, Policy & Networks Officer, Focus on Labour Exploitation:

“The UK Government is failing victims and survivors of trafficking and modern slavery. Rather than taking much needed steps to enable victims to access identification, protection and support systems, the Government has decided to demonise victims and narrow access to vital support and protections. We call on the Government to focus on preventing modern slavery through an evidence-based and person-centred approach which keeps people safe through giving them access to rights and options.”

Notes

This public statement is supported by 21 civil society organisations and groups working in the anti-trafficking and anti-slavery sector: AFRUCA Safeguarding Children, After Exploitation, Anti-Slavery International, Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG), Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit (ATLEU), The UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (BASNET), Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), East European Resource Centre (EERC), ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking UK), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), Freedom United, Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF), Hope for Justice (HfJ), Kalayaan, Kanlungan Filipino Consortium, Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), Migrants Organise, Sophie Hayes Foundation, Survivor Collective, Unseen, and the Voice of Domestic Workers.

This coalition includes civil society organisations and groups that are: survivor-led; working on the frontline providing direct assistance to victims and survivors including legal advice and representation, medical support and therapy, independent advocacy, and delivering support services to victims; those focused on research, policy, advocacy, campaigning, and coalition building; and a First Responder.

The full text of the joint press release by the three UN Experts, **Mr. Tomoya Obokata**, [*Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*](#); **Ms. Siobhán Mullally**, [*Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children*](#); **Mr. Felipe González Morales**, [*Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants*](#), is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/uk-un-experts-condemn-attacks-credibility-slavery-and-trafficking-victims>

This statement comes at a time of a growing consensus of concern about the UK's actions and rhetoric on trafficking and modern slavery:

- In October, the Chief Executive of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Elysia McCaffrey, said that ["We don't see people gaming the system. That's not our experience... What we see is vulnerable people who are being exploited by opportunists and criminals"](#)
- In October, the former Victims Commissioner for England and Wales, Dame Vera Baird, and former Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Dame Sara Thornton, [warned that the Government is "totally misguided"](#) to attack the rights of victims
- In November, at least 14 other countries expressed concern during the UK's fourth cycle Universal Periodic Review
- In November, the OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, concluding a five-day visit to the UK, [expressed concern that a stalled anti-slavery agenda risked undermining past achievements.](#)

On Anti-Slavery Day 2022, 22 civil society organisations [put together five key recommendations](#) on how the forthcoming Modern Slavery Bill should strengthen the protection and support for victims of human trafficking and modern slavery rather than strip them back. These recommendations for the Government include:

1. Create an environment where all victims of modern slavery feel safe to report to authorities
2. Develop processes to ensure victims of modern slavery are identified in a timely manner
3. Tailor response for child victims of modern slavery
4. Support victims of modern slavery to access criminal and civil justice
5. Empower victims of modern slavery to recover.