

Asongu, Simplice; Usman, Usman M.; Vo, Xuan Vinh

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## The novel coronavirus (Covid-19): Theoretical and practical perspectives on children, women and sex trafficking

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# A G D I Working Paper

WP/20/039

## **The Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19): Theoretical and practical perspectives on children, women and sex trafficking <sup>1</sup>**

**Simplice A. Asongu**

Institute of Business Research,  
University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City,  
59C Nguyen DinhChieu Street, Ward 6, District 3,  
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

E-mails: [asongusimplice@yahoo.com](mailto:asongusimplice@yahoo.com) / [asongus@afridev.org](mailto:asongus@afridev.org)

**Usman M. Usman**

University of Malaya,  
Department of Development Studies, Faculty of  
Economics and Administration, Kula Lumpur, Malaysia  
E-mail: [umu9933@gmail.com](mailto:umu9933@gmail.com)

**Xuan V. Vo**

Institute of Business Research,  
University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City,  
59C Nguyen DinhChieu Street, Ward 6, District 3,  
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.  
E-mail: [vinhvx@ueh.edu.vn](mailto:vinhvx@ueh.edu.vn)

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## Research Department

**The Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19): Theoretical and practical perspectives on children, women and sex trafficking****Simplice A. Asongu, Usman M. Usman & Xuan V. Vo**

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**Abstract**

The novel Coronavirus has spread internationally to more than two hundred countries and territories. At the same time, human trafficking in girls and women constitutes a global oppression in virtually all nations either as the source, transit, or destination. The feminist investigators have it that women are in destitute situations, which is a substantial trait of exploitation, especially in the light of the present Covid-19 pandemic. There is practically no research on the relevance of the current deadly respiratory disease to human trafficking from the gender dimension. This study fills the identified gap by providing theoretical and practical perspectives on children, women, and sex trafficking. It is a qualitative inquiry that employs process tracing as a primary research instrument. To better understand the present plague and gender situation, secondary data which are utilized consist of articles, books, reports, and integrated statistics. This research is arguably the first attempt that creates data evidence connecting the pandemic to female sexual exploitation. The paper illustrates that a policy is needed that will strengthen the capacity of existing structures in the fight against the underlying trafficking so that these attendant structures efficiently react to the corresponding threats to public health safety as well as contribute towards stopping the trafficking of girls and women during a pandemic.

*Keywords:* Coronavirus, pandemic, human trafficking, girls and women, feminism.

## **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 caused by a novel coronavirus has been declared an epidemic of great global public health concern. Human trafficking is a transnational illicit crime that exploits girls and women. Using feminist gender theory, this inquiry is an attempt to explain the state of these global crises. Due to the severity and magnitude of these problems globally, urgent attention is needed to assist females and develop modalities via research on how victims will be helped to start a new life. The Covid-19 began in the city of Wuhan. The deadly respiratory disease has spread internationally to more than two hundred countries and territories (World Health Organisation, 2020; Price and van Holm, 2020). On the contrary, human trafficking in girls and women constitutes a global oppression in virtually all nations either as a source, transit, or destination. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased human trafficking, partly as a result of female domestic violence in many societies. The feminist investigators have it that women are in destitute situations, which is a substantial trait of exploitation due to the present Covid-19 pandemic.

Through feminist theory literature on gender, this piece of work investigates the impact of Covid-19 and human trafficking on girls and women globally. There are a few works of literature on Covid-19 (del Rio and Malani, 2020; Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020; van Staden, 2020; Li et al., 2020). A number of scholarly writings exist on the current human trafficking perspectives of girls and women (Atkins and House, 2019; Dell et al., 2019; Fraley, Aronowitz, and Stoklosa, 2020; Latzman et al., 2019; Usman, 2014). These reviews point out Covid-19 and human trafficking as two critical global menaces. The underlying academic works have paid attention to Covid-19 as a pandemic and national crisis, whereas, human trafficking is a slavery, a prostitution problem and a public issue. However, these scholarly pieces of literature do not

reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on the human trafficking of girls and women in the context of theoretical viewpoints pertaining to feminism. It implies that there is practically no research on the current Covid-19 as well as human trafficking focusing on the gender dimension. This is the identified gap in the literature the present study attempts to fill.

The rest of the study is structured as follows. The literature review focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic and human trafficking is covered in Section 2, while Section 3 engages the theoretical perspectives. The methodology is provided in Section 4. Section 5 is concerned with the impact of the novel coronavirus on the trafficking of girls and women. Facts about the Covid-19 pandemic and the female gender are engaged in Section 6, while Section 7 focuses on the communication surrounding the epidemic and female exploitation. Section 8 concludes with policy recommendations and future research directions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Covid-19*

The name Covid-19 emanates from the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) through its specialized Global Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses. The first incidents of the disease are linked to the Huanan food market in the city of Wuhan. Apart from seafood, certain animals, namely birds, snakes, marmots, and bats, are reported to have been sold at the Huanan seafood market. The ecological samples collected from the market were confirmed to have returned positive for the new coronavirus, however, the actual animal was not known.

del Rio and Malani (2020) point out that the virus is a new kind of human infection derived from the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) similar to that which originates from chrysanthemum bats. Its incubation period usually is fourteen days, and five or six days as a

median. Although recent and rear cases have shown the incubation is likely about twenty-four days. In the words of Vellingiri et al. (2020), coronavirus is a causative agent of a potentially fatal disease that is of global public health concern. The novel virus is inflicting transnational havoc as a result of limited risk assessment as it relates to the urgency of the circumstances. In comparison to the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SERS), Covid-19 has spread swiftly as a result of globalization. To reduce the number of people afflicted with the pandemic requires people with severe sickness to stay at home and providing a better healthcare system in countries is also fundamental. The study shows that the current upsurge of Covid-19 illustrates a quick response to therapeutics that target the victims is required.

Remuzzi and Remuzzi (2020) establish that the pandemic has reached a disturbing proportion. In this condition, the victims are spread in nearly 200 countries. The paper posits that an international concerted effort is needed to address this public health issue. According to the authors, China was able to contain the pandemic of about 90%. Although the situation in Italy poses a threat to the incapacity of the health system due to the corresponding inability for the country to efficiently control the virus, Italy's statistics show that around 11% of the victims require intensive care treatment. Due to the rise in the pandemic, the authors call on the government especially the political leaders as a matter of immediate concern to provide funds, ventilators, as well as intensive care facilities. Such resources will be an attempt to control and minimize the spread of the Covid-19. Remuzzi and Remuzzi (2020) conclude that a collaborative partnership is needed globally to tame the unprecedented challenges caused by the virus. States have suffered from the tragedy of the disease, so there is a need to share experience and knowledge; an aggressive measure must be taken. Li et al. (2020) find that the novel coronavirus

is a threat to global public health as there is no healing drug or vaccine to cure the deadly disease. According to the authors, thorough research is required to recognize a possible antidote contributing to the treatment of the victims and the prevention of the pandemic.

## *2.2. Human trafficking*

Fouladvand and Ward (2019) submit that the government has failed to ameliorate susceptibility but is vigorously using the vulnerability to exploit its subjects. Fouladvand and Ward (2019) conclude that citizens become vulnerable due to the absence of provisions, especially their social needs. The authors' primary concern is for a government to address the susceptible forces of unemployment and joblessness that are driving females into human trafficking. Sharapov (2019) confirms the limited data on human trafficking, particularly on the awareness and comprehension of the scourge by the populace. The central point that arises out of the review is that there is a need to increase the level of public awareness and comprehension of trafficking in humans. John (2019) points out that poverty is a global phenomenon. He argues that Rwanda is a nation that is part of the human trafficking problem. The quantitative findings prove a secure connection between poverty and trafficking in women and children. His study confirms that victims are the rural poor who are mainly street kids and orphans. The author calls on the Rwandan government to address the plight of the vulnerable.

Acharya (2019) submits that human trafficking is a global health problem. The Mexican empirical study finds severe torture and abuse on the victims. The research reports victims of various immediate and long-term health disabilities. The author draws the attention of the government as a matter of urgency to develop a national program in an attempt to address the sexual trafficking of women and children. Uduji, Okolo-Obasi, and Asongu (2019) provide a thorough examination of the effect of transnational corporations in the Niger Delta region in

Nigeria on combating the trafficking in persons. The significant findings show friends and family members play a crucial part in exploiting victims. The study's empirical result proves community and religious leaders are sacrosanct to eliminate human traffickers and human rights violators. Human trafficking, according to Latzman et al. (2019), doubles as a rising social justice issue and public health concern amongst youth. The significant literature argues that the vast majority of the exploitation of minors is centred on sex trafficking and coerced labour. According to the attendant research, the interpretive issue centres on the detrimental psychological and physical health consequences on the female, especially the youth that is faced with traumatic stress, depression, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Fraley, Aronowitz, and Stoklosa (2020) look extensively at human trafficking as human rights and health issues. The Columbian study finds children below the age of eighteen as victims. The authors establish that the trafficking scenario poses national and global health threats. It also serves as a fundamental violation of the civic and civil rights of the minors. Fraley, Aronowitz, and Stoklosa (2020) conclude that females are targeted via fraud, coercion, places in which children congregate as well as through friends who are the recruiters. Dell et al. (2019), in their systematic review, postulate that human trafficking survivors' intervention and impactful financial assistance is direly missing. According to the United States inquiry, numerous policies have been enacted to deal with human trafficking internally and internationally. The review calls on the government as a matter of necessity to provide food, shelter, and clothing for the victim-survivors. In line with the submission of Dell et al. (2019) on the severity and magnitude of the problem globally, urgent attention is needed to assist survivors. The findings also call for advanced research on how victims will be helped to start a new life.



### **3. Theoretical Views**

Pateman's (2018) feminist view is that in almost all societies males dominate the females and 'the sex contract' means the subordination of females in several cultural and social settings, paving the way for continuous male power. Such instances include oppressing girls' education, unwanted births, and barriers that prevent women from earning a wage or salary. Feminists' activists were the first to expound on the issue, and it is in this field that the debate around what constitutes female sex trafficking is extensively explained. According to Mackay (2015), women everywhere around the globe are economical, socially, politically, culturally, and legitimately not favoured contrasted with men. This inadequacy or subservience capacities are at various levels in familial, communal, local, national, regional, and international spheres. The Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW), considers sex exploitation and slavery as trafficking in women and prostitution. They expel the monetary approach talked about as it leaves the power dimension unchallenged. The reason for trafficking is the persistent desire for sex, and the best way to end sexual exploitation is to stop female abuses entirely. Feminist intellectuals writing on gender, such as Delicado-Moratalla (2018) and Raymond (2013) see sex trafficking as an infringement of the human rights of women. They have battled for the annulment of prostitution to be incorporated into national and international laws on human trafficking. For CATW, trafficking contains all types of recruitment and transportation for prostitution, regardless of whether force or deception occurred or was applied. For Hughes (2005), trafficking is an issue of demand and supply with the sex business in which men initiate the demand, whereas the criminals who are the traffickers recruit the supply (i.e. women). Victims are, for the most part, women who are trafficked for exploitation in the sex industry. No woman would ever eagerly be a prostitute. Therefore, any woman who moves with or without consent into prostitution

(regardless of whether forced or not) is a trafficking person (Delicado-Moratalla, 2018). The answer for Hughes (2005) is to make prostitution illicit, as the non-appearance of a legitimate sex trade translates to mean that there would be less demand.

Thusi (2018), in her radical feminist critique, pointed out that to criminalize some part of sex work is a severe problem, especially the demand aspect of it. The empirical study is carried out in South Africa. Thusi (2018) proves that the justice system, the supremacy of the white people, and the patriarchy are the main forces limiting the sex workers' voices. The ethnographic inquiry significantly sees oppressive practices meted out to sex workers. Sanders, Connelly, and King (2016) in their distinction between prostitution and sex work, opine that the men who buy sex aggravate prostitution. According to the writers, what holds or sustains the prostitution market is the persistent demand of sex from men. The authors also find that females in prostitution work have created clients or consumers, and this is done mainly via legislation that promotes women's sex work.

#### **4. Methodology**

The study employs process tracing as a fundamental instrument in the qualitative paradigm. This is in an attempt to establish whether the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced and caused changes in the human trafficking tendency of girls and women (Beach, 2017). This paper traces the Covid-19 process, and it strengthens the evidence connecting the pandemic to females' sexual exploitation. To better understand the current gender situation, secondary data are utilized; particularly, articles, books, official sites, and statistics are integrated. The information gathered from these sources has critically shed light on the role of the global pandemic with regards to

female human trafficking. This distinct article tries to substantiate from the pieces of literature, whether the plague exacerbates female sexual oppression.

## **5. The Novel Coronavirus impact on Girls and Women Trafficking**

The name Covid-19 emanates from the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) through its specialized Global Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses. In December 2019, China reported the first case of the coronavirus. The outbreak of the Covid-19 was sighted in the city of Wuhan. The deadly respiratory disease has spread internationally. Though disease outbreaks are systemic in scope, they are still local in terms of underlying impact. This indicates that the grassroots government may turn to the federal government for assistance and support in many specific emergencies. In this Covid-19 communicable disease, all government departments can be affected by the incident that triggers multiple demands for assistance and services. The present pandemic challenges government services that needed to be addressed. The ongoing pandemic tasks who the stakeholders are, and what their responsibilities will be. That is to say, the hospital personnel, officials from the emergency management agency, emergency workers, officials from the health department, security outfits, border and immigration officers, and policymakers are mostly expected to play an important role in the crisis.

van Staden (2020) mentions that the global trend of generating revenue from the biodiversity in the name of pestering a country's development has set a favourable environment for the Covid-19 pandemic as well as a fertile ground for the flourishing of human trafficking exploitation. This has also brought attention to the human abuse of biodiversity as collective resources, which force humans and animal interactions that have made the disease to be transmitted among humans. The culprit is namely, the market for the wild animals in Hubei,

which is a province in China where the first identified case of the epidemic became visible. According to van Staden (2020), the government in China has declared an absolute ban on wildlife trade and its consumption as food. Wildlife conservation agencies around the world have welcomed this change, but others have pointed out that similar restrictions were immediately lifted following the initial 2003 SERS crisis.

In their argument, Kulig and Butler (2019) and Sohrabiet al. (2020) posit that the tendency of girls and women being trafficked for sex will increase as a result of the global plague. According to the narrative, thousands of persons will be affected by the virus. This is because the female victims are, *inter alia*: among the neediest, involved in hazardous labour, marginalized, and always struggling to make a living. From the perspective of Sarkar (2020), due to the closure of transnational borders, traffickers have moved their operations into online sex trafficking. This tendency has made the trafficking of girls and women one of the most fast-growing negative criminal externalities directly resulting from the underlying global pandemic. This implies that the internet and other dynamics of information and communication technology are facilitating the depth and operations of criminal elements of society, especially as it pertains to leveraging on illegal opportunities for sex trafficking in times of Covid-19. The current available technological resources such as chatrooms, advertisement sites, social media, adult sites, and the dark web have paved the way for the interactions among traffickers. This also increases the target of females in sex trafficking as well as the potential to spread the novel coronavirus.

According to Keyhan (2020), with the fast rate at which the Covid-19 virus is being transmitted owing to its inherent contagiousness nature, an American sex trafficker in a matter of a short spell of time or period will pass on the virus to a thousand people. The author is of the view that instability at home and the absence of work are some of the factors that push females

into selling sex and sex traffickers into exploiting them further. The author has recommended some form of monetary compensation to females involved in the trade as a means of stopping the spread of the killer disease. Felbab-Brown (2020) points out that Covid-19 has substantially contributed to the flourish of illegal economies and crimes globally. According to the author, some of the underlying crimes are apparent from sex trafficking in women, whereas the majority constitute a longer-term emergence of unlawful universal crimes. Covid-19 has left scores devastated in debt, impoverished, and unemployed especially the females. As a result of the plague, there is a significant rise in online prostitution. In this situation, it is the women that will be enslaved, coerced, trapped, and exploited by notorious human traffickers.

The novel coronavirus depicts an imminent danger through violence, fraud, and the crime of human trafficking. Poor families in many poor countries such as India, Pakistan, Kenya, and Uganda are finding it difficult to follow the prescription of social distancing as a means to curtailing the spread of the virus. In the slums of the attendant countries, crimes like sex trafficking, looting, robbery, and violence against migrants and minorities would increase as the destitute individuals struggle to find what to eat in order to survive. However, Feminist intellectuals from the CATW (2020) mentions are of the position that a change in tendency has not characterized sex trafficking despite the deadly Coronavirus pandemic. That is to say, the sexual abuse of females continues and remains alarming. At the same time, feminist academics point out that the lives of females are more at risk with the advent of the pandemic because, women are daily sexually abused and exploited by the pimps, traffickers, and buyers of sex. The majority of scholars discussed in this section are consistent on the position that continuous awareness-raising and policy amendments towards assisting female victims are critical to ending trafficking and preventing the exploitation of women globally. According to the feminist

standpoint, the most feasible policy option to end female sex trafficking is to adopt and implement stringent measures against the scourge.

## **6.The Facts: Covid-19 and Females**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020) confirms that Covid-19 has worsened the difficulties associated with paid domestic work, particularly as it pertains to girls and women. Healthcare services are spread in an attempt to control the disease. Treatment roles are also transferred to girls and women who are typically able to care for sick relatives and older people. School closures further intensify the difficulty of unpaid domestic work on girls and women who have been bearing the added workload linked to childcare. Although women makeup 70% of the health and social workers worldwide and are at the front-line in combating the Covid-19 pandemic, an average pay gap between men and women of about 28% is still apparent in the health industry; a tendency which could be worsened in moments of crisis. Female health professionals have drawn attention beyond personal protective devices to their individual needs.

In contrast, findings from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Control (UNODC, 2020) show that globally about 80% of victims in human trafficking victims are girls and women who are exploited in the sex trade. Moore (2018) and Qiu, Zhang and Liu (2019) find that most of the victims of human trafficking are females, and up to 50% are children, signifying a cleargender dimension to the mayhem. At the same time, the majority of the victims that constitute up to 70% are mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation, and a lot are women and children as young as 15 years old. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report on trafficking for sex exploitation states traffickers move victims across continents, and

79% of the victims are mostly girls and women. Trafficking for forced labour is just 18% of victims. Surprisingly, the report cites that while human trafficking is becoming more severe, it is difficult to show evidence due to the absence of data (UNODC, 2020). The underlying increasing tendency can be traceable to the non-implementation of the protection, prevention, and prosecution and weak policies to address human trafficking from countries. Based on the UNODC 2018 report, sex trafficking remains an alarming and a disturbing human abuse which is more concerning than labour trafficking. The UNODC uncovers that much of the female exploitation in prostitution is done transnationally. The report states that domesticating the UN Palermo protocol through policy legislation has been accepted by almost all countries (Cho, 2015; UNODC, 2020). But most importantly, the commitment and capacity of the governments to implement the attendant policies of eliminating sex trafficking is still missing.

## **7. Communication: The Pandemic and Female Exploitation**

The pandemic has proved that it is essential that governments across the globe consider and prepare for vital cross-country communication and information flow. At this time of emergency in the novel virus, as well as the need to cater for the trafficked girls and women, important communication about the disease and exploitation is highly required (Sheppard and Thomas, 2020). The issue calls for a comprehensive way of communications to the public and stakeholders in the fight against the plague and human trafficking. This is in a strategic response to the pandemic as information is a vital component. Also, communication is valuable across countries' governments, as well as for the international police and the international office on migration for the necessary and professional action to take care of females' human trafficking exploitation. As such, some factors are worth considering when designing a communication plan

(Liang, 2020). First, individuals need to be informed during the pandemic, particularly the vulnerable females and the public, along with the vital medical and health stakeholders. Undoubtedly, developing a comprehensive and well-trusted communications strategy is essential to the responsiveness in the fight against female traffickers during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Information is usually intended with a focus on knowing the females' migration, home safety status, and health condition. These involve guaranteeing that information directory and records of specific female activities and reportage remain up to date. In this context, archived information that is accessible can be analyzed for public health and policy perspectives. That also means key authorities are qualified as trustworthy spokespersons for public and private communication of critical information. This will also ensure that communities and vulnerable females are provided with rich information.

It is especially important to inform the females about the measures they are required to take to protect themselves and their families during a pandemic. Social workers and authorities should maintain the task of providing the females with the adequate information needed to make decisions based on how to respond in an emergency or domestic violence. Most importantly, there is a need to ensure coordinated information from all responsible organizations to the degree that women do not panic, especially when confronted with uncertainty as to how to deal with unforeseen circumstances arising from the pandemic. The department of health, in collaboration with the anti-trafficking organization in a country, has to embark on mass outreach programs to reach females at-risk. Public service announcements by radio, print media, television, and social media have proved to be the most effective method for educating people about the consequences of the novel coronavirus and its impact on girls and women (Liang, 2020; Sheppard and Thomas, 2020). Importantly, some countries have pursued more innovative strategies using



communication technology, and a computerized response with the locations, times, and dates of the victims or neighbourhood residents recorded for government and social workers' needs and to provide the females affected with timely services in the community during the plague.

## **8. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The novel coronavirus outbreak has created devastating and catastrophic outcomes throughout the world. Over the past weeks, measures taken across the globe to fight the global pandemic have substantially inhibited individual liberties and the movements of people. However, mitigation strategies from countries in the light of growing evidence of female sex trafficking require cross-country conventional policies and partnerships. The underlying should be informed by comprehensive and rigorous research, which has been an objective of the present study. Over the past months, the female population has suffered from the outcome of the novel coronavirus. As a result, sex trafficking in girls and women has increased with the spread of the plague. Women at home are suffering from domestic violence, and the lockdown has increased the probability and propensity of female exploitation in various forms, including gender sexual exploitation and human trafficking. In the light of analytical and documented insights from this study, a policy is needed that will strengthen the capacity of existing structures in the fight against the underlying trafficking so that these attendant structures efficiently react to the corresponding threats to public health safety as well as contribute towards stopping the trafficking of girls and women during a pandemic

Among the most relevant preparatory measures is the policy related to preparing and reacting to isolation and social distancing in an epidemic as well as ensuring homes are free from gender violence during the lockdown. Much consideration should be centred on the areas of

communication, quarantine, and volunteering. Although supportive data are required on the global scale on anti-trafficking activities during the pandemic, more research is necessary to meet the needs of the female gender to facilitate quick and efficient responses from the relevant structures designed to fight human trafficking and sexual exploitation. This article has informed both scholars and policymakers on the imperative of timely, vital, and consistent policies tailored towards protecting females in times of plagues such as the novel coronavirus. The significance of suggested policies and knowledge gained is of practical relevance in addressing some of the concerns pertaining to female trafficking during the pandemic. By continuously improving policies during the current epidemic, societies would be more prepared in defending women against abuse and trafficking in future pandemic outbreaks.

The study leaves room for future research, especially as it pertains to leveraging on the relevant data for quantitative analysis of the underlying problem statements. Accordingly, while owing to data availability constraints, the framework of the present study cannot be engaged with quantitative data, it would be worthwhile for future research to engage more quantitative studies as the relevant quantitative data become available with the unfolding of time.

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