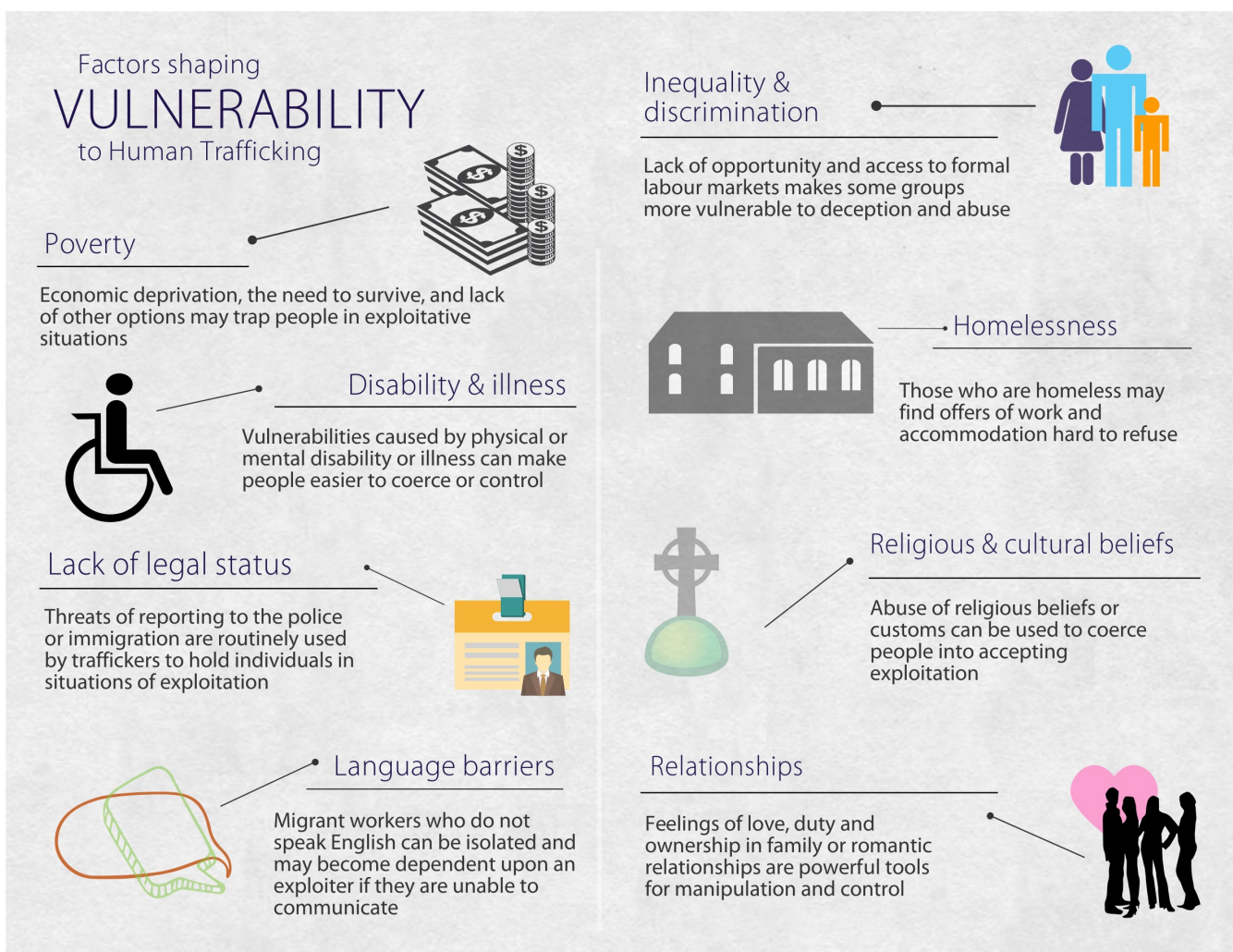


Vulnerability to human trafficking for labour exploitation

“In the context of trafficking, “vulnerability” is typically used to refer to those inherent, environmental or contextual factors that increase the susceptibility of an individual or group to being trafficked.”¹

Factors rendering particular individuals and communities vulnerable to trafficking are varied and complex. They can be pre-existing factors, such as an illness, gender or poverty, or created by the exploiter including employment status, isolation or dependency². These factors, which limit an individual's ability to make choices and to access their rights, render them vulnerable to being exploited as they may have no perceived or actual alternative when presented with an offer of work, or when faced with threats, coercion, or violence. In other words, vulnerability to trafficking can be understood to be “any state of hardship in which a human being is impelled to accept being exploited.”³

What factors shape vulnerability to trafficking?



¹ UNODC Issue Paper *Abuse of a position of vulnerability and other “means” within the definition of trafficking in persons* New York: United Nations, 2013 p.13

² For more on this see *ibid*, p.3

³ *European Trafficking Convention, Explanatory Report*, para. 83. Available at https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/trafficking/Docs/Convntn/CETS197_en.asp

Poverty

Economic deprivation increases vulnerability to trafficking because the need to survive and provide for one's family can drive individuals to accept offers of work which may appear at first to be legitimate but turn out to be extremely exploitative. The lack of any alternative options causes people to take the risk of being trafficked rather than starve or leave their families in destitution, and many stay in situations of exploitation either because they are unable to escape or because they fear that they will not be able to find any other work.

Inequality & discrimination

The lack of equal opportunities for women, for example, or for migrants or members of certain minority groups means that these groups may have fewer rights and fewer options and are therefore more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Stigma and social isolation mean that many are excluded from legitimate labour markets and must seek alternatives. Some individuals that are marginalised, despite having the same rights as others, might believe that they are not entitled to those same rights or protections.

Lack of legal/immigration status

Those with insecure or no legal status are often fearful of authorities and are therefore less likely to report abuse. Threats of reporting to the police or immigration are routinely used by traffickers to hold individuals in situations of exploitation. Even after exiting situations of exploitation, many are reluctant to have contact with police or to report what has happened for fear of being arrested or deported.

Homelessness/destitution

Those who are homeless or destitute are often targeted by traffickers as they may be attracted by the promise of work and accommodation. Mental health issues and substance misuse may also increase vulnerability among the homeless as they can make individuals easier to coerce or control.

Illness & disability

Physical or mental illness and disability can increase vulnerability to exploitation as those affected may be more dependent upon others, have reduced understanding or capacity to make judgements, or be more physically vulnerable to abuse.

Religious & cultural beliefs

Religious and cultural beliefs and practices may influence the way individuals perceive their situation, to the extent that some may feel their exploitation is deserved or determined by factors beyond their control. For example, voodoo or juju practices have been used to exercise control over individuals who believe that spiritual 'oaths' they have taken bind them into situations they may never leave for fear of punishment by god to them or their families. Exploitation within religious or cultural communities may also occur when senior group members use authority and the fear of exclusion to control individuals.

Emotional/romantic relationships

Romantic and family relationships may be used to exert pressure and influence over individuals/dependents who may feel they must submit to the will of a partner or family member out of duty, love or a sense of ownership. Additionally, the responsibility of providing for family members is often a driving factor in accepting exploitative working situations when it appears that there is no alternative.

Language barriers

Migrant workers who do not speak English are often isolated and may become dependent upon an exploiter as they are unable to communicate, to ask for help, report abuse or to seek other employment in order to survive.

What factors shape vulnerability to labour exploitation?

In addition to the broader drivers of vulnerability to trafficking outlined above, there are several factors specific to the experiences of workers within labour situations which may also increase vulnerability to exploitation.

Long employment chains

Subcontracting labour can create long employment chains, wherein workers do not know by whom they are employed, what their employment status is or to whom they can complain if they are being exploited. This also creates deniability whereby businesses are either unaware that abuses are occurring in their supply chains or deny involvement if abuses occur.

Bogus self-employment

False self-employment is used by employers and contractors to avoid granting their workers basic employment rights such as holiday and sick pay. Workers without these rights are more vulnerable to exploitation as they may be more dependent on insecure hours or pay, be unable to take holiday or time off when ill, and feel they have no recourse to remedy for abusive or exploitative working arrangements.

Lack of knowledge of rights

Workers are often disempowered when they do not know their rights. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable in this regard as they may believe that they are not entitled to the same rights as other workers. This perception is often reinforced and abused by exploitative employers.

Lack of worker organisation

Workers at the end of long supply chains or in unregulated or illegitimate labour sectors can be hard for workers' organisations and unions to reach. When workers are unable to organise they may not be aware of their rights or may feel that they are powerless to challenge abuse and exploitation.

Lack of access to rights

Legal processes to access remedies for labour abuses & exploitation can be complex and expensive, meaning that most people are unable to claim money they have not been paid, access compensation or bring their exploiters to justice. Employers are rarely made to pay for exploitative practices, and so they are able to act with impunity.