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Experiences of Families Separated across Borders Following Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Rebecca Treadaway

Abstract

Within the United Kingdom's system for identifying survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, survivors coming from overseas account for nearly 75%. This data indicates that many survivors are separated from family in the process of trafficking, yet little is known about the impact this separation has on them and their families. This article addresses this gap by analysing case data and twelve interviews with anti-slavery practitioners. The findings demonstrate that separation from family can hamper survivors' recovery, due to the distress caused by the separation and an ongoing need for survivors to provide for family overseas. The process of family reunification is unnecessarily lengthy and complex, and survivors receive limited support for this aspect of recovery. The impact of separation on families is significant, and a 'family-oriented' approach to survivor support should be developed alongside measures to address the structural issues that create extended periods of separation and precarity for migrants.

Keywords: modern slavery, human trafficking, transnational families, family reunion

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Introduction

In 2023, 17,004 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM), with nearly 75% of those coming from overseas.[1] These survivors often left behind family members when they came to the UK, with their experiences of modern slavery causing prolonged separation from family, which can cause significant distress for them. The experiences of families separated across borders following modern slavery is largely absent from literature and survivor support policies in the UK. The Salvation Army's international Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery (ATMS) team in the UK has been responding to this gap in service provision through its Beyond Programme. The Beyond Programme aims to use the Salvation Army's presence in 134 countries and its global anti-trafficking structure to connect survivors and their families with information and support where needs go beyond borders. The service focuses on supported return and reintegration, and on connecting separated family members to support overseas.

This article explores the impact of family separation following modern slavery. It argues that the period of separation increases risks to survivors and their families overseas, and that the processes to reunify them are complex and lengthy. It concludes that a family lens should be incorporated into support services, that protocols to protect separated family overseas should be developed, and that the complexity, costs, and delays of routes to family reunification should be reduced.

Transnational Family Separation in Literature and Policy

Transnational family separation is rarely the focus of modern slavery research. A study by Juabsamai and Taylor explores family reunification following the trafficking of one male survivor in the USA,[2] and many studies explore family reunification after survivors are returned to their home countries.[3] Research has

1 Home Office, 'Modern Slavery: NRM and Duty to Notify Statistics, End of Year Summary 2023', GOV.UK, 7 March 2024.

2 K Juabsamai and I Taylor, 'Family Separation, Reunification, and Intergenerational Trauma in the Aftermath of Human Trafficking in the United States', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 123–138, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218108.

3 A Brunovskis and R Surtees 'Coming Home: Challenges in Family Reintegration for Trafficked Women', *Qualitative Social Work*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2012, pp. 454–472, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325011435257; L A McCarthy, 'Life after Trafficking in Azerbaijan: Reintegration Experiences of Survivors', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 105–122, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218107; R Surtees, 'At Home: Family Reintegration of Trafficked Indonesian Men', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 70–87, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218105.

also explored the parental needs of survivors and the impact of modern slavery on their children, but the primary focus remains on children residing with the parent and less on the separation period itself.[4] Similarly, within the UK, key resources for practitioners on survivor support do not focus on the separation of family members. For example, the Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards contain only one reference to survivors' families, stating that survivors may be 'cut off from a family network'.[5] Further, the Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (MSCOS), which was developed to improve the practice, assessment, and evaluation of the recovery, makes no reference to family relationships in the eight core outcomes it identifies as requisites for the recovery, well-being, and integration of adult survivors.[6]

While there is little research on the separation of families with experiences of modern slavery, one area of relevant research which is further developed can be found in the concepts of 'transnationalism'[7] and 'transnational families' within labour migration research and refugee studies. Parreñas defines transnational families as 'households with core members living in at least two nation states'[8] which encompasses a range of contexts. This research highlights that some families experience positive outcomes from transnational separation, such as increased school attendance in children who receive funds for school fees from a parent working overseas.[9] Despite these potential benefits, the experience

4 V Brotherton, *Time to Deliver: Considering Pregnancy and Parenthood in the UK's Response to Human Trafficking*, The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2016; N Bush-Armendariz, M Nsonwu, and L Heffron, 'Human Trafficking Victims and Their Children: Assessing Needs, Vulnerabilities, Strengths and Survivorship', *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2011, pp. 1–19; N Chazal, K Raby, and E Spasovska, '"I'm All About My Child": Supporting Modern Slavery Survivors as Parents', *Journal of Human Trafficking,* 2023, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2023.2279875; Hestia, *Underground Lives: Forgotten Children, the Intergenerational Impact of Modern Slavery*, Hestia, 2021, p. 12; K Hutchison, Olly, and B Mullan-Feroze, *One Day at a Time; A Report on the Recovery Needs Assessment by Those Experiencing it on a Daily Basis*, Anti-Slavery International, 2022.

5 K Roberts, *The Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards*, Human Trafficking Foundation, 2018, p. 96.

6 'The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set', retrieved 3 June 2024, https://www.mscos.co.uk/core-outcomes.html.

7 S Vertovec, *Transnationalism,* Routledge, Oxon, 2009.

8 R S Parreñas, 'Mothering from a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2011, pp. 361–390, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178765.

9 G Valtolina and C Colombo, 'Psychological Well-being, Family Relations, and Developmental Issues of Children Left Behind', *Psychological Reports*, vol. 111, no. 3, 2012, pp. 905–28, https://doi.org/10.2466/21.10.17.pr0.111.6.905-928; D Yang 'International Migration, Remittances and Household Investment: Evidence from

of separation can involve many negative aspects for children. Children with a parent overseas often experience feelings of abandonment, rejection, distress, anger, and perceived lack of care,[10] the long-lasting effects of which can include depression, anxiety, and insomnia.[11] Parents often migrate to provide opportunities for their families,[12] and research emphasises that children associate money, or remittances, sent from a parent's earnings overseas with love,[13] with children feeling that separation is more justified when they receive money.[14] This mitigation of the negative effects of separation can be particularly difficult for survivors of modern slavery who may be unable to send remittances due to their situations of exploitation. Migrants can consequently experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and

Philippine Migrants' Exchange Rate Shocks', *Economic Journal of Royal Economic Society*, vol. 118, 2006, pp. 591–630, https://doi.org/10.3386/w12325; R S Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*, Manilla University Press, Manilla, 2006.

10 R Marsden and C Harris, *"We started life again": Integration Experiences of Refugee Families Reuniting in Glasgow*, British Red Cross, 2015; I Abdirashid, '"I Live in Agony": The Everyday Insecurity of Rejected Somali Asylum-seekers in Finland', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, vol. 24, 2023, pp. 1917–1937, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-023-01048-2; J R Delagado *et al.*, 'Community-based Trauma-informed Care Following Immigrant Family Reunification: A Narrative Review', *Academic Paediatrics*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2021, pp. 600–604, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.02.005.

11 C Rousseau *et al.*, 'Remaking Family Life: Strategies for Re-establishing Continuity among Congolese Refugees during the Family Reunification Process', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 59, issue 5, 2004, pp. 1095–1108, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.12.011; A Nickerson *et al.*, 'The Impact of Fear for Family on Mental Health in a Resettled Iraqi Refugee Community', *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, vol. 44, issue 4, 2010, pp. 229–235, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2009.08.006; B Wilmsen, 'Family Separation and the Impacts on Refugee Settlement in Australia', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 48, issue 2, 2013, pp. 241–262, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2013.tb00280.x.

12 A Fresnoza-Flot, 'Migration Status and Transnational Mothering: The Case of Filipino Migrants in France', *Global Networks*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2009, pp. 252–270, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00253.x; H Lutz and E Palenga-Mollenbeck, 'Care Workers, Care Drain, and Care Chains: Reflections on Care, Migration, and Citizenship', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2012, pp. 15–37, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr026; Parreñas, 2001; E Zontini, *Transnational Families, Migration and Gender: Moroccan and Filipino Women in Bologna and Barcelona*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2010.

13 L Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders,* Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2014; Juabsamai and Taylor; Fresnoza-Flot; S Horton, 'A Mother's Heart is Weighed Down with Stones: A Phenomenological Approach to the Experience of Transnational Motherhood', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, vol. 33, 2009, pp. 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-008-9117-z.

14 Abrego.

powerlessness,[15] and an inability to provide financially can contribute to families' perceptions of survivors as 'failed' migrants.[16] Relationships can become further strained when migrants detach from family in an attempt to hide the reality of life in the new country.[17]

The literature on transnational families emphasises the ways in which bureaucratic practices control mobility,[18] and how immigration processes, such as reunification policies, can impact not just survivors but whole families. Home Office data shows that between January 2015 and March 2023, the refugee family reunification process was the third most accessed legal humanitarian route to the UK, after the Ukraine scheme visa and the British National Overseas Hong Kong visa, with over 46,215 family reunification visas granted.[19] This is relevant for some survivors of modern slavery, as Home Office data from January to September 2022 shows that 7% of those claiming asylum were referred into the NRM.[20] This means that some survivors may be eligible to apply for the family reunification visa upon a grant of protection, such as refugee status.

The Migration Integration Policy Index rates the degree of difficulty for family reunifications amongst 38 countries worldwide, and the UK ranks second from the bottom.[21] The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration argued that the performance in family reunions has 'deteriorated', with long delays and

15 Parreñas, 2001; J White and L Hendry, *Family Reunion for Refugees in the UK: Understanding Support Needs*, British Red Cross, 2011; Marsden and Harris; C Rousseau, A Mekki-Berrada and S Moreau, 'Trauma and Extended Separation from Family among Latin American and African Refugees in Montreal', *Psychiatry*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2001, pp. 40–59, https://doi.org/10.1521/psyc.64.1.40.18238.

16 Juabsamai and Taylor; Surtees; C Murphy *et al.*, *Cultural Influences and Cultural Competency in the Prevention and Protection of Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: Insights from the UK and Albania*, St. Mary's University, 2024.

17 L Hoang and B Yeoh, 'Sustaining Families across Transnational Spaces: Vietnamese Migrant Parents and Their Left-Behind Children', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 36, issue 3, 2012, pp. 307–325, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.711810.

18 L Näre, 'Family Lives on Hold: Bureaucratic Bordering in Male Refugees' Struggle for Transnational Care', *Journal of Family Research*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2020, pp. 435–454, https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-353.

19 Home Office, 'How Many People Do We Grant Protection To?', GOV.UK, 2023.

20 Home Office, 'Annex: Analysis of Modern Slavery NRM Referrals From Asylum, Small Boats and Detention Cohorts', GOV.UK, 2023.

21 'Migrant Integration Policy Index', retrieved 3 June 2024, https://mipex.eu/family-reunion.

an inadequate response to the complexity and number of ongoing applications.[22] The issues surrounding the reunification process in the UK are well documented by the refugee sector and include the restrictive definition of 'the family', the ineligibility of children to sponsor parents within the immigration rules, the consequences of delays in the asylum process, the removal of legal aid in 2012, and the heavy financial costs to applicants.[23] Less explored is the intersection of these processes with survivors of modern slavery.

Research from labour migration and refugee studies highlights the emotional toll on families during separation, feelings which can be exacerbated by the immigration processes described above. Whilst these themes may be relevant to survivors of modern slavery, there is a gap in current research and a need to focus specifically on this issue in relation to adult survivors of modern slavery in the UK and their families overseas. It is this gap in the research that this article seeks to address.

Methodology

This research was undertaken through the Salvation Army in the United Kingdom and Ireland (UKI) territory by the coordinator of the Salvation Army's Beyond Programme and using data from the Beyond Programme. The Salvation Army is a global church, which offers charitable services. Its Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery (ATMS) department in the UK supported over 10,000 survivors in 2023[24] through its partners, delivering services through the government-funded Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC). The Beyond Programme works outside of the MSVCC and uses the Salvation Army's extensive global networks to connect survivors and their family members with overseas organisations, services, helplines, and the local Salvation Army church where appropriate. It focuses on the supported return and reintegration of survivors, and locating in-country support for separated family members overseas.

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22 D Neal, 'A Reinspection of Family Reunion Applications September–October 2022', Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-reinspection-of-family-reunion-applications-september-october-2022.

23 Marsden and Harris; A Beesley *et al.*, *Together at Last: Supporting Refugee Families Who Reunite in the UK*, The British Red Cross, 2022; Safe Passage and the Refugee Council, *Families Belong Together: Fixing the UK's Broken Family Reunion System*, 2024, p. 5; S Borelli *et al.*, *Refugee Family Reunification in the UK: Challenges and Prospects*, University of Bedfordshire, 2021; S Holden, *Cuts That Cost: The Impact of Legal Aid Cuts on Refugee Family Reunion*, The British Red Cross, 2020.

24 The Salvation Army, *Modern Slavery Report*, The Salvation Army, 2023, p. 4.

The researcher and author of this article is the coordinator of the Beyond Programme, and may, accordingly, be termed a 'pracademic', which Powell *et al.* describe as a single person who is engaged as both practitioner and researcher.[25] This straddling of both worlds can be seen as a subjective position in terms of the pre-existing value placed on the service being provided and the subject matter. The researcher, however, takes a transformative worldview which Mertens describes as consciously focussing on 'addressing inequities and providing a platform for transformative change'.[26] The involvement of direct service providers in research is considered good practice, as it can bridge the gap between the world of academic research and service provision. Furthermore, the ability to draw from experience in support services and an academic evidence base allows the researcher to understand both worlds to bring about impactful change.

To provide depth and context to this quantitative data, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted between April 2022 and April 2024 with practitioners working with survivors of modern slavery. Practitioners were selected for the research using convenience and snowball sampling. The researcher started by identifying participants from those who were known to have experience of working on family reunification cases, or those who had made referrals into the Beyond Programme and then asked them to suggest others who fit the criteria. This method allowed the researcher to swiftly expand the number of participants for the study, in a group of individuals who may otherwise be difficult to access.[27]

A range of practitioners were purposively selected to ensure a diversity of scenarios and perspectives. Practitioners were selected from three organisations based in different regions in England. They include three caseworkers who provide free support to refugees applying for family reunifications; two caseworkers who provide long-term support to adult survivors of modern slavery when government-funded support ends; and seven support workers from organisations that provide support to adult survivors of modern slavery through the MSVCC. Interviews were conducted virtually, with transcriptions of the interviews generated for analysis. The focus of the interviews was on respondents' experiences of working with survivors of modern slavery who are separated from family overseas or going through the family reunification process.

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25 E Powell, G Winfield, A M Schatteman, and K Trusty, 'Collaboration Between Practitioners and Academics: Defining the Pracademic Experience', *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2018, pp. 62–79, https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2018-V8-I1-8295.

26 D M Mertens, 'Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 20, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563.

27 S J Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2012.

The interview data was analysed thematically using a grounded theory approach.[28] The researcher used thematic analysis as a means to 'interpret patterns of meaning' from the data[29] and draw broad themes.[30] The interview data was firstly organised into broad categories focussing on three key areas: the impact of separation from their families on survivors in the UK; the impact on the separated families overseas; and experiences with the process of seeking reunifications. Within each category, themes were developed, for example the emotional distress or precarity caused by the separation. Informed consent was sought prior to the interviews and anonymity and confidentiality was maintained. Practitioners are not identifiable by their organisation, which protects their anonymity and the examples from which they drew.

The key limitation of this research is that it does not include the perspectives of survivors and family members separated through human trafficking and modern slavery. Survivors were not interviewed, given that the focus of the research was likely to cause distress and may be seen as unethical. In the literature on cross-cultural research, Liamputtong also explains that marginalised individuals may 'feel too powerless to express their concerns or to resist the power of researchers'.[31] The researcher was conscious of this power dynamic and did not want survivors to view their participation in the research as a requirement for receiving support. Thus, a key limitation is that practitioners can only comment upon issues which fit within their remit, and aspects that survivors chose to present to them. The study places the focus on experiences presented and reported by survivors, not by their families overseas, due to the lack of access to them. However, in selecting a range of practitioners, a broad range of issues were included, which is suitable for such exploratory research.

Findings

The Beyond Programme received 40 referrals from survivors seeking support for their separated families overseas. As Table 1 demonstrates, the three most common concerns of survivors were: tracing family members overseas following a loss of contact (30%); seeking support for family members overseas who were

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28 B Glasner and A Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Routledge, London, 1999.

29 V Clarke and V Braun 'Thematic Analysis', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 12, issue 3, 2017, pp. 297–298, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613.

30 B Matthews and L Ross, *Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences,* Longman, London, 2010.

31 P Liamputtong, *Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

receiving threats or experiencing violence from a person related to their trafficking (22.5%); and supporting the care arrangements of children under 18 who lived overseas (20%).

Table 1: Referrals by Type of Concern

Primary concern of survivor noted in referral into the Beyond Programme (February 2023 to April 2024)	Referrals (number)	Referrals (percentage)
Tracing family members overseas following loss of contact	12	30%
Seeking support for family members overseas who are receiving threats or experiencing violence from a person related to their trafficking	9	22.5%
Supporting the care arrangements of children under 18 who live overseas	8	20%
Supporting the basic needs of family members overseas (such as food and schooling)	5	12.5%
Seeking support for family members living in conflict zones	3	7.5%
In-country support to unaccompanied children overseas	3	7.5%
Total	40	100%

It must be acknowledged that there is significant diversity in family experiences. As Practitioner 11 observed, there is a 'split' amongst survivors who are 'really worried and concerned' about their families' safety and those whose families 'pose a risk' to them. The latter, and the feelings of shame and stigma, are well-documented within the literature, particularly upon being returned home.[32] The quantitative data above represents only those survivors choosing to seek some support or connection with their families. However, it was noted that in some cases, this was as a result of the risk posed by family overseas, as seen in the referrals regarding support around the care arrangements for children.

[32] McCarthy; K Ramaj, 'The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2023, pp. 408–429, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823; S Pandey, H R Tewari, and P K Bhowmick, 'Reintegration as an End of Trafficking Ordeal: A Qualitative Investigation of Victims' Perceptions', *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2018, pp. 447–460, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2658088.

Referral data also indicated the type of family relationship for which survivors sought support, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Referrals by Relationship Type

Relationship Type	Number of Referrals*	Percentage
Concern for a child	27	54%
Concern for a parent	7	14%
Concern for a sibling	6	12%
Concern for a spouse	2	4%
Unknown	8	16%
Total	50	100%

*A total of 40 referrals were received. However, each of these referrals may relate to more than one family member or relationship type.

Of all referrals, 54% were related to concern for a separated child. Practitioners also observed that the most pressing concern for survivors was often for their children:

> *I mainly have seen concern for children as like the primary stress, like there's absolutely concern for like spouses, parents, but I think when people are in, like pure distress, it's normally to do with … wanting their children to be safe, cared for. (Practitioner 11, Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Other forms of family separation were also observed, with concerns for parents making up 14% of referrals into the Beyond Programme and concern for siblings accounting for 12%.

This data is contextualised by the qualitative research, which can be separated into three distinct areas: the impact of separation on survivors; the impact of separation on family members overseas; and the processes and experiences associated with reunification attempts. These areas are now explored in more depth.

Impact of Separation on Survivors

The key themes surrounding the impact on survivors include significant distress caused by family separation and the continued need to provide financially for their families overseas.

Distress

All practitioners described survivors they worked with as experiencing distress, in the form of worry or fear for the welfare of separated family members, as outlined by Practitioner 11:

> *Every…conversation we'd have, they would, like, cry in distress for their family members back home. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

This distress for survivors with children overseas is also noted by Chazal *et al.*[33] Distress was common for those without contact with their families but fearing for the their welfare, as documented in other studies.[34] Similarly, practitioners observed that most survivors had lost contact with their families, often during situations of exploitation when their communication was controlled. Most practitioners worked with survivors who did not know if their families were alive or dead. Boss terms this type of 'loss without confirmation' an 'ambiguous loss', which is associated with prolonged grief.[35] It is well-documented in research with refugees who may be unsure of the welfare of their families, which can negatively impact their mental health.[36]

Practitioners noted that the distress associated with separation is a significant obstacle in recovery. Practitioner 11 said they could not begin to help one survivor with his mental health issues whilst he was anxious that his children were about to be killed. Similarly, Practitioner 8 observed how supporting a survivor to reconnect with her children appeared very influential on her recovery:

> *to be able to be back in touch with her two boys… that was more than anything that we've been able to do for her in the last three years… (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

This quote highlights how there may be a disconnect between the perceived priorities of psychological recovery that many service providers in the Global North place and the benefit that family support and connection could bring in some cases. Scholars have documented that the primary need of many survivors is

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33 Chazal *et al.*

34 E Beaton *et al.*, *Safe but Not Settled; The Impact of Family Separation on Refugees in the UK*, The Refugee Council and Oxfam, 2018.

35 P Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

36 A Renner *et al.*, 'Traumatized Syrian Refugees with Ambiguous Loss: Predictors of Mental Distress', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, issue 8, 2021, pp. 3865-3878, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18083865.

to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children or families.[37] Thus, responding to the needs of a survivor who is a parent in turn promotes their individual recovery more effectively than a solely 'person-centred' therapeutic approach. For example, Murphy *et al.* advocate for the incorporation of a 'family-oriented' approach in support provision.[38]

Among practitioners working within the MSVCC, there was no clear consensus if support around transnational family separation was within their remit. Most referred to their remit of support as detailed in the 'Journey Plan', which is the support plan they make every 28 days, outlining specific goals. Some referred to the remit of 'dependents and maternity' as the area in which they could discuss the wider family, whilst others thought this related only to family in the UK. Practitioner 6 explained that, 'it's regarding dependents you have here', whereas Practitioner 10 explained that in relation to family separation it was 'our role to support them with that and help establish that connection'. Without the wider family being acknowledged in support systems, the remit surrounding family separation is open to interpretation, a situation that does not recognise the significance and impact that the wider family can have on survivors' recovery.

Providing for Family

Practitioners observed that many survivors felt the need to continue providing for family during the separation. Practitioner 8 described the initial migration of a survivor who sought short-term employment overseas to support herself and her child. However, when the situation turned exploitative and became a long-term separation without the anticipated salary, the benefits to the separation were not realised:

> *the purpose of her leaving was to make her daughter's life better. She didn't realise that it would end up making her life and her daughter's life worse. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

The purpose of migration in providing opportunities for family members is well recognised in the literature on transnational families.[39] However, when opportunities become exploitative, the anticipated benefits of providing for family members may not be realised. This can create considerable feelings of guilt for survivors.[40] The inability to provide for one's family and the subsequent feelings of guilt was observed by all practitioners. Several noted that this led to

37 Bush-Armendariz *et al.*; Chazal *et al.*, p. 11.

38 Murphy *et al.*

39 Fresnoza-Flot; Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck; Zontini.

40 Surtees.

survivors not eating, with Practitioner 11 relaying how a survivor felt 'selfish' when she was eating, at a time when her children were starving, even though the survivor's physical health was declining due to lack of food. The pressure to provide financially was identified as common for those in contact with family. Practitioner 6 described common perceptions from family overseas. When they hear that their family member is in the UK, for example, family members may say:

> *'OK, he's going to start working, he's going to start getting a lot of money, he's going to send us a lot of money', so they don't really know what's going on. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Most practitioners were working with survivors within the asylum system who were unable to work legally. Scholars have highlighted the tensions that asylum-seeking mothers face when responsible for family in a system that excludes them from working, or being reunited.[41] Studies show that this context increases the likelihood of exploitation, as workers lack legal protections,[42] something Hodkinson *et al.* describe as 'state-facilitated compulsion to enter precarious work.'[43] Policy-related pressures and constraints therefore contribute to a continuation of exploitation.

This conforms to research which identifies the precariousness experienced by asylum seekers whilst waiting for a decision[44] and the added pressure to provide for family.[45] Similarly, Chazal *et al.* note that a consequence of survivors being

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41 See, for example: G Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2018; R Madziva and E Zontini, 'Transnational Mothering and Forced Migration: Understanding the Experiences of Zimbabwean Mothers in the UK', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 19, issue 4, 2012, pp. 428–443, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812466609.

42 E Flint and H Muggeridge, *At Risk: Exploitation and the UK Asylum System*, UNHCR and the British Red Cross, 2022.

43 S N Hodkinson *et al.*, 'Fighting or Fuelling Forced Labour? The Modern Slavery Act 2015, Irregular Migrants and the Vulnerabilising Role of the UK's Hostile Environment', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 41, issue 1, 2021, pp. 68–90, p. 71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320904311.

44 J Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 134–151, https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134; L Shobiye and S Parker, 'Narratives of Coercive Precarity Experienced by Mothers Seeking Asylum in the UK (Wales)', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 46, issue 2, 2023, pp. 358–377, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2079383; UNHCR and the British Red Cross.

45 Murphy *et al.*

unable to meet parental needs was an increased risk of further exploitation.[46] As Practitioner 5 explained, the efforts to provide for family were 'the whole reason that they got into that situation' of exploitation in the first place and into the precarious situation they find themselves in again. Practitioner 11 (Support Worker, MSVCC) explained that, despite the risks associated with illegal work, survivors 'just don't really care because they kind of like weigh the risks and would much rather their family have food to eat.' Therefore, the need to provide can add to the precarity experienced during recovery and the risk of re-exploitation.

The Impact on Separated Family Members

The second key finding of the research explores the impact of transnational separation following modern slavery on separated family overseas, with the data primarily relating to children. This section will focus on the key themes of abandonment and precarity in the context of parental separation from children.

Abandonment and Fractured Narratives

Most practitioners noted the distress relayed from child to parent, as detailed by Practitioner 10 who explained that she often heard the child crying on WhatsApp calls:

> *'…where are you, mummy? Are you coming home, mummy?' (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Practitioner 6 also reported hearing children crying 'terribly' and 'non-stop' when on the phone with their mothers. Studies on separated children in transnational families highlight that they experience higher levels of stress, feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, which can affect their development.[47] Manyeruke *et al.* found that distress may be exacerbated if children are younger, as those who were under five when the parent migrated had lower scores when it came to 'positive outlook' and 'psychological wellbeing'.[48] The ages of separated family members were not collected in this study.

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46 Chazal *et al.*, p. 11.

47 Valtolina and Colombo.

48 G Manyeruke *et al.*, 'Attachment, Psychological Wellbeing, and Educational Development among Child Members of Transnational Families', *Alpha Psychiatry*, vol. 22, issue 1, 2021, pp. 49–55, https://doi.org/10.5455/apd.106486.

These feelings may be compounded by confusion around why the parent cannot help. The role of caregivers in helping children understand their parents' absence is noted in the literature on separated children.[49] However, as Practitioner 11 explained, 'stories' about the absence of their parent may be circulated in the community, which can lead to confusing narratives for children. Practitioner 11 explained that in one case the child became 'upset' and started 'lashing out' in anger at their father from the pain of perceived abandonment. For those impacted by modern slavery, practitioners observed that narratives may be shaped by those complicit in the exploitation, as noted in the literature,[50] which may lead to children's rejection of their parents.

All practitioners presumed that survivors did not share much with their families about the reasons for their absence, often due to shame.[51] They suggested this is to protect the family from the truth, as documented by Hoang and Yeoh in regard to mothers who hide the harsh realities of their lives overseas.[52] Without an alternative, this may be confusing, as noted by Practitioner 8,

> *I've seen messages that she [the survivor] has sent her mum… 'I just want you. I need you. I want you to come back.' (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Without a clear narrative, children may feel abandoned, and practitioners raised concerns about how these conversations could be approached with children. Practitioner 3 reflected that such skills were not covered in their training:

> *I don't quite know how to manage those conversations because I think a lot of parents would seek advice and it's not advice that I could give.*

They explained further:

> *I think it would be really, really helpful if there [would be] support tools and resources for parents around preparing them for what happens when the child arrives, and I don't mean practically, I mean more around kind of like piecing back together family narratives. We've had situations before in our team where the parent might not have seen the child since they were a baby. So, the baby, the child, is in effect meeting a stranger. (Caseworker, Post-NRM)*

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49 M Poeze, E K Dankyi, and V Mazzucato, 'Navigating transnational childcare relationships: Migrant parents and their children's caregivers in the origin country', *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, vol. 17, issue 1, 2017, pp. 111–129, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12135.

50 Brunovskis and Surtees; McCarthy; Pandey, Tewari, and Bhowmick.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Hoang and Yeoh.

In the context of adoption, Watson *et al.* argue that having no coherent narrative is associated with mental health problems later in life, and that 'life-story' work can support children.[53] However, Dalgaard and Montgomery argue that disclosure of trauma to children under 12 can lead to increased anxiety, whereas for adolescent girls, a lack of communication can lead to 'internalizing symptoms'.[54] Most practitioners reflected that they felt ill-equipped to deal with such complex dynamics. There is little research on how families communicate a narrative to children when a parent has experienced modern slavery. Research by Hestia similarly describes survivors' need to have a 'story about their family makeup'.[55]

Precarity

The second key theme raised by practitioners was the precarity associated with family overseas. Twenty-four out of 40 (60%) referrals into the Beyond Programme indicated that a family member was at risk in some way. The literature on separated children highlights the increased vulnerability to drug abuse, pregnancy, violent behaviour, dysfunctional eating habits, and dangerous lifestyles.[56] In referrals to the Beyond Programme, threats or violence linked to modern slavery was the second most frequently cited primary reason for referrals, with 22.5% of survivors citing this as their primary concern. Practitioner 3 noted the impact of trafficking on a separated child overseas:

> *they [the traffickers] threatened to kidnap the son, and to traffic him… And as a result, he is not registered at any school, he's not registered with a doctor, he's basically been in hiding for the last two years. (Caseworker, Post-NRM)*

Practitioner 11 described how debt bondage can impact families, providing the example of one survivor who was trafficked to pay off a debt that the family owed. After her exit from exploitation, she was fearful of the impact this would have on her family, as the family still owed the money and may be harmed if it was not repaid.

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53 D L Watson *et al.*, 'Adopted Children and Young People's Views on Their Life Storybooks: The Role of Narrative in the Formation of Identities', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 58, 2015, pp. 90–98, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.09.010.

54 N T Dalgaard and E Montgomery, 'Disclosure and Silencing: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Patterns of Trauma Communication in Refugee Families', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, vol. 52, issue 5, 2015, pp. 579–593, p. 585, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514568442.

55 Hestia, p. 10.

56 Valtolina and Colombo.

Debt bondage is defined as a situation 'when someone is forced to pay off a loan by working for an agreed-upon or unclear period of time for little or no salary. The work performed to pay off the debt greatly exceeds the worth of the initial loan'.[57] The risk posed by debt bondage on the wider family, when one family member exits exploitation, should be explored to contribute to a more holistic approach to safeguarding that considers protection of the whole family.

Seeking Reunification

Practitioners noted that most survivors concerned about their family sought to be reunited in the UK via the refugee family reunion visa. In brief, those eligible within the British immigration rules are those with protection status, seeking to bring a partner or child that satisfies the eligibility requirements. For children, eligibility criteria include being under 18 at the time of application; otherwise, this is only considered under 'exceptional circumstances'.[58] Family reunification is relevant to survivors of modern slavery, who may claim asylum, given there is no automatic permission to stay in the country following identification through the NRM, but who may face risk on return or other Refugee Convention reasons. The issues surrounding the reunification process are documented by the refugee sector, and practitioners corroborate the findings around the restrictive definition of 'the family'; the ineligibility of children to sponsor parents within the immigration rules; delays in the asylum process; the removal of state-funded legal aid in 2012; and the prohibitive financial costs.[59]

Delays

Delays within the asylum process were identified as impacting survivors and their family members. Asylum decisions resolved between 2018 and 2019 with an associated NRM referral were seven times more likely to have taken longer than one year than those without.[60] Furthermore, in the first nine months of

57 Q Kepes *et al.*, *The Role of Recruitment Fees and Abusive and Fraudulent Recruitment Practices of Recruitment Agencies in Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2015, p. 28.

58 Home Office, 'Immigration Rules Appendix Family Reunion (Protection)', GOV.UK, 2024, retrieved 21 June 2024, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-family-reunion-protection.

59 Marsden and Harris; Beesley *et al.*; Safe Passage and the Refugee Council.

60 Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, *Asylum Decision Times for Potential Victims of Modern Slavery (October 2021)*, 2021, https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1687/iasc-paper_nrm-and-asylum-decision-times-for-potential-victims-of-modern-slavery_october-2021.pdf.

2023, women in the NRM waited twice as long as men for an initial decision.[61] A consequence of such prolonged delays is that separated children may turn 18 prior to the application being submitted. Practitioner 3 observed that this 'puts stress where there is already tons of it, and makes the need for a decision so much more important'.

Processing time for family reunion applications was noted as increasingly long, with a lack of prioritisation based on risk. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIB) explains that there was a backlog of 8,000 cases, which means the standard service time of 12 weeks has doubled.[62] Consequently, the ICIB observed that, 'applications sat in a pile and would only be expedited as a result of MP [Member of Parliament] correspondence, threat of litigation or sheer luck'.[63] Practitioner 2 outlined the emotional impact of this on one survivor:

> *The decision-making times have gone so awfully long they've lost trust and she … says 'I feel like no one's doing anything in this for me'. (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion)*

This leaves survivors unable to focus on their recovery and may lead to families seeking reunification via precarious routes to safeguard their children. Practitioner 5 explained that one mother in their care, whose asylum claim was 'massively drawn out', was re-trafficked when she returned to her country to look for her children.

The excessive delays also contribute to risks for family members. For example, Practitioner 3 described how a survivor's daughter 'died trying to cross the Mediterranean' following the separation. Such precarity, stemming from family members overseas seeking routes to safety and reunification, is well documented within the sector.[64]

Complexity and Lack of Legal Aid

In 2012, the UK government removed state-provided legal aid for family reunification applications.[65] During a parliamentary debate on the bill in 2011, Jonathan Djanogly, the former parliamentary under-secretary of state for courts

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61 International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Updated Analysis of the National Referral Mechanism data', IOM, 24 January 2024, https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/news/updated-analysis-national-referral-mechanism-data.

62 Neal.

63 *Ibid.*

64 Safe Passage and the Refugee Council; Neal; The Refugee Council and Oxfam.

65 *The Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.*

and legal aid, described such applications as 'generally straightforward',[66] an aspect refugee charities have disputed.[67] Interviewed practitioners stressed that family reunion cases linked to modern slavery were complex to argue, as observed by Practitioner 2:

> *I have never heard a trafficking victim whose case was straightforward. Never. (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion)*

The lack of legal aid also contributes to increased precarity and risk to exploitation through the process, as identified by Holden.[68] Practitioner 11 worked with a survivor who was considering to 'sell his organs to pay for a solicitor', placing him at great risk of exploitation and harm for the purpose of safeguarding his at-risk children. Practitioner 1 (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion) explained that in applications, families must prove that they have had continued contact, which is, 'particularly challenging for survivors of modern slavery who have often been cut off'. Similarly, evidence in the form of remittances may be limited, as Practitioner 3 explained: '…she can't send them anything directly' as they are in hiding. Practitioner 1 stated that the Home Office needs to be 'continually told' why a survivor of modern slavery 'might be totally cut off…' even if they have already been identified as a victim of modern slavery. This leads to survivors having to justify why they have limited proof of communication and financial support, which can cause great distress for them.

Practitioners emphasised the beneficial role of practical and emotional support throughout the process, which was also noted in research on reunification of survivors in Australia.[69] Practitioner 4 (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion) detailed the benefit of cooperation with support workers, explaining that in one case, the narrative around the separation was 'jumbled-up' but the support worker helped piece together the information required by the authorities.

However, no practitioners interviewed working under the MSVCC had supported someone through the family reunion process. A possible explanation is that

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66 *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill*, Hansard of the House of Commons, 31 October 2011, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2011-10-31/debates/1110315000002/LegalAidSentencingAndPunishmentOfOffendersBill.

67 J Beswick, *Not So Straightforward: The Need for Qualified Legal Support in Family Reunion*, The British Red Cross, 2015, https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/not-so-straightforward-refugee-family-reunion-report-2015.pdf; UNHCR, *UNHCR Submission to the Post-Implementation Review Evidence Gathering Exercise of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012*, 28 September 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/uk/sites/uk/files/legacy-pdf/5bb70cea4.pdf.

68 Holden.

69 Chazal *et al.*

survivors of modern slavery would only be eligible to apply for family reunions once they have been granted specific types of permission to stay in the country, and by then, they may have exited the NRM and its support entitlements. The government-funded post-NRM 'Reach-in' service may encounter such cases. Since 2021, 'Reach-in' support, a post-NRM service providing transitional support to confirmed victims of modern slavery, has been available to survivors with a positive 'Conclusive Grounds' decision.[70] However, Practitioner 3 did not believe family reunions were within the remit of 'Reach-in' and so they were doing it as an 'add-on'. Without detailing this as a key outcome of Reach-in support, or support under the MSVCC, this leaves it open to interpretation and may lead to survivors being prevented from reunification and the period of uncertainty for the family being prolonged.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article highlights the impact of separation following modern slavery on families. The emotional and financial strain of separation on survivors is evident, with significant impact on their recovery. The stress for separated families is also notable from perceived abandonment and an incoherent narrative to explain the separation and risks from perpetrators. While reunification is often key for survivors' recovery and families' safety, the legal routes for reunifications are lengthy and complex, with a lack of legal aid leading to survivors and family members resorting to risky reunification strategies.

Based on these findings, there are three key areas of recommendations to improve the experiences of families separated following modern slavery.

A 'Family-Oriented' Approach

The family is hugely influential in determining outcomes for survivors in terms of recovery, decision-making, and priorities. This is not comprehensively catered for in support services, which primarily focus on individual survivors. Chazal *et al.* argue that the family should be a focus to ensure that survivor support is trauma-informed and holistic.[71] Therefore, a 'family-oriented' approach,[72] which recognises the impact of the welfare of family overseas on survivors, should be incorporated into support services. There is also a need for more guidance on how families impacted by modern slavery can articulate helpful and age-appropriate narratives.

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70 The Salvation Army, 'New 2021 Victim Care Contract', 2021, retrieved 24 June 2024, https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/modern-slavery/new-victim-care-contract.

71 Chazal *et al.*, p. 14.

72 Murphy *et al.*

An International Safeguarding Lens

The findings highlight UK service providers' lack of knowledge of appropriate responses to disclosures of family overseas being at risk, such as family members receiving threats from traffickers. UK service providers should develop international safeguarding protocols to respond to the risks faced by separated families. This could include a guide to appropriate overseas organisations, services, or helplines, as well as the challenges, risks, and best practices involved. Prevention programmes in source countries could also attempt to identify and support family members who may be at risk.

Processes: Asylum, the NRM, and Family Reunifications

This article reiterates recommendations by the refugee sector regarding the delays, barriers, and complexity of immigration processes. Survivors waiting for an NRM decision can be impacted by longer delays to decision-making on their asylum claims, which subsequently delays the eligibility to apply for family reunifications. For those eligible to apply, families face delays to processing even in cases where children are at risk. For many, legal family reunifications are not possible, due to the high costs associated with the application and the lack of legal aid, which can leave families at risk during the separation. The prohibition on working while awaiting the asylum decision can lead to further exploitation and abuse. The interconnectedness of these systems and the impact on families should be acknowledged, and the barriers addressed by the UK Home Office.

Rebecca Treadaway is Coordinator of the Beyond Programme in the Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery Department at the Salvation Army, United Kingdom and Ireland (UKI) territory. Email: Rebecca.Treadaway@salvationarmy.org.uk