Anti Slavery Day: Joint open letter to the Prime Minister, copied in the Secretary of State, regarding the risks facing modern slavery survivors

Dear Prime Minister

We, the undersigned, are advocates, researchers, and experts by experience challenging the impact of modern slavery through our work.

This Anti Slavery Day, we write with urgency.

The UK’s emphasis on immigration control, at the expense of human dignity and safety, is threatening efforts to identify and support survivors of trafficking.

Modern slavery deprives people of their liberty, and often leaves victims with the life-long legacy of physical, mental or sexual abuse. Yet, too many victims who seek help from the authorities are subject to harmful immigration control measures rather than support.

1,256 potential trafficking victims were held in prison-like detention centres, last year alone, due to their immigration status. Many will go on to become ‘confirmed’ victims, with 42 already recognised as having been trafficked. Conversely, the State only convicted 35 traffickers in the same period.

In practice, we hold more survivors, than perpetrators, behind bars.

Modern slavery is routinely referred to as a ‘hidden crime’ but, with no immigration protection in place for survivors, it is little wonder that victims of exploitation are so rarely counted. It is well documented by Non-Governmental Organisations that traffickers use the threat of detention and forced removal to ensure compliance from those they abuse. An exclusive focus on immigration control is playing into traffickers’ hands, making it harder for victims to come forward.
To ensure that victims report this crime, receive support, and pursue justice where it is right for them, the Government must provide at least 12 months’ support and immigration protection for survivors, as outlined in the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill. The Government must also introduce an absolute bar on the detention of confirmed and potential victims of slavery, and address the high numbers of vulnerable people deemed suitable for detention.

We are concerned that traffickers will also be emboldened by proposed policies to prejudge asylum claims on the basis of the time at which they are made, or the route by which the claimant arrived. Victims of trafficking often have no choice but to claim asylum months or years after first entering the country. This will impact many survivors, for whom the factors that made them vulnerable to traffickers in the first place will pose further threats upon removal. Worryingly, even under the current asylum process, many trafficked people already struggle to secure the international protection they need from a system notorious for disbelief.

Lastly, we must challenge the narrative that tougher borders stop human trafficking. On the contrary, trafficking is made profitable through a lack of safe and legal routes, and made sustainable through policies which deter victims from seeking help.

*We ask for the UK Government to turn the tide.*

This Anti Slavery Day, we call for a commitment to ensure that victims of trafficking do not face punitive immigration control measures if they come forward for support. Asylum applications must be considered on merit, in a framework that acknowledges that many who make asylum claims, including survivors of modern slavery, have no choice but to arrive spontaneously or claim asylum after having been in the UK for some time. First and foremost, any reform to our immigration system must seek to remedy, rather than entrench, the wrongs committed against survivors of modern slavery.

The UK has played a crucial role in sounding the alarm on this heinous crime, at home and on a global stage, with the passage of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. However, without action, traffickers will continue to benefit from hostile immigration policies.

Signed:

1. **After Exploitation**  
   Maya Esslemont, *Director*
2. The AIRE Centre
   Matthew Evans, *Legal Director*

3. African Rainbow Family
   Aderonke Apata, *Chairperson*

4. Amnesty International UK
   Kate Allen, *Director*

5. Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit (ATLEU)
   Carita Thomas, *Solicitor*

6. Association of visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID)
   Ali McGinley, *Director*

7. Baca
   Jimmy Zachariah, *Chief Executive*

8. Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)
   Celia Clarke, *Director*

9. Birds Solicitors

10. Choose Love
    Josie Naughton, *CEO*

11. City of Sanctuary
    Siân Summers-Rees, *Chief Executive*

12. Deighton Pierce Glynn

13. Doughty Street Chambers
    Immigration and Anti Trafficking Teams

14. Duncan Lewis

15. Equality Now
    Jacqui Hunt, *Eurasia and Europe Director*
16. Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT)  
   Patricia Durr, CEO

17. Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX)  
   Lucila Granada, CEO

18. Freedom From Torture  
   Sile Reynolds, CEO

19. Freedom United  
   Joanna Ewart-James, Executive Director

20. Garden Court Chambers

21. Govan Community Project  
   Traci Kirkland, Head of Charity

22. Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit  
   Denise McDowell, Chief Executive

23. Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)  
   Satbir Singh, Chief Executive

24. Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)  
   Sarah Teather, Director

25. Kalayaan  
   Avril Sharp, Policy Officer

26. Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)  
   Dr Razia Sharrif, CEO

27. Law Centres Network

28. Leigh Day

29. Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network  
   Rosario Guimba-Stewart, Chief Executive
30. Medact
   James Skinner, Access to Healthcare Campaigner

31. Migrants' Rights Network
   Doriam Leatham, CEO

32. Migrant Voice
   Nazek Ramadan, Director

33. Migrants at Work
   Ake Achi, Director

34. The No Accommodation Network (NACCOM)
   Renae Mann, National Director

35. One Pump Court Chambers

36. Reading Refugee Support Group
   Nick Harborne, CEO

37. Refuge
   Lisa King, Director of Communications

38. Refugee Council
   Maurice Wren, Director

39. Scottish Detainee Visitors (SDV)
   Kate Alexander, Director

40. Solidarity With Refugees
   Rosalind Ereira, Director

41. South London Refugee Association
   Celia Sands, Director

42. Southwell & Partners

43. St Chad's Sanctuary
   Abigail Martin, Project Manager
44. Survivor Alliance

45. Unseen
   Andrew Wallis, CEO

46. The Voice of Domestic Workers
   Marissa Begonia, Director

47. Waging Peace
   Maddy Crowther, Co-Executive Director

48. Women for Refugee Women
   Natasha Walter, Director

49. Women’s Aid
   Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive

Academics

50. Dr Ella Cockbain, Associate Professor in Security and Crime Science
    UCL

51. Dr Carole Murphy, Deputy Director of Centre for the Study of Modern Slavery (CSMS)
    St Mary’s University

52. Neena Samota, Programme Director - Criminology and Sociology
    St Mary’s University

¹Figures on the immigration detention of both potential and recognised victims of trafficking have been taken from Home Office responses to Freedom of Information requests by After Exploitation. The most recent figures on the detention of victims can be viewed in the organisation’s report Hidden Futures: How Data Denial Threatens the Fight Against Slavery (2020).