

Expansion, Fracturing, and Depoliticisation: UK government anti-trafficking funding from 2011 to 2023

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Abstract

Anti-trafficking policy discourses and funding trajectories in the UK are developing and expanding in a fractured way. This paper demonstrates that current policies and funding allocations primarily focus on supporting specific ‘victims’ and targeting indistinct ‘criminals’, rather than addressing the broader structural issues underlying human trafficking. This focus perpetuates ignorance of harm done at other scales. Supporting migrants who meet a narrow definition of ‘victims’ effaces how government-funded projects and agencies abuse migrants and exacerbate their vulnerability to exploitation. Anti-trafficking funding from the UK’s Official Development Assistance addresses both the individual and structural scales. However, structural problems are often framed as external, neglecting the impacts of UK policies that increase the vulnerability of migrants and low-paid or casualised workers. We also demonstrate that the UK government’s anti-trafficking discourse and funding are increasingly fractured along spatial lines, with a limited emphasis on the rights of exploited individuals outside the UK coinciding with attacks on the rights of migrants inside. Instead of narrow, depoliticised anti-trafficking discourses, it is vital to critique government policies that cause structural harm and amplify migrants’ vulnerability to exploitation. This could involve defunding certain government activities that increase vulnerabilities rather than merely expanding individual-level funding.

Keywords: migration, immigration policy, human trafficking, repoliticisation, anti-trafficking, defunding, freedom of information

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Introduction

This paper builds on the use of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in Sharapov's earlier work,¹ to produce a fuller picture of the UK anti-trafficking landscape today.² By examining anti-trafficking funding allocated by UK government departments, police forces, and local councils in the financial year 2012/13, Sharapov argued that anti-trafficking funding was primarily directed towards 'crime prevention and border "management", including shutting and "offshoring" the UK border, rescuing "genuine" victims, and funding anti-trafficking projects in countries of origin'.³ This paper draws on FOI requests submitted to UK central government departments in 2017, 2020, and 2023.⁴ These requests covered six financial years and sought information on direct spending to combat human trafficking and 'modern slavery', along with related policy and strategy documents. Our longitudinal data collection process yielded both qualitative and quantitative data, which were compiled and analysed. This analysis suggests that although the UK government's anti-trafficking funding continues to reflect its dominant discourse,⁵ both the discourse and funding are

¹ K Sharapov, 'Giving Us the "Biggest Bang for the Buck" (or Not): Anti-Trafficking government funding in Ukraine and the United Kingdom', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 3, 2014, pp. 16-40, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121432>.

² For an in-depth critique of slavery and anti-slavery terminology, see L Brace and J O'Connell Davidson, 'Slavery and the Revival of Anti-Slavery Activism', in L Brace and J O'Connell Davidson (eds), *Revisiting Slavery and Antislavery: Towards a critical analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90623-2_1. In this paper, we refer to 'human trafficking' as defined by the UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. This definition explicitly links 'trafficking in persons' to exploitation (a term which lacks an internationally recognised legal definition) and lists 'slavery or practices similar to slavery' as forms of exploitation (alongside forced labour, the exploitation of the prostitution of others, or other forms of sexual exploitation, etc.). All references to human trafficking here encompass 'modern slavery' as defined by the UK *Modern Slavery Act 2015*. We use 'modern slavery' in contexts such as policy documents, departments, and specific reports. We place 'modern slavery' in inverted commas when discussing this critically to highlight the narrow, depoliticised, and ahistorical use of this term by the UK government in its anti-trafficking strategy.

³ Sharapov, 2014, p. 39.

⁴ All calculations presented in this article, which may utilise exchange rates, inflation calculators, and available government data, are intended for illustrative purposes only. Due to the use of incomplete FOI-sourced government data and potential fluctuations in exchange rates and inflation, these data and calculations may not fully reflect the actual amounts spent or allocated. Readers are advised to interpret the financial figures with caution and consider the potential limitations and variability in the data sources.

⁵ K Sharapov, "'Traffickers and Their Victims': Anti-Trafficking policy in the United Kingdom", *Critical Sociology*, vol. 43, issue 1, 2017, pp. 91–111, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920515598562>.

increasingly fractured along spatial lines. There is a growing emphasis on the rights of trafficked and exploited individuals outside the UK. However, this focus is often limited and primarily aimed at preventing migration to the UK. Meanwhile, UK immigration policies increasingly criminalise irregular migrants, making their lives more perilous. This narrow focus on the human rights of trafficked and exploited people outside the UK, and spending on services for ‘deserving’ victims within the UK, also aligns with government policies that strip rights from irregular migrants inside the UK. Trafficking within the UK continues to be framed as a matter of individual criminals and victims.⁶

This fractured discourse—and the counter-productive spending patterns it generates—is enabled by a depoliticised consensus around trafficking as a major but individualised and non-specific evil, failing to address the broader systematic causes of trafficking and exploitation.⁷ Against this, we argue for a repoliticisation of challenges to exploitation—including a critical engagement with contested political issues such as the rights of irregular migrants inside the UK, workers’ rights, the right to welfare, and the potential for reducing trafficking and exploitation risks by defunding certain government activity (including, for example, immigration enforcement).⁸

The paper begins with an overview of the research methodology describing the use of FOI requests to examine government practices affecting everyday life. The Results section presents key findings, including funding totals. The section starts with the Cabinet Office, followed by reviews of departments primarily

⁶ K Sharapov and J Mendel, ‘Trafficking in Human Beings: Made and cut to measure? Anti-Trafficking docufictions and the production of anti-trafficking truths’, *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2018, pp. 540–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518788657>. For the most recent discussion of ‘ideal’ victimhood in the human trafficking discourse, see A Forringer-Beal, ‘Why the “Ideal Victim” Persists: Queering representations of victimhood in human trafficking discourse’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 19, 2022, pp. 87–102, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222196>.

⁷ J Mendel and K Sharapov, ‘Re-Politicising Anti-Trafficking: Migration, labour, and the war in Ukraine’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 22, 2024, pp. 52-73, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201224224>.

⁸ We completed the final revisions to this article in the summer of 2024, shortly after the change of the UK government following the general election. Some migration policy has changed as a result of the change of government—for example, the plan for the UK to send refugees to Rwanda has been scrapped. While further changes are likely to follow, the new government’s approach to migration also looks highly likely to involve policies and spending that make migrants more vulnerable to exploitation (for example, by imposing and enforcing migration restrictions). The Scottish Refugee Council has prepared a helpful summary of the current (at time of writing) situation, see ‘New UK government: What changes have been made so far?’, 25 July 2024, <https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/labour-immigration-refugees-policy-campaign>.

responsible for employment and welfare, economic and financial systems, and those working cross-sectorally. It concludes with departments focused on international development and agencies in immigration, policing, and criminal justice. This combined focus reflects key representations of human trafficking in the UK's anti-trafficking/'modern slavery' policy⁹ including organised crime, 'illegal' immigration, and victim assistance.

The Discussion section explains how anti-trafficking funding priorities mirror the UK government's strategy of reducing 'modern slavery' to a narrow range of themes, which differentiate between trafficking 'abroad', at the UK border, and 'at home'. Through this funding and discursive strategy, the government diverts attention from recognising and addressing human trafficking as a complex multi-dimensional issue reflective of economic and social injustices. The paper concludes by summarising the findings and calling for further discussion and action to defund government agencies, policies, and activities that increase vulnerability to exploitation.

Methodology

This paper adopts the methodology utilised in Sharapov's 2014 research, using FOI requests to collect data on anti-trafficking funding provided by UK central government departments. It relies on FOI requests as a valuable source of longitudinal data in anti-trafficking research. While FOI legislation aims to 'enhance transparency' and allow citizens to 'learn more about the practices of government that affect everyday life', as Walby and Luscombe argue, the full potential of FOI as a powerful research tool is not yet fully realised.¹⁰ Walby and Luscombe note that FOI requests can reveal secretive but impactful government decisions and policies. Although we do not claim that anti-trafficking funding allocations are secretive, the contentious political context surrounding immigration and crime often makes the UK government reticent in disclosing related costs.

We acknowledge the limitations of using FOI requests,¹¹ including the lengthy and uncertain process from data identification to response. This process may lead to

⁹ Reviewed in Sharapov, 2017.

¹⁰ K Walby and A Luscombe, 'Introduction: Freedom of Information and Research Design in International Perspective', in K Walby and A Luscombe (eds), *Freedom of Information and Social Science Research Design*, Routledge, 2019, p. 16, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429437717-1>.

¹¹ See Walby and Luscombe. In addition, see, for example, B Hawkins *et al.*, 'The Law of Diminishing Returns? The challenge of using freedom of information legislation for health policy research', *Critical Public Health*, vol. 33, issue 4, 2023, pp. 383–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2023.2220134>.

data being withheld due to exemptions, including cost and data sensitivity issues preventing public release. Consequently, data from FOI inquiries, even when timely and unexempted, may not fully reflect the situation. Research by Thomas indicates that in the UK, the alleged balance between security and disclosure is skewed, with security often being prioritised.¹² He critiques the UK's freedom of information legislation for acknowledging that disclosure might compromise public interests, while failing to recognise the risks of secrecy.¹³ In discussing the use of FOI to investigate UK government decision-making, Sheaff demonstrates how a critical approach to FOIs can reveal insights into less visible government practices.¹⁴

Accessing the data involved submitting nearly fifty FOI requests to central government departments over three periods: Autumn 2017 (for financial years 2015/16 and 2016/17), Autumn 2020 (for 2018/19 and 2019/20), and Spring 2023 (for 2021/22 and 2022/23).¹⁵ This process included clarifying the information sought, filing responses, and systematically organising and interpreting the data through quantification and coding. We carefully crafted each request to remove ambiguity and avoid confusion among FOI coordinators, which could lead to 'information not held' denials. By using identically worded FOI requests, with slight modifications for different dates and legislative changes, like the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, we compiled an extensive multi-institutional dataset, enabling comparative analysis over seven years.¹⁶ Each request contained two questions, asking the contacted authority to: (a) Identify budgets/funding or resources directly allocated towards anti-trafficking/'modern slavery' in respective financial years; and (b) provide a copy of the organisational strategy or document outlining actions against trafficking/'modern slavery'.

¹² OD Thomas, 'Security in the Balance: How Britain tried to keep its Iraq war secrets', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 51, issue 1, 2020, pp. 77–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010619839544>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁴ M Sheaff, 'Using FOI to Explore Governance and Decision-Making in the UK', in Walby and Luscombe (eds).

¹⁵ The UK financial year runs from 6 April to 5 April of the following year.

¹⁶ As part of this study, we approached all police forces and thirty largest local councils in the UK. However, due to data volume and limitations on the article length, this article focuses solely on funding allocation within UK central government departments. We plan to provide further analysis on anti-trafficking/modern slavery funding in UK policing and local councils in future publications.

While we acknowledge Walby and Luscombe's views that ethical reviews are unnecessary for research based on FOI requests, we obtained ethical approval from the University of Dundee's Ethical Review Board for the last wave of requests.¹⁷

During the 'accessing stage', we faced delays and had to respond to high-cost estimates used as a basis for refusal. However, when contacting central government departments, in all instances where information was disclosed, we received purposefully written responses rather than poorly scanned photocopies of spreadsheets or heavily redacted or 'blacked out' documents. Consistent with Spiller and Whiting's observations, the depth and thoroughness of the reviews were markedly affected by the responder's skills and expertise.¹⁸ Despite responses being typically attributed to an impersonal 'FOI Team', it was clear that individual input was behind each response.

Like much work using FOI requests, our data depended on several factors. These included: what information was available, discoverable, and disaggregated on internal systems in such a way that it could be made available in response to a request like ours; who had prepared and processed this information, and their individual interpretations of what should be included. Responses could vary depending on anything from how the person handling the request understood 'trafficking' to how much time people elsewhere in the organisation had to answer emails.¹⁹

The analysis stage posed challenges due to the varying content and format of responses. Some were straightforward, while others offered vague estimates, redirected us to other agencies, or referenced poorly organised online data, often missing or incomplete. We used contextual and discourse analysis to: (a) calculate, where feasible, the total funding for anti-trafficking activities; (b) identify key themes in these allocations; and (c) examine the representation of anti-trafficking in policies and financial allocations, building on Sharapov's work on the representations of human trafficking in UK government policy.²⁰

¹⁷ K Walby and A Luscombe, 'Ethics Review and Freedom of Information Requests in Qualitative Research', *Research Ethics*, vol. 14, issue 4, 2018, pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117750208>.

¹⁸ K Spiller and A Whiting, 'UK Experience of Freedom of Information as a Method of Enquiry', in Walby and Luscombe (eds).

¹⁹ We specifically requested details of direct allocations to reduce workload and the risk of cost-based refusals, which may have led the oversight of data not explicitly labelled as human trafficking or modern slavery.

²⁰ Sharapov, 2017.

Results

The Cabinet Office and Central Government Departments and Agencies Responsible for Employment and Welfare

The Cabinet Office, a ministerial department supporting the Prime Minister, reported no anti-trafficking funding from 2015 to 2017 and had no dedicated policies. In 2018/19, it allocated over a million pounds to the ‘Hidden in Plain Sight’ campaign to raise awareness of exploitation among healthcare, job centre, and bank staff. In 2021/22 and 2022/23, it reported no direct spending, deferring anti-trafficking efforts to the Home Office.

Acknowledging the role of the British state in fostering poor working conditions and allowing abusive labour relations,²¹ we next examined departments broadly responsible for employment and welfare. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), overseeing welfare, pensions, and child maintenance, reported no direct anti-trafficking funding for 2015/16 and 2016/17, integrating victim support into broader staff duties without a specific policy. By 2020, the DWP had not provided dedicated funding, but was committed to addressing human trafficking through multi-agency cooperation, staff training for victim identification, and establishing a reporting mechanism for concerns. In its 2023 response, the DWP cited the cost of gathering information across 600 job centres as a reason for not providing data; however, it mentioned a focus on victim identification and support, investigating system abuses, and monitoring supply chains.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), operational from July 2017 to February 2023,²² aimed to enhance workplaces and support a thriving UK economy. No strategies were reported for 2015/16 and 2016/17. In 2020, although not directly funding anti-trafficking initiatives, BEIS noted that bodies like the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate²³ and the HMRC National Minimum Wage team collaborated to refer trafficking cases

²¹ See, for example, SN 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, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320904311>.

²² The department was formed in July 2016 and dissolved in February 2023, with functions divided among three new departments. The 2023 response was provided by the Department for Business and Trade, one of these new departments.

²³ The role of the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate is to ‘protect the rights of agency workers by ensuring that employment agencies and businesses treat their workers fairly’. See ‘Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate’, GOV.UK, 2022, retrieved 9 April 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/employment-agency-standards-inspectorate>.

to appropriate authorities, but could not specify funding for trafficking-related training or operations. In 2023, its successor, the Department for Business and Trade, reported no data.

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), established as the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) in 2005 and expanded in 2017 to cover the entire economy,²⁴ reported limited anti-trafficking actions in 2017/18 and expenditure of GBP 874.14 in 2015/16 and GBP 15,596.80 in 2016/17 with no jurisdiction over trafficking offences. After its remit expansion, it allocated GBP 2 million for labour abuse prevention, identifying labour exploitation and trafficking as pressing issues and pinpointing high-risk sectors in the UK labour market with about ten million workers. In its 2023 response, the GLAA reported no specific anti-trafficking funding but confirmed its investigative mandate in England and Wales. Its annual report for 2022/23 highlighted three modern slavery convictions, fifty-seven referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), and GBP 165,582 recovered for 4,598 workers affected by various exploitation issues, from wage discrepancies to severe labour exploitation and modern slavery allegations.²⁵

Departments and Agencies Related to Economic and Financial Systems, and Departments Operating at the Cross-Sectoral Level

Our longitudinal study included various UK government agencies related to economic and financial systems, such as the Competition and Markets Authority, Department for International Trade, Serious Fraud Office, and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). The Competition and Markets Authority,²⁶ focused on promoting competitive markets and addressing unfair practices, reported no involvement in combating human trafficking. The Department for International Trade, operational from 2016 to 2023, provided information only in its 2023 response, noting internal policies to prevent human trafficking within its supply chains. The Serious Fraud Office,²⁷ which handles major fraud, bribery, and corruption, offered no data on human trafficking efforts. The HMRC, citing

²⁴ See 'What We Do - Regulation - Licensing Scheme - GLAA', n.d. <https://www.gla.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do> and 'GLAA - New Powers - GLAA', n.d. <https://www.gla.gov.uk/whats-new/press-release-archive/01072017-new-powers-for-law-enforcement-to-combat-slavery-and-labour-exploitation>.

²⁵ GLAA, *Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority Annual Report and Accounts 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 (House of Commons Paper) HC 337*, Dandy Booksellers under the Open Government Licence, 2024, https://www.gla.gov.uk/media/9983/e02945337_glaa-ara-22-23_elay.pdf, p. 8.

²⁶ See 'Competition and Markets Authority', GOV.UK, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority>.

²⁷ See 'Home', Serious Fraud Office, n.d., <https://www.sfo.gov.uk/>.

cost considerations, discussed its anti-trafficking roles, including a Strategic Lead for Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking and two Operational Support Officers. By 2020, HMRC had integrated anti-trafficking efforts into its standard operations, collaborating with law enforcement and other departments. In its 2023 response, HMRC reported no direct funding for these efforts, emphasising its supportive role in the government's anti-trafficking response without being an enforcement agency.

We approached the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Communities and Local Government, anticipating their potential to integrate anti-trafficking efforts within their extensive remits. The Department for Communities and Local Government, renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2018 and later the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in 2021, reported no relevant data or strategies. In 2018/19, it funded a GBP 1.1 million pilot via the Controlling Migration Fund for six local authorities to support victims transitioning from safe houses to community living. No further information or strategy was available for 2021/22 and 2022/23. The lack of funding for anti-trafficking initiatives aligns with the systemic defunding of local services through austerity policies since 2010.²⁸ The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport provided no data in 2017/18, and its 2020/21 response mentioned staffing for anti-trafficking efforts (0.15 FTE combined). The 2023 response also lacked financial details, indicating a staff increase to 0.5 FTE combined. A 2020/21 modern slavery statement was shared, focusing on internal operations rather than broader government actions against modern slavery.

Central Government Departments and Agencies Working in the Fields of International Development, Migration, Policing, and Criminal Justice

This subsection examines government agencies involved in international development, including the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the defunct Department for International Development (DFID). DFID operated from May 1997 until September 2020, managing the UK's foreign aid to reduce global poverty before merging with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to form the FCDO. DFID did not specify direct funding allocations for anti-trafficking for 2015/16 and 2016/17 due to the cost of identifying the data, but acknowledged funding overseas programmes to combat human trafficking. These also included indirect support through education and livelihood training to reduce vulnerability to exploitation. While some programme details are available

²⁸ We are not aware of any empirical studies that investigate the impact of austerity policies in the UK on the defunding of anti-trafficking initiatives at the local level.

on the UK government’s Development Tracker,²⁹ disaggregating annual funding proved difficult. Notable initiatives included ‘Work in Freedom 1’, allocating GBP 1,198,163 in 2015/16 for partnership work in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Persian Gulf States to prevent trafficking of women and girls. Another significant project, ‘Aawaz II – Inclusion, Accountability and Preventing Modern Slavery Programme in Pakistan’, aimed to create a more inclusive society and stronger government institutions.³⁰ By March 2024, this programme had committed GBP 66,825,682, covering activities from 2015 to 2022, with significant allocations to the British Council and UNICEF.³¹

In 2020, DFID listed twenty-three projects but did not provide specific funding details. ‘Work in Freedom 1’ received GBP 10,384,774 between 2013 and 2019 to prevent trafficking through empowerment in India, Bangladesh and Nepal.³² The second phase of the project, ‘Work in Freedom 2’ allocated GBP 10,151,563 between 2018 and 2024 to reduce vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking in South Asia and parts of the Middle East, although DFID did not directly mention this phase in their response.³³ The ‘Responsible Accountable and Transparent Enterprise – RATE’ project provided GBP 30,065,315 from 2015 to 2020³⁴ to help businesses manage their social and environmental impacts, notably funding B Lab³⁵ and other NGOs focused on ethical trading and reporting. RATE’s outcomes saw over 18,000 companies adopt ethical codes and 2,000 assessed for their impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the tangible impacts of these investments, such as the specific number of cases of exploitation and/or trafficking cases identified or prevented due to increased awareness, remain unclear.

²⁹ A UK government website which ‘shows in detail the international development programmes led by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), other government departments and partners’, see ‘Development Tracker’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/>.

³⁰ See ‘DevTracker Programme GB-1-204605’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-1-204605/summary>.

³¹ See ‘DevTracker Programme GB-1-204605 Transactions’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-1-204605/transactions>.

³² See ‘DevTracker Programme GB-1-203857 Transactions’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-1-203857/transactions>.

³³ See ‘DevTracker Programme GB-GOV-1-300551’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-GOV-1-300551/summary>.

³⁴ See ‘DevTracker Programme GB-1-203448’, n.d., <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-1-203448/summary>.

³⁵ See ‘About B Lab’, n.d., <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/movement/about-b-lab>.

Following the DFID merger into the FCDO in 2023, no further information was provided. FCDO was created in 2020 to promote the UK's interests and address global challenges like poverty.³⁶ In 2017, the FCDO mentioned its cross-government efforts and the establishment of a Modern Slavery Unit without providing funding details. By 2020, the FCDO had spent GBP 1.48 million to combat human trafficking, focusing on reducing the 'flow of slavery to the UK' and enhancing international cooperation. The annual *Human Rights and Democracy* reports of 2018 and 2019 noted a significant increase in UK funding to combat human trafficking, promising over GBP 200 million without providing specific details.³⁷ These funds supported initiatives including ethical public procurement, international collaborations, and anti-trafficking measures across supply chains, with additional support for data collection projects in Pakistan and Latin America. The FCDO allocated GBP 15,342,740 in 2021/22 for various initiatives, including efforts to end child exploitation and labour, and establishing the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. In 2022/23, the FCDO allocated GBP 14,775,208 for activities to combat human trafficking, including actions to support victims of sexual exploitation and additional funding towards the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to establish a correlation between specific anti-trafficking Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocations to specific countries and the number of individuals from these nations identified in the UK's NRM as potential or confirmed victims of human trafficking. This could be explored in future research. Nevertheless, human trafficking and 'modern slavery' concerns are now integral to the discourse surrounding the UK's overseas development assistance. For example, the 2022 *Human Rights and Democracy* report by the FCDO³⁸ discusses 'modern slavery' within the human rights framework across countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and South Africa. It also notes countries such as India, Albania, Vietnam, and Sudan, which are among the top ten nationalities for NRM referrals as of 2023.³⁹

³⁶ See 'Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office', GOV.UK, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>.

³⁷ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018', GOV.UK, 5 June 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2018> and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Human Rights and Democracy Report 2019', GOV.UK, 16 July 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2019>.

³⁸ FCDO, 'Human Rights & Democracy Report 2022', GOV.UK, 13 July 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2022>.

³⁹ See 'Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2023', GOV.UK, 7 March 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2023/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2023>.

The second part of this subsection reviews anti-trafficking funding and initiatives by law enforcement and immigration control agencies, including the Home Office, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC), the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The Home Office, central to the UK's strategy against human trafficking and modern slavery,⁴⁰ reported annual funding increases across three data collection waves. In 2015/16, it spent GBP 7,173,240.52 on policy development, victim support, and immigration control efforts. This included the Modern Slavery Unit's costs, support for the IASC, contributions to victim care contracts co-funded with the MoJ, the Child Trafficking Protection Fund, UK Border Force training, and training for the Office of the Children's Champion on child safety.

The 2016/17 expenditure of GBP 16,004,680.70 more than doubled the previous year's, covering the Modern Slavery Unit, the Safeguarding Unit's child trafficking focus, and the IASC's activities to promote best practices and victim identification. It also funded the Adult Victim of Modern Slavery Care Contract, delivered by the Salvation Army and co-funded by the MoJ, the Modern Slavery Fund, and the Child Trafficking Protection Fund. Additional initiatives included the roll-out of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates, a trilateral conference in Warsaw with Poland and Lithuania, and Police Transformation Fund contributions to enhance the policing response to human trafficking in England and Wales.

The response also references the 2015 and 2016 reports of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery highlighting the Home Office's commitment to combating human trafficking.⁴¹ The 2016 report recognises human trafficking as a critical issue, noting efforts to improve victim identification, prosecute perpetrators, and implement anti-slavery legislation. While it notes root causes like instability and conflict, the report primarily focuses on legal, enforcement, awareness, and victim support rather than directly addressing broader structural issues like poverty or inequality.

⁴⁰ See Home Office, 'Home Office Modern Slavery Statement 2020 to 2021 (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, 25 November 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-modern-slavery-statement-2020-to-2021/home-office-modern-slavery-statement-2020-to-2021-accessible-version>.

⁴¹ Home Office, 'Report of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery 2015', GOV.UK, 21 October 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-of-the-inter-departmental-ministerial-group-on-modern-slavery-2015> and Home Office, 'Report of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery 2016', GOV.UK, 12 October 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-of-the-inter-departmental-ministerial-group-on-modern-slavery-2016>.

The 2020 response indicated a continued increase in Home Office funding for anti-trafficking initiatives, with allocations rising from approximately GBP 16 million in 2016/17 to GBP 31 million in 2017/18, and GBP 39 million in 2018/19. The report highlighted an expanded range of funded activities, though it did not specify the exact distribution of funds. Ongoing projects included the UKVI NRM decision-making hub, IASC's office, the Victim Care Contract, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians, the Modern Slavery Unit, and the Police Transformation Fund grant. New initiatives in 2017/18 included the digital NRM system, public procurement training to avoid modern slavery in supply chains, the Business Against Slavery Forum, the Child Trafficking Protection Fund, and both the Modern Slavery and Modern Slavery Innovation Funds, emphasising an expanded approach to combating human trafficking.

Funding in 2018/19 supported activities aimed at 'transparency in supply chains' and prevention efforts including research and communications campaigns. The total direct government expenditure on combating human trafficking reached GBP 39 million in 2017/18 and GBP 61 million in 2018/19, as reported in the 2018 UK Annual Modern Slavery Report and the Independent Review of the *Modern Slavery Act*.⁴² The annual reports, while recognising socioeconomic vulnerabilities, primarily focused on criminal and operational challenges, citing lack of awareness, economic hardship, and organised crime as key causes. The reports advocated for solutions centred on law enforcement, victim support, awareness-raising, and international cooperation, continuing to stress operational, legislative, and protective measures without addressing deeper socioeconomic inequalities.

The 2023 response was less comprehensive than those in 2017 and 2020, omitting total Home Office funding allocations, with some details deferred. Mentioned activities included the Devolving Child Decision-Making Pilot initiated in 2021, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians, the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime (MSOIC) Unit, modern slavery victim support within the criminal justice system, GLAA, and contributions to the Modern Slavery Fund (MSF) at GBP 4.8 million in 2021/22 and GBP 5.6 million in 2022/23. The Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC) received GBP 62.2 million in 2021/22 and GBP 77.7 million in 2022/23, totalling GBP 67 million in 2021/22 and GBP 83 million in 2022/23 for both MSVCC and MSF. The increase in funding for these initiatives—from GBP 39 million in 2018/19 (for all anti-trafficking activities funded by the Home Office) to GBP 83 million in 2022/23 (combined funding for MSVCC and MSF only with additional, undisclosed

⁴² Home Office, '2018 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery', GOV.UK, 18 October 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2018-uk-annual-report-on-modern-slavery> and Home Office, 'Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act: Final Report', GOV.UK, 22 May 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-modern-slavery-act-final-report>.

amount allocated to other activities)—was significant.

A direct comparison of anti-trafficking funding between 2012/13 and 2022/23 is challenging due to redacted data in the 2012/13 response. However, examining allocations to the Victim Care Contract, managed by the Salvation Army, shows a significant increase from just over GBP 3 million in 2012/13 to almost GBP 78 million in 2022/23—a 26-fold increase. This coincided with an increase in NRM referrals from 550 individuals in 2012/13⁴³ to 10,704 in 2022/23,⁴⁴ allowing for an indicative estimate of expenditure per person to determine whether the increase in contract value is proportionate to the rise in NRM referrals assisted by the organisation.

This measure is only indicative as the data do not align between the financial year (April to March) used for funding allocations and the Salvation Army’s contractual year (June to July) used for reporting assisted individuals. It is unclear if the costs for supporting individuals already in the NRM system differ from those entering the service or vary geographically across England and Wales. No data are available on the proportion of costs allocated towards contract administration versus direct support to assisted individuals.

In 2012/13, GBP 3 million was allocated, supporting 550 individuals at an average cost of GBP 5,545 per person. In 2022/23, GBP 77.7 million was allocated, averaging GBP 7,259 per person. Factoring in inflation, GBP 5,545 in 2013 equates to GBP 7,741 in 2023 indicating a 7% real-term decrease in spending per person when adjusting for inflation, despite nominal increases in funding.⁴⁵ This suggests that while the Victim Care Contract’s value has risen annually, much of this increase is due to the growing number of victims assisted rather than higher individual support levels. This raises questions whether the increase in NRM referrals reflects better victim identification, or continuing government failures to address underlying issues like crime, poverty, and exploitation, or a combination of these factors.

The FOI requests were sent to the Office of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC), established under the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* (MSA) with a UK-wide mandate to promote best practices in tackling human trafficking. The IASC’s funding, as noted by the Home Office, is included within its total budget. The 2017 response, which lacked specific financial details, referenced the IASC’s annual report disclosing a 2015/16 budget of GBP 494,836 for salaries

⁴³ ‘Home Office modern slavery statement 2020 to 2021’, p. 3.

⁴⁴ No author, *Behind the Shield: Protecting and supporting survivors of modern slavery*, Salvation Army, 2023, p. 4.

⁴⁵ ‘Inflation calculator’, Bank of England, n.d., <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>.

and operational expenses.⁴⁶ The report mentioned strategies focusing on victim care, law enforcement, international cooperation and private sector involvement; it identified criminal profits, population vulnerabilities, and exploitation of global crises as root causes of human trafficking. The budget increased to GBP 588,025 in 2016/17, with subsequent reports noting greater emphasis on partnerships and tackling labour exploitation and supply chain transparency.⁴⁷ The 2020 response lacked 2017/18 data, reporting a GBP 629,755 budget for 2018/19 but noted the absence of a Commissioner in post. The 2023 update indicated that following the Commissioner's departure in April 2022, the office was non-operational without budget or activity records until December 2023.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) were also contacted regarding their anti-trafficking efforts. The MoJ confirmed it had no information on funding for these efforts, with a 2023 response still pending as of 2024. The CPS also reported a lack of dedicated funding or relevant data, but its 2023 update mentioned guidance for prosecuting under the MSA and a joint statement with the Attorney General's Office on preventing their supply chains from being implicated in human trafficking.

Table 1 collates anti-trafficking funding from UK central government agencies and departments to illustrate what appears to be a fragmented approach to funding anti-trafficking efforts at the central government level. This table should not be viewed as a definitive measure of any single agency's or the UK government's commitment to anti-trafficking due to methodological limitations such as FOI response accuracy and the challenge of distinguishing 'direct' anti-trafficking funds from broader initiatives that address exploitation, inequality, abuse, and violence as multifaceted structural issues. However, it does show how the UK government's interpretation of human trafficking (or 'modern slavery') tends to focus narrowly on human rights abuses 'abroad', immigration control 'at the border', and victim assistance 'at home'. This segmented view will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

⁴⁶ 'Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner: Annual Report 2016', GOV.UK, 12 October 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-anti-slavery-commissioner-annual-report-2016>, p. 40.

⁴⁷ 'Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's Annual Report 2016 to 2017', GOV.UK, 16 October 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-anti-slavery-commissioners-annual-report-2016-to-2017>, p. 41.

Table 1: Summary of Anti-trafficking Funding Allocations by Central Government Departments and Agencies as Reported in Freedom of Information Responses

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2021/22	2022/23
Cabinet Office	NIP/NF*	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	£ 1,071,037.61	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Competition and Markets Authority	Staff time (0.5 FTE)	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	Staff time (0.15 FTE)	Staff time (0.5 FTE)	Staff time (0.5 FTE)	Staff time (0.5 FTE)
Crown Prosecution Service	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Department for Business, Energy and industrial strategy (and successor)	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Department for Communities and Local Government (and successors)	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	£ 1.1million	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Department for International Trade (and iterations)	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Serious Fraud Office	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority	£ 874.14	£ 15,596.80	£ 2 million in FY 2017 and 2018	£ 2 million in FY 2017 and 2018	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Department for Work and Pensions	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Foreign & Commonwealth Office (up until and including FY2018/19) and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (starting from FY2021/22)	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	£ 1.48 million Reference the overall ODA commitment to fight modern slavery of £ 200 million	£ 15,342,740	£ 14,775,208
Department for International Development	Refused on the basis of cost, referred to Devtracker	Refused on the basis of cost, referred to Devtracker	Refused on the basis of cost, referred to Devtracker	Refused on the basis of cost, referred to Devtracker	Merged with FCO (as FCDO)	Merged with FCO (as FCDO)

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner	Refers to the annual report: £ 494,836 spent on the operation of the Office (funded by Home Office)	Refers to the annual report; £ 588,025 spent on the operation of the Office (funded by Home Office)	No data	£ 629,755 (funded by Home Office)	No information provided since office was non-functioning	No information provided since office was non-functioning
HMRC	Refused on the basis of cost; staff costs – 3 FTEs	Refused on the basis of cost; staff costs – 3 FTEs	Refused on the basis of cost; staff costs – 2 FTEs + 1 part-time	Refused on the basis of cost; staff costs – 2 FTEs + 1 part-time	NIP/NF	NIP/NF
Ministry of Justice	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	NIP/NF	No response	No response
Home Office	£ 7 million	£ 16 million	£ 31 million	£ 39 million	Incomplete data: Modern Slavery Fund & Victim Care Contract: £ 67 million	Incomplete data: Modern Slavery Fund & Victim Care Contract: £ 83 million

*NIP/NF = no information held or provided, or confirmation of no dedicated funding

The data discussed above should be considered indicative rather than definitive. While FOI requests were standardised to encourage uniform responses, departments varied in their criteria for what constituted ‘direct’ anti-trafficking funding. To avoid misinterpretation, charts showing funding totals have been omitted. The data provide a snapshot of the scale of anti-trafficking funding, the specific interpretation of trafficking it legitimises and reinforces, and its dynamics over time. This sets the stage for analysis of how these allocations align with government policies on migration and crime control, discussed in the subsequent section.

The total anti-trafficking spend for the UK central government in 2022/23, as reported in the context of this study and taking into account various methodological limitations, can be estimated as GBP 98 million, a significant increase from almost GBP 21 million reported in 2012/2013.⁴⁸ However, direct comparison is difficult due to the complexity of funding structures, such as the multi-year nature of some Official Development Assistance projects, which complicates annual spend disaggregation. Despite the substantial increase in the

⁴⁸ Sharapov, 2014, p. 36. The total amount reported in this article is USD 24,101,847; using an average exchange rate for 2014, when the article was published, this equals almost GBP 15 million; the Bank of England’s inflation calculator adjusts GBP 15 million in 2014 to almost GBP 21 million in 2023. See <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>.

volume of funding, it remains unclear whether this increase has correspondingly enhanced the impact of the government's anti-trafficking efforts.

During the period covered in this article, until the end of 2020, the UK continued to contribute to the EU budget as part of the financial settlement between the UK and EU. A portion of this contribution, though not quantifiable due to the lack of detailed data, would have supported various anti-trafficking initiatives at the EU level. These included initiatives led by the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, projects targeting non-EU countries, and efforts to protect workers' rights. These initiatives ceased following the UK's EU withdrawal. However, it was unexpected that the impact of Brexit or COVID-19 on anti-trafficking initiatives and funding was neither explicitly mentioned nor implied in the description of allocated funding in the FOI responses collected for this study.

Discussion

Modern Slavery 'Abroad', Modern Slavery at the UK Border, and Modern Slavery 'at Home'

We have argued elsewhere that the expansion of anti-trafficking activities often occurs despite—and sometimes because of—a failure to meet its stated goals.⁴⁹ In the UK, government funding and the scope of the 'modern slavery' mandate have seemingly broadened in a way that might initially seem progressive as it encompasses a wider range of activities under its international development efforts.⁵⁰ Originally, the UK addressed human trafficking and 'modern slavery' primarily as 'foreign' crimes and issues of 'illegal' migration aiming to intercept these before they reach the UK border.⁵¹ More recently, it has included a selective focus on human rights in specific countries. This expansion might appear as a shift towards a rights-based approach, but this is misleading. Examining the UK government's allocation of anti-trafficking funding reveals a specific temporal and spatial pattern of selective recognition of human trafficking as a human rights concern: rights of would-be migrants matter only when they are still 'in

⁴⁹ J Mendel and K Sharapov, 'Expanding Circles of Failure: The rise of bad anti-trafficking, and what to do about it', *Global Policy Journal*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/18/11/2021/expanding-circles-failure-rise-bad-anti-trafficking-and-what-do-about-it>.

⁵⁰ For an overview of the UK's aid, see P Loft and P Brien, 'The 0.7% Aid Target', UK Parliament, 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03714>. For a discussion of the nationalisation and neoliberalisation of the UK aid (focusing on African countries), see M Lazell, 'UK Aid to Africa: "Nationalisation" and neoliberalism', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Canadienne d'études Du Développement*, 2023, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2023.2166026>.

⁵¹ Sharapov, 2017.

place' in their home countries (before they are trafficked into the UK) with a focus on narrowly targeted micro-economic interventions like providing limited income-generating opportunities. This approach does not address broader structural factors that impoverish and disenfranchise many people, meaning these micro-projects, though commendable in annual reports, are unlikely to effect significant change.

The closer to the UK border trafficking occurs, both metaphorically and geographically, the more it transitions from a limited human rights issue to a matter of border, crime control, and immigration 'at home'. Irregular migrants in the UK have been deliberately stripped of protections that the NRM should offer, but the 2023 *Illegal Migration Act* prevents those who enter irregularly from accessing asylum or modern slavery support.⁵² Under former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's leadership, the UK government faced criticism for deprioritising human trafficking,⁵³ particularly when he stated that the requirement for 'basic evidence' in modern slavery claims tripled the refusal rates by June 2023.

This approach shifts the focus from supporting 'victims' to emphasising the alleged crimes committed through irregular migration, prioritising punishment. This narrow interpretation of trafficking in the UK frames it as a foreign issue while domestically criminalising trafficked people who crossed the UK border irregularly, rendering them liable for deportation. Such an extension of the 'field' of human trafficking 'over there' accompanied by a violently narrow approach to trafficking 'at home' signifies a deliberate and calculated strategy. A selective emphasis on the human rights of people 'abroad' helps efface the ways in which the UK economy depends on people working in exploitative conditions (whether as part of supply chains or in underpaid casualised or informal jobs within the UK) and the current UK government's policy of deliberately criminalising and stripping rights from irregular migrants to the UK.⁵⁴

The analysis, shaped by both the availability and the completeness of the data, clearly suggests that UK government anti-trafficking funding has been consistently and significantly increasing, partly due to the rise in the number of presumed victims. However, this specific methodology does not permit a

⁵² See, for example, UN Migration, 'UK "Illegal Migration Bill" Exacerbates Risks for Survivors of Modern Slavery: IOM', International Organization for Migration, 28 March 2023, <https://www.iom.int/news/uk-illegal-migration-bill-exacerbates-risks-survivors-modern-slavery-iom>.

⁵³ See, for example, H Bancroft, 'Modern slavery "less of a priority for Sunak's government" as watchdog budget cut by £100,000', *The Independent*, 7 February 2022.

⁵⁴ J Mendel and K Sharapov, 'Human Trafficking and Online Networks: Policy, analysis, and ignorance', *Antipode*, vol. 48, issue 3, 2016, pp. 665–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12213>.

confident identification of any subtle or structural changes in how this funding was distributed among the three distinct categories identified in the paper: anti-trafficking efforts abroad, at the border, and at home. These expansions—in the volume of trafficking and what appears to be a more focused approach on the ‘trafficking abroad’ dimension—have occurred within a narrow and well-established conceptualisation of trafficking in the UK. This approach focuses on the dual objectives of deterring racialised ‘others’ from the UK border, and ‘rescuing’ (often via deportation) a limited group of victims who conform to the punitive and racialised governmental benchmarks of ‘genuine’ suffering.

Such ‘evolution’ in the UK anti-trafficking policy and approach glosses over systemic causes of trafficking and exploitation. Notably absent is a critique of the role that neoliberal economic policies and the capitalist system play, which, by prioritising profit maximisation and deregulation at the expense of workers’ rights and protections, foster environments conducive to exploitation and trafficking.⁵⁵ This not only impedes efforts to eradicate human trafficking but also raises questions about the UK government’s genuine commitment to addressing the issue that it has long claimed to prioritise. Anti-trafficking activities are able to expand and broaden in scope precisely through these failures: UK government policy and practice help to create an ‘intractable’ problem (in part through attacks on the human rights of some groups within the UK) while also looking to address this problem through a developing emphasis on the human rights of trafficked and vulnerable people ‘abroad’.

The UK government continues to put its anti-trafficking money where its mouth is, but what is coming out of this mouth is increasingly fractured and fragmented. Human trafficking projects abroad emphasise human rights, with the government’s international strategy evolving to include limited and targeted interventions such as enhancing legal frameworks, raising awareness, economically empowering communities and individuals, and collaborating with local NGOs and the private sector. This approach marks a shift from earlier oversimplifications that attributed human trafficking solely to criminal networks and impoverished individuals inhabiting ‘uncivilised, undemocratic and impoverished spaces out there’.⁵⁶ Although these initiatives still aim to un-make victimhood at the individual level—through awareness-raising or sustainable livelihood opportunities—they remain limited in scope. Both at and within the UK’s borders, anti-trafficking policy continues to frame trafficking as an individual crime or victimhood, while other government policies simultaneously undermine the human rights of irregular migrants and render citizens and residents vulnerable to exploitation.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Mendel and Sharapov, 2024.

⁵⁶ Sharapov, 2017, p. 102.

Repoliticising Anti-Trafficking Funding (and Defunding)

The expanding conceptualisation of anti-trafficking, reflected in changes to UK anti-trafficking funding, contribute to its depoliticisation. Mendel and Sharapov argue that anti-trafficking can be ‘perceived as non-partisan or above the fray of party politics precisely *because* it fails to confront the “normal” exploitation of labour...[and] fails to engage with the political issues surrounding routine exploitation in daily life’.⁵⁷ In the UK, there is a largely depoliticised consensus that human trafficking, or ‘modern slavery’, is a ‘barbaric crime’⁵⁸ and that supporting individual ‘victims’ is commendable. This consensus can also be perceived as non-partisan because it overlooks routine labour exploitation in the UK and fails to address key political questions around the systemic causes of trafficking or the harms done by state actions.

For some politically contested policies related to trafficking—for example, the now defunct plans to deport unauthorised migrants to Rwanda—this contestation is presented as separate from the non-partisan consensus on anti-trafficking and is largely framed as a political disagreement about migration rather than disrupting the consensus on anti-trafficking. This seemingly ‘reasonable’ or ‘normal’ consensus enables fractured discourses and policies around UK anti-trafficking funding, leading to harmful outcomes for trafficked individuals and maintaining a ‘centre ground’ that overlooks crucial political issues around exploitation. As Bhagat and Quirk note, former UK Home Secretary and Prime Minister Theresa May was able to establish a Global Commission on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery, which draws on this depoliticised consensus around anti-trafficking, in order to avoid key political questions on topics such as migration and corporate power. They also note that May’s own political decisions made many more vulnerable to exploitation.⁵⁹ UK government anti-trafficking funding is able to expand despite or because of repeated failures, even as policies on issues like irregular migration, welfare and poverty contribute to these very failures.⁶⁰

Rather than accepting a depoliticised consensus view that simplistically frames all anti-trafficking activities as inherently positive, research on UK policy should give greater attention to more politically contentious issues like migration, benefits

⁵⁷ Mendel and Sharapov, 2024, p. 58.

⁵⁸ No author, ‘New UK action against modern slavery protects women at risk from trafficking in Med’, GOV.UK, 2 December 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-uk-action-against-modern-slavery-protects-women-at-risk-from-trafficking-in-med>.

⁵⁹ A Bhagat and J Quirk, ‘Do we really need a Global Commission on Modern Slavery?’, *openDemocracy*, 10 April 2024.

⁶⁰ Mendel and Sharapov, 2021.

policy, and workers' rights within the UK, moving away from depoliticised and fractured anti-trafficking discourses. While our call for repoliticisation links into broader political and ideological debates, engaging with political questions about anti-trafficking is also crucial for more 'pragmatic' inquiries into how anti-trafficking funds can be used effectively. It is neither effective nor efficient for a government to allocate large sums of money towards futile attempts to implement clashing policy objectives. Discussions on 'what works' in anti-trafficking must not therefore shy away from engaging with political and politicised issues.

In the context of both a repoliticised discussion and debates about 'what works', defunding useless and/or harmful anti-trafficking and anti-migration work should be on the agenda.⁶¹ In examining anti-trafficking efforts following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we found that significant impact came from states refraining from harmful practices towards refugees. For example, not preventing Ukrainian refugees from crossing borders and not criminalising them for migrating or working proved crucial, and allowed them to access legal work alongside 'normal' state services like healthcare and welfare.⁶² Attention should shift towards the anti-trafficking potential of defunding activities that make people more vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, defunding immigration enforcement activities that make migrants' work and living situations in the UK unnecessarily precarious and increase their exploitation risk could have a more positive impact than spending money on addressing trafficking as an individualised issue of crime. The UK could defund the work of immigration enforcement and police to detain and deport unauthorised migrants where this is done for no reason other than their migration status. It could also stop spending money on enforcing laws and regulation that make migrants' situations more vulnerable: for example, ending workplace raids that are focused just on immigration enforcement.

Focusing on defunding harmful state activities offers two major benefits: first, eliminating harmful activities is intrinsically beneficial, irrespective of how the funds are reallocated; and second, re-evaluating funding priorities could free up hundreds of millions of pounds that could significantly benefit trafficked, exploited, or otherwise vulnerable individuals.

Some anti-trafficking activities, including punitive immigration enforcement or (the now withdrawn) preparations to deport unauthorised migrants to Rwanda, would be beneficial to defund even if the money saved were not redirected. Given

⁶¹ *Ibid.* As discussed in Mendel and Sharapov, 2024, we acknowledge that various state-funded activities are important for individuals who might otherwise be susceptible to trafficking and exploitation—from providing access to welfare and healthcare to upholding workers' rights. However, these actions are not typically classified under the umbrella of 'anti-trafficking'.

⁶² Mendel and Sharapov, 2024.

the substantial possible benefits of such defunding, we would argue that the focus of much anti-trafficking research should shift from how money is spent to what might be achieved by eliminating harmful practices.⁶³

Moreover, the saved funds could be used to replace harmful activities with beneficial ones, such as making migrants less vulnerable to exploitation through enhanced homelessness prevention services, welfare rights, language skills for recent migrants, or improving worker protections through enhanced labour inspection and a welfare system that is less likely to impoverish people. Additionally, we would call for more work on how state and NGO anti-trafficking funding might more effectively be reallocated towards more decentralised efforts to reduce the vulnerability of marginalised groups, such as mutual aid projects or redistributing money directly as an unconditional basic income.

Conclusion

Drawing on Freedom of Information requests, this paper illustrates the fractured expansion of UK government anti-trafficking funding. As spending increases, a divide in anti-trafficking discourse and funding allocation emerges. On one hand, there is a limited focus on protecting the human rights of vulnerable individuals ‘abroad’ to prevent their migration or trafficking into the UK. On the other hand, once these individuals reach the UK, the focus shifts to criminalisation and eroding their human rights. The allocation of anti-trafficking funds by the UK government reflects a practical manifestation of its anti-trafficking policy discourses. While the fractured discourses of anti-trafficking policy discussed above are of academic interest in themselves, they also have very real practical effects since they shape which anti-trafficking activities are prioritised as the government continues to ‘put its money where its mouth is’.

The need for critical anti-trafficking work is clear—not only to improve (academic) understanding of anti-trafficking policy but also to critique and influence discourses to ensure effective use of anti-trafficking funds. Much attention focuses on how non-state organisations use often-limited budgets on anti-trafficking work with marginal benefits. This paper argues for refocusing research on anti-trafficking funding to prioritise identifying and potentially defunding harmful state activities. Defunding these activities could significantly reduce vulnerability to exploitation and free up funds for more productive uses. Despite allocating funds to seemingly progressive anti-trafficking measures, the UK simultaneously invests in projects that increase vulnerability of already at-risk groups, causing further harm. Therefore, discussions on anti-trafficking funding should not only

⁶³ Mendel and Sharapov, 2021.

assess the efficacy of initiatives but also consider the benefits of withdrawing funding from harmful state activities.

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