



# **TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

Conference Report

**11 October 2021**

Small-scale agriculture in the semi-arid Peruvian highlands

Photo by Chris O'Connell

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**Cover photo: Melbourne Global climate strike on Sep 20, 2019**

Photo by Takver from Australia via Wikimedia Commons



Haze over Santiago, Chile

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Illegal deforestation viewed from a drone

## Conference Report

# Towards a Holistic Approach to Contemporary Slavery and Climate Change

Climate change poses an immediate and existential threat to many of the most marginalised communities on the planet. Around the world the impacts of this global emergency are being felt right now in the form of both sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset events. The combination of these impacts with ongoing deforestation, widespread pollution and resource scarcity is rendering livelihoods ever more precarious for millions of people and driving migration and displacement.

This situation has clear implications for development and human rights. In the words of former UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Philip Alston, climate change is “likely to challenge or undermine the enjoyment of almost every human right in the international bill of rights”. Among the human rights issues implicated are forms of abuse and exploitation such as forced and unfree labour, human trafficking and contemporary slavery.

To date, however, the relationship between climate change and contemporary slavery has received relatively little attention in policy, advocacy and academic fields. Furthermore, mainstream policy approaches to both issues have traditionally placed these issues within ‘siloes’, disconnected from their political, social and economic contexts. The objective of this conference was to break down siloes by bringing together leading researchers and civil society practitioners from around the globe.

The conference was organised by researchers from Dublin City University and the University of Hull, with the support of Anti-Slavery International. The event took place online on 11th October 2021 and included inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral panel discussions focussed on: industries and labour exploitation, human rights-based approaches, ecosystems of disaster, and conflict, disaster and migration. The one-day event also featured powerful keynote addresses by Jasmine O’Connor of Anti-Slavery International; and by Wilma Mendoza Miro, a Bolivian Indigenous leader living at the frontlines of the climate, environmental and human rights crises. The conference concluded with an Outcome Statement addressed to the President Delegate of COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow, highlighting the relationship between contemporary slavery, environmental destruction and climate change, and calling for a just transition.

## Introduction

### What do we mean by a holistic approach?

Contemporary slavery, environmental destruction and climate change are intrinsically connected and mutually reinforcing. We humans both shape and are shaped by the environment; but our behaviours and systems are conditioned by relations of power.

For example, during field research in the Peruvian Amazon town of Nauta an Indigenous broadcaster and anti-trafficking activist drew my attention to a series of murals depicting the horrors of the rubber boom in the region during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries from the perspective of the local Indigenous peoples. They portrayed disturbing scenes of subjugation, exploitation and violence.

The worst of these atrocities took place in the Putumayo, deep in the rainforest of present-day Colombia. The entity responsible – the Peruvian Amazon Company – was registered on the London Stock Exchange and had British directors. When word got out, the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society (forerunner of Anti-Slavery International) pushed successfully for a Commission of Investigation to be led by Sir Roger Casement, the foremost human rights investigator of his day.

During the commission's visit to Peru in 1910, Casement uncovered a system of de facto slavery which entrapped Indigenous peoples with unpayable debts and coerced them to meet rubber quotas through the systematic use of torture, floggings and murder. This caused the deaths of an estimated 40,000 Andokes, Boras, Huitotos and Ocainas, and deforested large areas – a situation facilitated by the 'othering' of racialised groups and Nature itself. The rubber was exported to feed industrial demand in the US and Europe, in particular the automobile industry, which played a significant role in creating the emissions that led to global warming.

Despite an ensuing scandal, high global demand meant little action was taken to end this exploitation and abuse. Instead, what 'saved' the Indigenous peoples from the rubber merchants was the development of synthetic rubber. The reprieve proved temporary, however: synthetic rubber is a by-product of oil, and growing demand soon brought a new phase of exploitation and environmental destruction.

Oil drilling displaced Indigenous groups and polluted so much of the surrounding land and water that today many people have heavy metals in their blood from eating toxic fish.



*As the murals emphasise, the exploitation of humans and Nature that began during the rubber boom continues to this day.*

Chris O'Connell



Photo by Chris O'Connell

**Mural depicting the unequal power relations of the rubber era from the perspective of local Indigenous communities in Peru's Amazon region**

Pollution has severely damaged traditional livelihoods and food sources. As the Indigenous activist that I interviewed told me: “We are eating our last fish.” Desperate for a means of survival, many are forced to accept low-paid and dangerous work cleaning up oil spills, exposing them to toxic substances. The oil boom has also caused an upsurge in the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. Finally, the oil extracted is burned and ends up in the Earth’s atmosphere, further fuelling the climate crisis.

Now Indigenous peoples face a new threat. Peru has announced a multi-million-dollar plan to create an Amazon Waterway linking the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Once again, the project promises ‘development’ for local communities. In reality, however, the Waterway is designed to facilitate international trade, including the export of primary products such as cocoa and palm oil (both strongly associated with labour exploitation and high rates of deforestation); and the import of products like automobiles.

Local Indigenous communities believe that the Waterway will facilitate illicit activities, including land, drug and human trafficking. The Waterway project will also require dredging rivers and tributaries, increasing the risk of severe flooding due to climate change, in turn destroying fish stocks and displacing communities. Indigenous activists therefore refer to the Waterway as the “route of death”.

Should we consider this an Indigenous rights crisis? A pollution crisis? A human security crisis? Or a climate crisis? In reality it is all of these things. The inter-connections between human exploitation, extractivisms and climate change are complex, and their impacts far-reaching. As the murals emphasise, the exploitation of humans and Nature that began during the rubber boom continues to this day. This situation is underpinned by unequal power relations that treat the rights, livelihoods and eco-systems of some people as disposable.

Yet hope still exists for breaking this vicious circle of abuse and damage, and moving toward a virtuous circle like the one outlined below.<sup>1</sup> At each stage Indigenous peoples have fought to resist this trend and preserve their traditions and ways of life. Research increasingly evidences their success, even in the face of extreme power imbalances: a recent UN report found significantly lower rates of deforestation in Indigenous and tribal territories than elsewhere. Indigenous peoples no longer need allies to speak for them; instead, they call for solidarity based on our shared reliance on this planet.

The contributions to this Conference – from experts and practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds, and around the globe – not only provide evidence of these interconnections, but begin to map a holistic pathway toward a just and sustainable world. As these presentations reveal, tackling the nexus of climate change, environmental destruction and contemporary slavery requires coordinated action across a range of sectors and at different levels – there is no one tool that can achieve this. There is, I believe, a principle that can help guide these actions, however: to contest, disrupt and overturn the relations of power upon which this nexus was and is built.

**Dr Chris O’Connell, Dublin City University**



<sup>1</sup> [https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ASL\\_ViciousCycle\\_Report\\_web2.pdf](https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ASL_ViciousCycle_Report_web2.pdf).



Photo by Nicholas Doherty via Unsplash

## Setting the Scene

**Saphia Fleury**, University of Hull, welcomed speakers from academia, research organisations and civil society organisations to generate ideas together to drive progress in tackling contemporary forms of slavery in relation to climate change and environmental degradation. Saphia noted that the University of Hull was an ideal place to host the conference, as the “twin issues of slavery and climate change” are at the heart of its teaching and research. Hull was the home of the abolitionist campaign led by William Wilberforce, and his legacy is continued by the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation. Furthermore, the Energy and Environment Institute at Hull is helping to lead efforts towards a sustainable future.

**Professor Trevor Burnard**, Wilberforce Professor of Slavery and Emancipation and Director of the Wilberforce Institute, welcomed the conference as “the start of several conversations about climate change and modern slavery”. As a historian of transatlantic slavery, he reflected on William Wilberforce and the abolitionist movement, noting that “ideas of freedom and slavery have been part of British, European and perhaps global discourse for a very long time”. The Wilberforce Institute is committed to studying slavery in all its forms. Furthermore, it combines policy, practice and academic research on modern slavery. As part of this process, the Institute’s work will interact with the work of scholars who are interested in climate change.

**Professor Daniel Parsons**, Director of the Energy and Environment Institute at the University of Hull, spoke of how that the University’s new vision of “a brighter, fairer, carbon-neutral future” goes to the heart of discussions. He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic contextualises the challenges we face globally: shutting down the global economy resulted in a 6% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared to the previous year. We need a 6% reduction each year until 2050 in order to meet the Paris Agreement’s target of keeping global warming below 1.5°C. Professor Parsons discussed climate justice and the harsh reality that the biggest impacts of climate change are faced by people who are least responsible for and least able to deal with those consequences. The UK in particular has a “moral responsibility to act”, given that it is the fourth country by total historical cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and that much of the nation’s wealth has been built on a combination of slavery and climate-change-generating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.



Photo by Gyan Shahane via Unsplash

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Climate change has the potential to drive slavery on an unimaginable scale.

Jasmine O'Connor

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## Keynote Speeches

### Jasmine O'Connor OBE – CEO, Anti-Slavery International

Jasmine spoke of the imperative to understand the links between climate change and modern slavery and to work together to find solutions. Anti-Slavery International is excited about the collection of evidence in this area because it builds toward calls for action by providing powerful messages to policymakers. Anti-Slavery International understands that “climate change has the potential to drive slavery on an unimaginable scale”. Jasmine highlighted the organisation’s recent report with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) which revealed that climate change has a domino effect, multiplying existing risks, driving migration and increasing vulnerability to human trafficking and modern slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Jasmine emphasised that decision-makers and civil society must work out how to respond during what is now the best situation we will ever be in. Restricting global warming to 1.5°C rather than 2°C could lower the number of people exposed to climate risks and susceptible to poverty by several hundred million by 2050. This would also mean reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 45% below 2010 levels by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050.

This transition needs to be fair and just. Climate action and building back from the pandemic need to happen fast, but both also need to involve people who have experienced slavery or been on the front lines of climate change and modern slavery. Furthermore, Jasmine outlined that climate finance and national and international planning are needed to support adaptation, resilience, loss and damage, as the impact of climate change disrupts communities and damages livelihoods and food and water systems, rendering people vulnerable to exploitation. Resilient communities need to be built, and adequate finance and resources are needed to help communities deal with the loss and damage caused by the climate crisis. Jasmine’s key message was that decent sustainable jobs are at the heart of this transition.

**Wilma Mendoza Miro – President of the National Confederation of Indigenous Women of Bolivia (CNAMIB)**

Wilma reflected on a deep inequality which exists in Bolivia regarding respect for human and collective rights and the rights of Indigenous people, which are frequently ignored. In particular she highlighted the rising levels of racism and violence toward Indigenous peoples within Bolivian society. Decision-makers and power-holders should transparently consult Indigenous peoples and respect their right to free, prior and informed consent, yet the reality is that they only speak to them to inform them about policies once decisions have been taken. Power-holders speak of values and recovery, but it is all talk. “We may have made progress on recognising collective rights”, she said, but not on exercising them.

Exploration for natural resources is occurring in Indigenous territories around Bolivia, including for minerals in the north of La Paz and for the Bala-Chepete dam. Furthermore, new settlements are being established within National Parks like Madidi and Pilón Lajas, and the long-consolidated boundaries of Indigenous territories are now being pushed back. Indigenous groups are also experiencing increased intimidation from drug traffickers. All these activities are encroaching on Indigenous territories and increasing vulnerability to contemporary slavery.

The experience of Indigenous peoples in relation to climate change is that temperatures are higher, and this is increasing the pressures on traditional ways of life and causing the premature deaths of elders from heart attacks and fatigue. The increased number of forest fires due to a mix of drier weather and land clearances have resulted in higher levels of smoke in the air in places like Chiquitania, and leads to new illnesses appearing. Indigenous communities are lacking food and water due to these abrupt and drastic changes in the climate. The state, with its technology, ignores Indigenous peoples when they are told which places are best to excavate water that will last for a long time, preferring to excavate elsewhere. The result is that the water runs out more quickly, and the cloudy water it produces can cause disease.

Wilma’s key message was: “Policy-makers should, above all, focus on human beings, people and life and not what can be taken from it. Material aspects are always temporary but conserving life is for everyone”.

**A Bolivian couple with their child on their field where their crop of quinoa failed this year because of frosts. Climate change is affecting the viability of farming in this area.**

Photo by Sean Hawkey

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*Policy-makers should, above all, focus on human beings, people and life and not what can be taken from it.*

**Wilma Mendoza Miro**

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## Panel 1

## Industries and Labour Exploitation

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Due to the worsening fishing situation, parents find it difficult to take care of their children, so they sell their children in return for money needed for survival.

**James Kofi Annan**

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### Dr Bethany Jackson – University of Nottingham Rights Lab<sup>3</sup>

Dr Bethany Jackson presented findings on the environmental and labour impacts within the brick-making sector, focusing on the kilns located in the South Asian ‘Brick Belt’, where there are an estimated 55,387 kilns. Brick manufacturing is highly polluting, requires vast amounts of natural resources, and often kilns are in direct competition for resources with agricultural production. Indeed, a landcover assessment shows that over 80% of brick kilns are located on quality agricultural land, which also jeopardises Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 2 and 3 on poverty, health, hunger and food security. Furthermore, emissions and absorption of heavy metals into soil and water supplies can have knock-on effects on health, including stomach conditions and food quality.

Brick manufacturing has also been associated with the use of debt-bonded labour, where a person is forced to work to pay off a never-ending debt. It is thought that where the kilns are not environmentally compliant, they are also using labour in an exploitative manner. If bonded labour came to an end within South Asian brick manufacturing, this could see the removal of an estimated 10,000 kilns. These intense work environments are at increasing risk from a changing climate, with decent work likely to be impacted by continued heat stress due to increasing temperatures and flooding risks.

<sup>3</sup> Essential References: Boyd, D.S., Jackson, B., Wardlaw, J., Foody, G.M., Marsh, S., and Bales, K. (2018). Slavery from space: Demonstrating the role for satellite remote sensing to inform evidence-based action related to UN SDG number 8. *ISPRS Journal of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing*, 142, 380-388. Foody, G.M., Ling, F., Boyd, D.S., Li, X., and Wardlaw, J. (2019). Earth Observation and Machine Learning to Meet Sustainable Development Goal 8.7: Mapping Sites Associated with Slavery from Space. *Remote Sensing*, 11(3), 266. Li, X., Foody, G.M., Boyd, D.S., and Ling, F. (2019). Aging brick kilns in the Asian Brick Belt using a long time series of Landsat sensor data to inform the study of modern slavery slavery. *IGARSS IEEE International Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium*. Yokohama, Japan, 28July-2 August 2019. Boyd, D.S., Perrat, B., Li, X., Jackson, B., Landman, T., Ling, F., Choi-Fitzpatrick, A., Goulding, J., Marsh, S., and Foody, G.M. (2021). Informing action for United Nations SDG target 8.7 and interdependent SDGs: Examining modern slavery from space. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 1-14.



Fishing is the main livelihood for many communities in Ghana

Photo by Seyiam Kweku on Unsplash

### James Kofi Annan – Challenging Heights, Ghana

James Kofi Annan began by drawing the connection between climate-induced migration and modern slavery in the fishing industry in Ghana. Previously during the fishing season a lot of fish could be caught near the shore, without needing to go out to sea. More recently, however, fisherfolk struggle to catch enough fish to feed their own families. Climate change, environmental pollution and bad fishing methods are some of the causes of depleting fish stocks. This has increased vulnerability and poverty among fisherfolk in coastal Ghana, driving people to migrate to the in-land fishing areas of Lake Volta. Yet even there, fish stocks are declining quickly due to the high frequency of fishing activities.

Consequently, migrants are vulnerable to becoming entrapped in modern slavery. Sometimes people borrow money which they later have to pay back with interest but cannot afford to do so. They are taken advantage of due to their lack of education and work in order to repay the debt. Sometimes they bring their children to work with them, and the children also end up trapped in modern slavery because their parents struggle to care for them due to the worsened fishing situation. In some cases the parents end up selling their children in return for money for survival. The children often go on to be maltreated by their traffickers.

James recommended fidelity to the implementation of the provisions of Ghana's National Climate Change Policy on migration. He further called for more synergistic approaches between government and NGOs in the development of support systems for victims of modern slavery.

- Boyd, D.S., Jackson, B., Wardlaw, J., Foody, G.M., Marsh, S., and Bales, K. (2018). Slavery from space: Demonstrating the role for satellite remote sensing to inform evidence-based action related to UN SDG number 8. *ISPRS Journal of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing*, 142, 380-388.
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### Savandie Aberyratna – Green Life Generation, Sri Lanka

Savandie Aberyratna highlighted that Sri Lanka provides a microscopic view of the links between contemporary slavery and climate change. The island is vulnerable to climate risks and its location on the Tier 2 Watch List on the latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

Green Life Generation (Pvt) Ltd is a privately initiated, holistic grassroots solution that emerged from empirical research into addressing the vulnerabilities of Sri Lankan Migrant Domestic Workers to exploitation and abuse. The might, flight and plight of these women – who are some of the world’s most invisible, vulnerable and devalued female workers – function as indicators of lived experience in Sri Lanka. They exemplify the drivers and decision-making processes of internal and international migration survival circuits. The discourse which labels these women as “victims” is wrong, stripping them of their agency. Instead, women must be understood to make rational decisions to migrate, often influenced by their own micro-economic situations.

Green Life Generation is a knowledge-based economic tool for grassroots research and development. It has now developed into an institute of social research, sustainable development and alternative education championing ground changing grassroots community development and empowerment in Sri Lanka.



Forests in Sri Lanka are being cleared for farmland



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Climate change threatens the enjoyment of the rights of present and future generations and, ultimately, the future of humanity.

**Chiara Liguori, Amnesty International**

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## Panel 2

# Human rights-based approaches

### Chiara Liguori – Amnesty International

Amnesty International recently published a report entitled, “*Stop burning our rights! What states and corporations must do to protect humanity from the climate crisis*”.<sup>4</sup> Chiara Liguori began by outlining that the climate emergency is a human rights crisis of unprecedented proportions. Climate change threatens the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of present and future generations and, ultimately, the future of humanity. It is a manifestation of deep-rooted injustices and worsens inequality and discrimination. When climate change-related impacts hit a country or a community, the knock-on effects can seriously undermine the enjoyment of the right to life lived in dignity, endanger a range of freedoms, and in many cases even put at risk the cultural survival of entire peoples.

International human rights principles and standards help to frame the climate crisis. But, more importantly, they also clarify that states have legal and enforceable obligations to tackle the climate crisis and provide significant guidance to establish the responsibility of businesses in relation to the climate crisis. Their obligations relate to mitigation, adaptation, regulating business, and loss and damage, among other things.

Chiara emphasised that it is vital to adopt a human rights lens to tackle the climate crisis. Human rights principles and standards help to clarify the steps that states must take to ensure a fast and fair transition to a decarbonised economy and resilient societies for all.

A fast transition is necessary to protect people’s human rights from the worst impacts of climate change, and a fair transition is essential to ensure that the decarbonisation process brings real positive transformation to all people, without discrimination.

### Carolina Rudnick – Fundación Libera, Chile

The prohibition of slavery is not obeyed and enforced because the principle of operational justice that it enshrines, namely the absolute balance between giving and receiving, is not understood. Instead, Carolina argued, the global political and economic regime enshrines the opposite as its operational principle of justice: domination for the maximisation of profits. This principle is based upon two false scientific principles: the possibility of unlimited growth on a finite planet, and the rule of law of the strongest, which authorises the strong to use their power in their own favour. This set of beliefs or fundamental grounding metaphors are leading humanity to its crossroads: slavery and ecocide, or freedom and Life.

Carolina outlined that the primary metaphor of separation, otherness and war is behind environmental damage and slavery. It is understood as the structural denial of commutative justice and redistribution of global wealth, and is engendered in anger, ignorance, individualism, competitiveness, and distrust. The global system is unsustainable and irrational because it produces a disturbance in an interconnected environment that carries the risk of destroying the entire system. Carolina discussed the consciousness of unity, referring to the mental state of realising that “I am part of something that at the same time constitutes me” has been weakened, lost and erased.

Carolina pressed the need to adopt a systems-thinking approach to reviewing the philosophical, legal and political concepts of freedom and slavery, and to reflect on the concrete consequences a change in the fundamental grounding metaphors could have to heal and eradicate slavery.

Artwork depicting the environmental and human costs of mining in Bolivia





Bare earth where tropical rainforest has been deforested



Slavery is perceived as 'the distant past' and climate change is seen as occurring in 'the distant future'. But both are happening right now.

Shannon Hobbs



## Panel 3

# Ecosystems of Disaster

### Rachel Phillips Rigby and Fabián Calvo Romero – Rainforest Alliance

Climate change is affecting some food production landscapes due to increasing temperatures, heavy rainfall and intense, frequent and unpredictable weather events. In these places, the land is no longer resilient, and the people who earn their livelihood from food production are vulnerable – not only to food scarcity, but to the many risks associated with economic desperation. Increasingly, so-called climate migrants are leaving their homes to seek livelihoods elsewhere, and their desperation leaves them vulnerable to various forms of modern slavery.

Rachel and Fabián explained Rainforest Alliance's work on nature-based interventions in tea, coffee and cocoa-growing landscapes affected by climate change in different parts of the world. They use Climate Smart Agriculture to improve livelihoods and reduce climate impacts. Climate Smart Agriculture has 3 pillars: adaptation, mitigation and food security. It aims to restore land and ecosystems degraded by unsustainable human practices and further compounded by a changing climate. Rainforest Alliance builds the capacity of farmers to cultivate crops in a way that supports biodiversity conservation and enhancement; soil health improvement; and emission reductions to prevent further climatic change. These nature-led recovery interventions build the resilience of production systems, and also of people, through improved and secured livelihoods. Rachel and Fabián highlighted how, in tandem with ensuring decent working conditions for farmers and farm workers, these Climate Smart Agriculture practices can be powerful forms of modern slavery prevention.

**Shannon Hobbs – University of Leeds**

Slavery is perceived as ‘the distant past’ and climate change is seen as occurring in ‘the distant future’. But both are happening right now. Shannon began by explaining that, as of 2016, Brazil held the largest absolute number of people experiencing modern slavery in Latin America at 369,000, the majority of whom are locked into debt bondage, resulting in exposure to violence, exploitation and injustice. The majority of work sites are concentrated within the ‘arc of deforestation’, meaning that victims of debt bondage will be working in sectors associated with deforestation.

Two significant gaps remain in understanding modern slavery. Firstly, vulnerability is recognised as a core component which enables enslavement, whereby proximate factors such as a lack of education, poverty and migration, govern an individual’s position of vulnerability to enslavement. This is compounded by the geographical isolation of the Amazon; maintaining the victim’s social isolation in turn maintains their vulnerability. While these are the proximate causes of exploitation, they are closely linked to deeper, underlying causes, in the form of ideological and structural systems that are embedded in the fabric of society. Shannon warned that an underdeveloped understanding of these root causes means they are neglected in policy.

Secondly, the modern slavery phenomenon tends to be viewed in isolation, but important links with wider issues are emerging. Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has far-reaching consequences, including increased emissions, biodiversity loss and diminishing ecosystem services. The proximate deforestation drivers are well established – cattle ranching, agricultural expansion and logging. Shannon concluded that these drivers represent the sectors where modern slavery is concentrated in Brazil, suggesting a primary link that requires further exploration to add to the emerging slavery-environment nexus.



Photo by Souro Souvik on Unsplash



Philippine city of Tacloban after Typhoon Haiyan struck in November 2013

## Panel 4

### Conflict, Disaster and Migration

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One thing is very clear: that is, climate change is worsening poverty and inequality and placing people, who are already in precarious situations, in positions where they have reached the limits of their coping capacity. They are then exposed to other impacts, such as slavery.

Ritu Bharadwaj

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#### Ritu Bharadwaj – International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

Climate change and climate-induced migration heighten existing vulnerabilities to slavery. Drivers of vulnerability to modern slavery are complex and are impacted by many layers of risk. While several socio-economic, political, cultural and institutional risks shape vulnerability, they are increasingly considered to be made worse by climate change impacts and environmental degradation. Climate-induced displacements are becoming unavoidable.

Ritu outlined the three contexts that IIED's research has considered:

1. Sudden and extreme climate events, such as cyclones and hurricanes, lead to displacement of communities which expose them to different types of slavery. This is the most well-documented pathway, with strong evidence indicating that human trafficking increases in the aftermath of sudden-onset disasters. For instance, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines caused many fatalities. Many women who were widowed in this disaster were then trafficked into prostitution.
2. Slow-onset climate events, such as increasing temperatures and rainfall, which can lead local people to pursue risky strategies which then lead to modern slavery.
3. The intersection between these slow-onset events and conflict and forced displacement. This weakens a community's existing institutions and mechanisms which could otherwise have provided support.

Case studies from Ghana and Bangladesh clearly demonstrate that climate change is acting as a stress multiplier with regard to existing vulnerabilities.<sup>5</sup> Climate vulnerability is rooted in social dynamics, reflecting historical marginalisation.

5 [https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ClimateMigrationReportSep2021\\_low\\_res.pdf](https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ClimateMigrationReportSep2021_low_res.pdf)

**Dr Chris O'Connell – Dublin City University**

Research into human trafficking and contemporary slavery has moved from an overwhelming focus on criminal justice to a broader historical view, encompassing structural issues and power dynamics. In particular, vulnerability to exploitation is said to be rooted in extreme forms of inequality and power imbalances, pointing to the importance of the state in preventing human rights violations by mitigating social, economic and environmental risk factors. Climate change is exacerbating existing risks and driving precarity and unsafe migration.

The disappearance of Bolivia's second largest lake, Lake Poopo, was an emblematic event. It was also a predictable event, due to the mass die-off of biodiversity the previous year. This had a devastating effect on the Indigenous Uru people, who lived predominantly by fishing. They were pushed into different forms of vulnerability and unfree labour. The event made global news as an example of the impacts of climate change, due to warmer waters killing off fish. However, later investigations showed a local tin mine was discharging toxic residue directly into the lake, while waters were being diverted for use by mining and agribusiness.

Chris outlined that very little support was given to the Urus except for immediate emergency measures and training programmes. This was victim-centred but limited in scope. Some Urus have moved across borders to work in textile factories, which are associated with exploitative labour. Men have been trapped into debt, particularly in the construction industry. Many women have migrated to the cities to work in domestic service or in exploitative agricultural labour.

This case study, along with that of climate migrants in Peru's alluvial gold mining sector in Madre de Dios, highlights a shared lack of political will to effectively regulate extractive activities that expose climate migrants to exploitation and abuse. Chris underscored that these findings indicate a common economic dependency that reveals the limits of the nation-state and the need for coordinated global action to tackle the root causes of vulnerability to contemporary slavery.

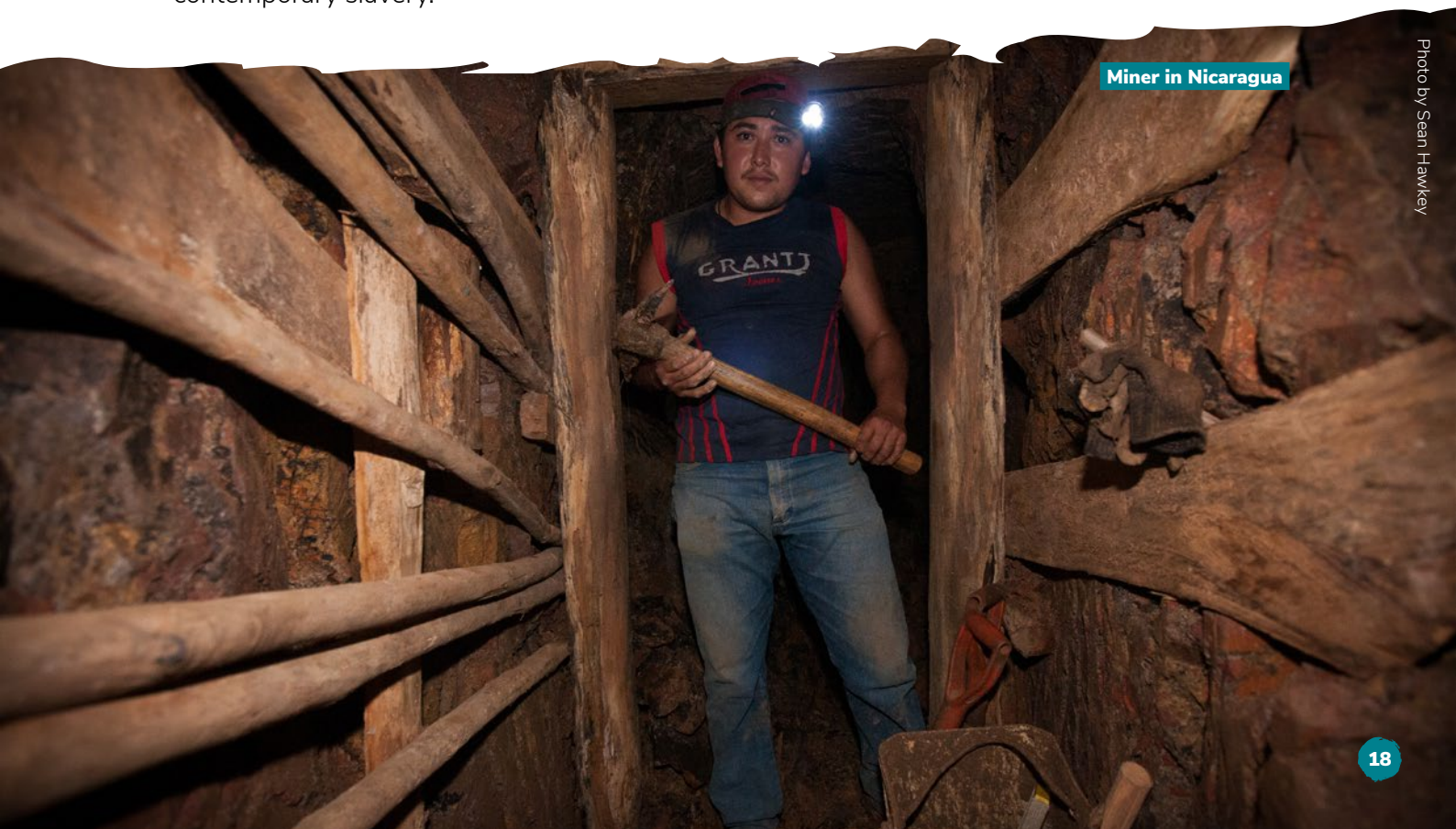
**Miner in Nicaragua**

Photo by Sean Hawkey

## Saphia Fleury – University of Hull

Saphia presented research that addressed the question: “What protection gaps exist for environmental refugees, and what would be the best mechanisms to fill these protection gaps?” It used two historical case studies of mass migration: the post-Vietnam War boat people, and the exodus from the Caribbean Island of Montserrat due to the volcanic crisis in the 1990s. These locations face major threats from climate change today, as well as having experienced significant environmental damage in the past, both manmade and natural.

Early findings indicate that migrants from both Montserrat and Vietnam faced a broad range of human rights violations and abuses, frequently due to direct state policy or failure to provide protection against abuses by non-state actors. Today, children fleeing environmental damage face abuses such as sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and organ trafficking. In theory, protection is given to people through national and international laws, international guidelines and regional initiatives, among other things. Yet in reality the protection they offer is undermined by a number of factors, for instance weak judicial or law enforcement systems and states opting out of certain provisions.

Saphia argued that new legislation may not always be the best solution, as putting people into categories will always leave someone out in the cold. In conclusion, future environmental migrants might be best served by assisted relocation schemes that are carried out in consultation with the affected individuals, grounded in existing human rights law, rather than a new legal framework or international treaty.

People fleeing Vietnam by boat following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975



Photo by Phil Eggman via Wikimedia Commons

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Climate change is another stressor that is tipping people into vulnerability to exploitation and modern slavery.

Fran Witt

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## Conclusion

### Fran Witt – Anti-Slavery International

Fran concluded by saying that today, many organisations of civil society, government and multi-lateral institutions are considering the urgency of responding to the nexus between climate change, environmental degradation and vulnerability to exploitation. This conference's Outcome Statement constitutes a joint message to COP26 to highlight that this is a vital issue that needs to be responded to by the climate community and policy-makers. Modern slavery has largely been a blind spot in the development and climate justice communities until this point. Climate change is another stressor that is tipping people into vulnerability to exploitation and modern slavery, and it needs urgent attention. Demands include a 'just transition' and decent work for all as we move into a new decarbonised economy that respond to the needs of people vulnerable to modern slavery. In particular, there is a need for a significant increase in finance for adaptation and loss and damage and to ensure people who are impacted have recourse to remedy.

## Annex I

### Outcome statement to the Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, President Delegate to COP26

Climate action at COP26 needs to happen fast, and it also needs to be participatory and fair to achieve sustainable, more equal, and resilient societies. According to the IPCC (the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change) limiting global warming to 1.5°C rather than 2°C could reduce the number of people exposed to climate-related risks and susceptible to poverty by up to several hundred million by 2050.

Climate change is costly, deadly and hits hardest those who are least responsible for causing it. The Climate Vulnerable Forum, estimates that developing countries could face financial losses of US\$4 trillion per year by 2030. Low-income countries are exposed to some of the most severe climate impacts, have the least capacity to adapt, and find it hardest to recover from the loss and damage caused by devastating climate impacts.

Climate change is affecting food production landscapes due to increasing temperature, heavy rainfall and intense, frequent and unpredictable weather events. In these areas land is no longer resilient, and people who earn their livelihood from food production are vulnerable – not only to food scarcity, but to the many risks associated with economic desperation.

In many cases these conditions lead to people being forced to migrate and leave their lands or jobs that can no longer provide them with a living, making them more vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking and contemporary slavery. The World Bank predicts that as many as 143 million people will migrate within their own borders in just three regions of the world by 2050 unless action is taken to address climate change. The data on the magnitude of contemporary slavery and environmental destruction shows that the number of victims and the complexity of the contemporary dynamics of exploitation in globalized markets and in the context of migratory and climate crises, will only increase.

Climate change threatens the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of present and future generations and, ultimately, the future of humanity. It also worsens inequality and discrimination. When climate change-related impacts hit a country or a community, the knock-on effects can seriously undermine the enjoyment of the right to life lived in dignity, endanger a range of freedoms, and in many cases even put at risk the cultural survival of entire peoples.

This is the decade in which we must collectively limit climate change and make our societies more equal and just. Otherwise, we will emerge from the global pandemic locked into a climate emergency and poverty emergency in which already marginalised people become exploited through forced and bonded labour, child slavery, forced marriage and trafficking.

## A Just Transition

Keeping the world to 1.5°C average global warming means reducing greenhouse gas emissions 45% below their 2010 levels by 2030; and reaching 'net zero' emissions by 2050.<sup>6</sup> This transition needs to be fair, to be "just". That means that transitions need to respect the fundamental rights of all those involved, particularly the most vulnerable.

This "Just Transition" is articulated in the Paris Agreement, which clearly states that "Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of Indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity."<sup>7</sup>

Climate change is not the only factor contributing to vulnerability. In particular, the environmental damage wrought by extractive sectors and the absence of sufficient state supports for rural livelihoods are significant factors influencing migration patterns.

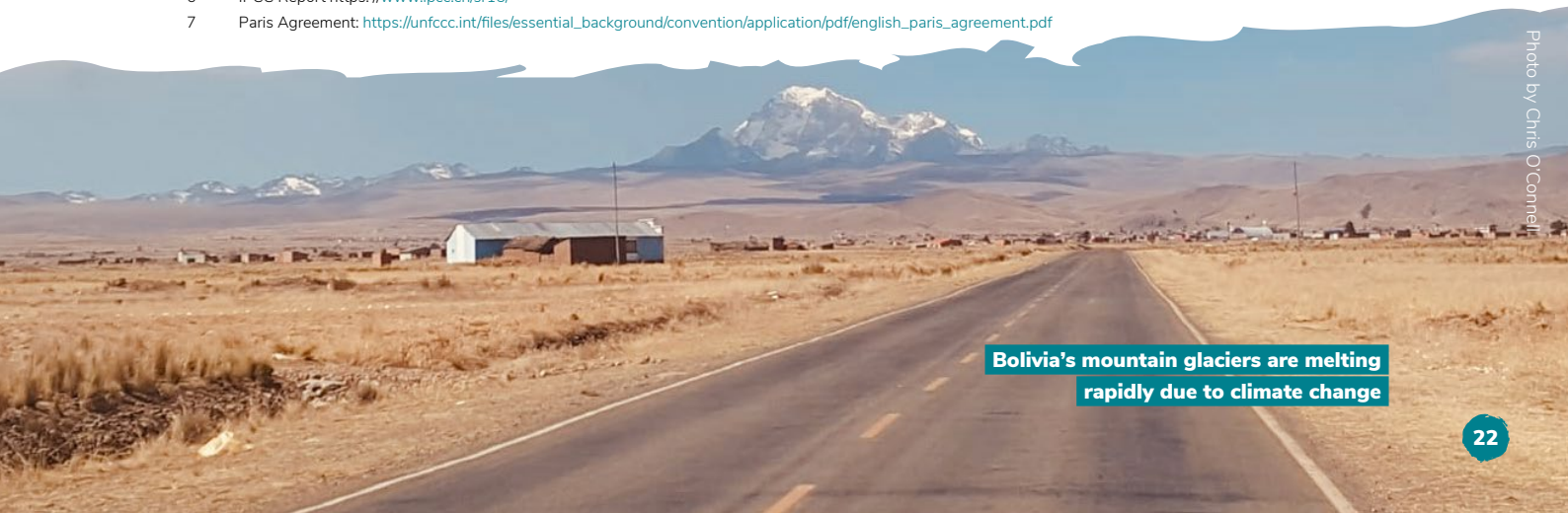
An estimated 6-12 million people are subjected to contemporary slavery in environmentally degrading activities. For example, forests are impacted by contemporary slavery through activities such as illegal mining, forestry, and intensive agriculture. Contemporary slavery thrives in forest areas as these activities require large workforces, and occur in secluded environments that are difficult to monitor.

In order to respond to the climate, environment and human right crisis, the Just Transition needs to be built into economic recovery planning from the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires ensuring that the expansion of low-carbon energy and infrastructure does not harm people or the environment. At COP26 governments need to ensure that as well as providing transition support to workers in traditional carbon intensive industry, they ensure commitment from the renewable energy industry and not turn a blind eye to the use of forced labour and contemporary slavery in their operations.

COP26 is an important test of the Paris Agreement and an opportunity for governments of the world to raise their ambition in response to the climate crisis and to put human rights and decent work at the centre of that response.

6 IPCC Report <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

7 Paris Agreement: [https://unfccc.int/files/essential\\_background/convention/application/pdf/english\\_paris\\_agreement.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf)



**Bolivia's mountain glaciers are melting rapidly due to climate change**



## Annex II

### Speaker bios

**Savandie Abeyratna** is Founder and CEO of Green Life Generation, a grassroots social research, sustainable development and alternative education institute based near Kandy in Sri Lanka. She developed and implemented the project I AM UPCYCLED in 2017 which has grown into a recognised ethical and green brand in the country. Her work cuts across gender, labour and developmental issues with a focus on sustainable development. Through her organisation, she aims to develop her community into a sustainable green town aiding in de-urbanisation and producing a blueprint for sustainable community development in the country.

**James Kofi Annan** is a passionate, hard-working anti-slavery advocate. James was trafficked to Ghana's Lake Volta at age six, where he spent seven years working in forced and hazardous labour and modern slavery-like practices in the fishing industry. He escaped and pursued his education. James became a successful banker in one of Ghana's leading banks. He founded Challenging Heights in 2005 to ensure that children realise their rights to freedom and education. James has also served as board chair of Family for Every Child and former UN Financial Sector Commissioner on Modern Slavery and Human trafficking, among other positions.

**Ritu Bharadwaj** is Senior Researcher, Climate Change Group, International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED). She has over 18 years of senior policy development, research and management experience in government, funding agencies and international NGOs. She has worked extensively on climate resilience, resource conservation, social protection, migration and gender issues. Her work has helped develop robust, evidence-based research that has influenced policy framework and strategies for numerous institutions and organizations, including national governments, international development and humanitarian organizations. Her experience spans across issues of climate change, disaster risk reduction and migration and how it interacts with climate induced migration.

**Professor Trevor Burnard** is Wilberforce Professor of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull and Director of the Wilberforce Institute. He specialises in the Atlantic World and slavery in plantation societies. He is the author of *Only Connect: A Field Report on Early American History* (Virginia, forthcoming); *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (2020) and *The Atlantic World, 1492-1830* (2020). He recently curated a special forum in *Slavery and Abolition* on Black Lives Matter and Slavery and is curating another special issue for *Early American Studies* on Richard Dunn's *Sugar and Slaves* after 50 years.

**Fabian Calvo Romero** leads the Rainforest Alliance's work on biodiversity conservation with a focus on avoiding deforestation, the sustainable use of natural resources and biological diversity and its interlinkages with climate change. He has extensive knowledge in developing criteria, guidance and training materials related to those topics in various sectors and countries, and with diverse stakeholders through active participation in international fora. He led the development of various requirements that aim to maximize the positive impact and minimize negative impact of farming practices on biodiversity for the new Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard and related documents.

**Saphia Fleury** is a final-year PhD candidate at the Wilberforce Institute, University of Hull. Prior to conducting research on environmental migration, Saphia worked for 12 years at the headquarters of Amnesty International. She published several books on international human rights law for Amnesty, and specialised in the Middle East and North Africa region, and fair trial law. She continues to advise Amnesty as a consultant, and has co-edited and co-authored Amnesty's annual State of the World's Human Rights report since 2008. Saphia is also a volunteer Expert Reviewer for the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

**Shannon Hobbs** holds a Masters in Climate Change and Environmental Policy at The University of Leeds. She aspires to progress a career in research that focuses on understanding modern slavery and environmental issues.

**Dr Bethany Jackson** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Rights Lab whose work focuses on the nexus between modern slavery, environmental degradation and climate change. Her background is in the application of remote sensing to investigate the nexus, and she has experience investigating sectors including agriculture, brick kilns and fisheries. Beth's current interests lie in the impacts of the nexus in relation to forest ecosystems.

**Chiara Liguori** is a Policy Advisor on Environment and Human Rights at Amnesty International. She leads the organisation's policy and strategy development on climate change and human rights, and previously worked as Caribbean researcher at Amnesty and as a human rights officer for the UN in Haiti and Comoros. She is particularly interested in climate-related migration and displacement, which she recently studied in her MA on Refugee Protection and Forced Migration Studies at the University of London.

**Wilma Mendoza** is President of the National Confederation of Indigenous Women of Bolivia (CNAMIB), a pioneering grassroots social movement which defends both collective Indigenous rights and the individual rights of Indigenous women. Wilma herself is from a lowland community in the eastern region of Bolivia – a region which made global headlines in 2019 with the widespread forest fires concentrated in the Chiquitania and Chaco regions that led to the burning of 1.4 million hectares (3.4 million acres). CNAMIB works to support affected communities and to highlight the impacts of climate change, environmental destruction and public policy.

**Dr Chris O'Connell** is a CAROLINE Research Fellow at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University. His current research is co-funded by the European Commission and the Irish Research Council and focuses on the relationship between and responses to climate change, environmental degradation and contemporary forms of slavery in Peru and Bolivia. Chris holds a PhD in Political Science from Dublin City University. Chris is the author of the report "From a Vicious to a Virtuous Circle" produced in collaboration with Anti-Slavery International, and is a member of the Advisory Board of Earth Refuge, a legal resource hub for climate migrants.

**Jasmine O'Connor OBE** has been the CEO of Anti-Slavery International since 2018. Over a 30-year career Jasmine has led a wide range of international human rights campaigns that combine practical grassroots programmes with policy change initiatives. She has worked across Africa, Asia and Europe and has an MA in International Diplomacy. She was awarded an OBE for services to international human rights and development. As CEO of Anti-Slavery International, Jasmine has led the development of a new 5-year strategy for the organisation, including a focus on climate change and modern slavery as one of four thematic priorities.

**Professor Dan Parsons** is an active researcher in areas related to fluvial, estuarine, coastal and deep marine sedimentary environments, exploring responses of these systems to climate and environmental change, for example understanding how evolving flood risk on large mega-deltas can impact populations and related regional and global food security – through to understanding the impact of plastics, particularly in coastal and marine environments. As the Director of the Energy and Environment Institute at Hull, he has gathered together an interdisciplinary team of over 160 researchers, with a portfolio of active research grants and projects of now totalling over £27M.

**Rachel Phillips Rigby** leads the Rainforest Alliance's work on human rights. She focuses on preventing and addressing forced labour, exploitative working conditions, and other human rights abuses across the Rainforest Alliance's global programs and landscapes. Previously, she spent 15 years with the United States Department of Labor, where she developed multi-million-dollar partnerships with NGOs and foreign governments to address child labour and forced labour and engaged in diplomacy with government counterparts to urge more action on these issues. Ms. Rigby holds an MBA in international management from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies and a BA from Grinnell College.

**Carolina Rudnick Vizcarra** is a lawyer from the University of Concepción, specializing in human trafficking, corruption and international human rights law. She served as a lawyer in the Department of Organized Crime of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security of Chile. She currently chairs the Libera Foundation, a non-profit organization combating human trafficking and contemporary slavery. She works as a lecturer of political and constitutional law at the Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile. She is a consultant for the Inter-American Commission of Women and Eurosocial+, and a researcher at the British Institute for International and Comparative Law.



Photo by Julian James

Women from a project supporting the Haliya community in Nepal



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