

## **The Ethics of Research into Human Trafficking Beyond 'Do No Harm': Developing a 'Living' Ethical Protocol**

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- 1 **Part II**
- 2 **Structural Issues in Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking**
- 3 **Practice**

1 5\*

2 The Ethics of Research into Human Trafficking Beyond ‘Do No  
3 Harm’: Developing a ‘Living’ Ethical Protocol

4 Patricia Hynes and Mike Dottridge

5 Abstract

6 Human trafficking has risen up the policy and legislative agendas of many countries  
7 during the past two decades following the UN Trafficking Protocol. Known forms of  
8 harm from anti-trafficking efforts have been described as ‘collateral damage’ – a term  
9 which describes the dangers of anti-trafficking measures having adverse impacts on  
10 the rights and freedoms of people. That these types of harms exist within work to  
11 protect people experiencing human trafficking is a key consideration when conducting  
12 research. This chapter looks at the ethics of conducting research into human  
13 trafficking and/or ‘modern slavery’. The chapter questions whether the principle of  
14 ‘do no harm’ is sufficient to guide researchers through these sometimes polemical and  
15 often contentious research environments. Given that power imbalances are built into  
16 responses to people who are trafficked, it is suggested that the concept of ‘harm’ be  
17 broadly interpreted from the outset of research. It is also suggested that social stigma,  
18 and the possibility that research might reify this, be understood within research  
19 processes and that the framing of trafficking research needs to include sensitivity

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1 towards regularly used negative terminology. To explore this, the chapter tracks the  
2 development of a ‘living’ Ethical Protocol developed for a two-year study looking at  
3 human trafficking from Albania, Nigeria, and Vietnam to the UK. Conceptual  
4 approaches, methodology, procedural ethics, existing ethical guidelines, ethics in  
5 practice, looking beyond the principle of ‘do no harm’, the context in which research  
6 takes place, and wider considerations of the use of research are then outlined.

#### 7 Keywords

8 human trafficking, modern slavery, forced migration, research ethics, vulnerabilities,  
9 harm, social stigma

## 10 Introduction

11 Although not new phenomena, human trafficking and human smuggling have risen up  
12 the policy agendas of many countries in the past two decades ([Gallagher, 2015a,b](#);  
13 [Morrison, 2002](#)). Prior to the landmark definition of human trafficking provided by  
14 the UN Trafficking Protocol, anti-slavery activities to ‘liberate’ or ‘rescue’ people  
15 experiencing various forms of extreme exploitation during the second half of the 20th  
16 century were already subject to critiques around their counter-productive impacts,  
17 notably the lack of provision for viable economic alternatives for those freed from  
18 slavery in the two international Conventions on slavery and practices similar to  
19 slavery adopted in 1926 and 1956. Critiques of rescue and liberation have continued  
20 after the UN Trafficking Protocol ([Dottridge, 2001](#); [LeBaron and Pliley, 2021](#)).

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1           The term ‘collateral damage’ describes the dangers of anti-trafficking  
2 measures having adverse impacts on the rights and freedoms of people who have  
3 experienced human trafficking and on related groups, such as women and child  
4 migrants more generally ([GAATW, 2007](#); [Dottridge, 2018](#)). The term describes how  
5 harm may be inflicted upon people as a result of anti-trafficking legal measures and  
6 wider campaigns. For example, detention in immigration centres, prosecution of  
7 individuals for offences involving illegal work, raids and rescues that do not  
8 adequately consider the protection of those involved, as well as repatriation to  
9 unchanged circumstances. In other words, practices wherein the ‘victim’ of human  
10 trafficking is not placed at the centre of actions designed to ‘combat’ human  
11 trafficking and which do not make it a priority to respect the dignity and rights of  
12 these individuals, as noted by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women  
13 (GAATW): ‘A plethora of actors on the anti-trafficking terrain do their work from the  
14 perspective of human rights including those who bundle off the trafficked and migrant  
15 women back to where they came from in the name of protection’ ([2007](#): vii).  
16 That these types of ‘harms’ exist within work to protect people experiencing human  
17 trafficking is a key consideration when conducting research.

18           Ethical issues have become increasingly more central to discussions about  
19 research more broadly due in part to historical transgressions of ethical principles,  
20 revelations of medical and scientific misconduct, and an increasing recognition that

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1 research is not conducted in a ‘moral vacuum’ becoming thereby invariably related to  
2 politics and the politics of knowledge production (Bryman, 2012: 149–52). Ethical  
3 boundaries in research are also constantly being set by historically informed and  
4 socially constructed limits to voyeurism.<sup>1</sup> [Israel and Hay \(2006\)](#) have argued that  
5 researchers need a better understanding of the politics and context within which ethics  
6 are regulated. Bryman (2012) also outlines how funding research through  
7 organizations with a ‘vested interest’ is a key part of the politics of knowledge  
8 production. This chapter links to research on ethics and human trafficking ([Cwikel  
9 and Hoban, 2005](#); [Duong, 2015](#); [Siegel and Wildt, 2016](#)). It also considers what  
10 [Jacobsen and Landau \(2003a,b\)](#) have called a ‘dual imperative’ in research with  
11 forcibly displaced populations. This ‘dual imperative’ relates to both satisfying high  
12 academic standards *and* ensuring knowledge production improves the lives of people  
13 concerned, including by influencing policy and practice. In other words, research is  
14 conducted ethically with responsibility towards participants and others *as well as*  
15 carried out in ways that underpin confidence in results of the research with

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<sup>1</sup> Two social studies that are of particular note are Stanley Milgram’s studies of obedience to authority and Laud Humphrey’s covert observation studies of homosexuality in the 1960s.

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1 researchers, and the research community, retaining integrity throughout and  
2 recognizing tensions may exist in such an endeavour ([Carling, 2019](#)).

3         This chapter looks at the ethics of conducting research into human trafficking  
4 and ‘modern slavery’.<sup>2</sup> The chapter questions whether the principle of ‘do no harm’ is  
5 sufficient to guide researchers through the sometimes polemical and often contentious  
6 research environment of human trafficking or modern slavery. Given that power  
7 imbalances are built into responses to people who are trafficked, it is suggested that  
8 the concept of ‘harm’ should be broadly conceived from the outset of research. It is  
9 suggested that social stigma, and the possibility that research might reify this, be  
10 understood within research processes from conception. It is also suggested that the  
11 framing of trafficking research includes sensitivity towards regularly used negative  
12 terminology.

13         The meaning of ‘harm’ is debatable but in bioethics is thought of as physical  
14 harm to human beings. In social research this also includes physical, psychological,  
15 social, and economic damage involving ‘psychological distress, discomfort, social  
16 disadvantage, invasion of privacy or infringement of rights’ ([Israel and Hay, 2006](#):  
17 96). Sound safeguards are therefore needed ([Carling, 2019](#)). In human trafficking

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘modern slavery’ is contested – see later discussion. The term was  
introduced in the UK through the 2015 Modern Slavery Act.

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1 research potential harms can include exposing an individual to retaliation if details of  
2 data are not held confidentially and responsibly, exposing individuals to harm from  
3 family or community members if their potentially stigmatizing experiences are  
4 revealed, impacting on the dignity of individuals through a charitable (but  
5 patronizing) approach that deflects from their rights and entitlements, distress caused  
6 through unwarranted eliciting of disclosures, as well as potential harms towards those  
7 conducting research. Future harms might include causing harm to future migrants who  
8 are not trafficked if detailed techniques, locations, and routes are provided to  
9 authorities.

10 To explore ethics in the context of a research study, the chapter tracks the  
11 development of a ‘living’ Ethical Protocol, developed over two years between April  
12 2017 and March 2019, for a project looking at human trafficking from Albania,  
13 Nigeria, and Vietnam to the UK.<sup>3</sup> The creation and development of this ‘living’

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<sup>3</sup> As outlined in the ‘Methodology’ section, Albania, Nigeria, and Vietnam have consistently seen high numbers of referrals into the UK’s National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and were chosen for this study on this basis – carried out in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and funded by the Modern Slavery Innovation Fund (MSIF) at the UK Home Office.

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1 Ethical Protocol sought to develop a ‘culture of ethics’ across all stages of the study  
2 and across a research team spanning four countries in which people who had  
3 experienced trafficking and associated stakeholders were interviewed. It sought to  
4 embed an iterative and continuous process of ethical thinking and ethical practice.  
5 The Protocol’s authors are acknowledged herein by level of contribution.<sup>4</sup> While this  
6 chapter does not contain a complete account of every detail of this unpublished  
7 Protocol, important aspects are included.

8       Initially, this mainly qualitative research drew on established ethical  
9 frameworks and guidance in existing literature, with reflection on their relevance to  
10 human trafficking research. Following a short section on the conceptual approach of  
11 the research and methodology, these established procedural ethics are outlined and the  
12 journey through ethics in practice is described. Thereafter ethical considerations

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<sup>4</sup> P. Hynes, V. Lenja, H.T Tran, L. Gani-Yusuf, A. Gaxha, P. Priest, A. Olatunde, J.

Dew, and P. Burland (unpublished, 2018) *‘Vulnerability’ to Human Trafficking: A Study of Vietnam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK – Ethical Protocol*, University of Bedfordshire and International Organization for Migration, Hanoi, Tirana, Lagos, and London. The end of the project and partnership arrangement meant no further work was carried out to publish this document.

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1 relating specifically to human trafficking and the imperative to think beyond the  
2 principle of ‘do no harm’ that emerged out of the study are detailed. Specific  
3 mechanisms for resolving ongoing ethical issues during this research study are  
4 described. Finally, the wider context and overall framing of human trafficking/modern  
5 slavery is considered, focusing on broader structural, global governance, and ethical  
6 considerations around the use and impact of research into migration and human  
7 trafficking. In this section we raise a series of questions relating to ethics and the use  
8 of research that require further discussion among researchers.

### 9 [Conceptual approaches: capturing the transnational and](#) 10 [contextual nature of trafficking](#)

11 Conceptually, this four-country study required an approach that avoided constructing  
12 migration as a problem which, as Anderson suggests, poses ‘ethical and  
13 epistemological challenges to migration scholars’ relating to ‘political and  
14 methodological nationalism’ (2019: 1). ‘Methodological nationalism’ relates to  
15 research which takes the nation state as the natural social and political form of the  
16 modern world, focusing on the engagement of individuals within one country and  
17 neglecting any simultaneous and continuing ties abroad ([Wimmer and Glick Schiller,](#)  
18 [2002](#): 302). Researchers may unconsciously define research topics within their own  
19 ‘imagined communities’ ([Anderson, 1991](#)) rather than transnationally and the

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1 tendency in migration studies to define issues, develop aims, conduct studies, and  
2 analyse data simultaneous to an ‘uncritical embracing’ of the nation state as the  
3 ‘natural social and political form’ which [Anderson \(2019\)](#) suggests in turn implicates  
4 scholars in nation state building processes (2019: 3). Methodological nationalism  
5 critiques the idea that nation states are such natural forms of organization, suggesting  
6 instead that a fuller theoretical perspective requires consideration of social networks  
7 and links with family, places of origin, and processes that cross borders between  
8 nation states ([Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002](#); [Vertovec, 2020](#)).

9         This also reflects what Castles referred to as ‘the tyranny of the national’, with  
10 knowledge and understanding constructed at national level, suggested to be a key  
11 reason why the policies of states seem to have little success in preventing unwanted  
12 immigration and why migration policies ultimately fail ([Castles, 2004](#); [Geddes, 2005](#)).  
13 There are also neglected social dynamics of the migratory process and factors linked  
14 to globalization and transnationalism to consider ([Castles, 2004](#)).

15         Policy, practice, and legislation on abuse, exploitation, and forced migration  
16 are regularly constructed within a paradigm of methodological nationalism  
17 ([Anderson, 2019](#)). While national logic is applied to migration control, the forces  
18 driving migration follow a national logic ([Castles, 2003, 2004](#)). Human trafficking  
19 studies that focus on transnational migration thus require conceptualization beyond  
20 the national, to encompass social networks and understandings that migration

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1 decisions are made by family/household networks to ‘minimise risk and produce  
2 benefits for all’ ([Vertovec, 2020](#): 7; see also [Boyd, 1989](#)). The four-country study  
3 sought to incorporate such transnational conceptual linkage between countries of  
4 origin and the UK.

5 Use of an ecological model enabled contextual ‘vulnerabilities’ to be  
6 understood through situation-specific analysis ([UNODC, 2013](#): 14). A recently  
7 devised IOM ‘Determinants of Migrant Vulnerability’ (DoMV) model allowed for  
8 disaggregation of individual-, family/household-, community-, and structural-level  
9 factors as contributors to human trafficking.

10 The DoMV model is akin to ecological models originally developed for child  
11 development and child maltreatment studies which place the child at the centre and  
12 explain the way in which the immediate and surrounding environment affects child  
13 development ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#); further developed by Belsky, 1993). The ILO  
14 used such an ecological model in its first global report on child labour ([2002](#)). The  
15 ecological model has also been applied to a range of other issues, including youth  
16 violence ([Krug et al, 2002](#)), violence against women (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2015),  
17 violence against children (UNICEF, nd), sexual violence (Heise, 1998), and child  
18 sexual exploitation and abuse ([Radford et al, 2015a,b](#); [UNICEF, 2020](#)). Most recently,  
19 contextual safeguarding approaches have grown out from this work (Barter, 2009;  
20 [Firmin and Rayment-McHugh, 2020](#)). As Firmin and Rayment-McHugh suggest,

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1 responses to child abuse that only target the individuals involved miss contextual  
2 factors such as ‘peer relationships, school, neighborhood and online settings’  
3 highlighting relationships between individuals and context and the consequent need to  
4 ‘consider context when seeking to prevent or respond to abuse’ (2020: 230). This  
5 body of work has shifted thinking around differing forms of abuse and violence from  
6 single-cause models to more multifaceted models that emphasize interacting factors  
7 and such nested ecological models. These models also recognize that risk and  
8 protective factors may change over the life course.

9         Applying an ecological framework specifically to human trafficking,  
10 [Zimmerman et al \(2016\)](#) suggest it allows for larger contextual forces to be  
11 considered alongside attributes and behaviours of people who have experienced  
12 migration and labour exploitation. They also suggest that at the individual, family,  
13 and community levels there is a potential role for ‘community migration norms’ to be  
14 considered; that is, common practices around migration that influence and ‘lend  
15 confidence’ to individuals considering their migration options ([Zimmerman et al,](#)  
16 [2016: 17](#)).

## 17 Methodology

18 The study looked at the causes of human trafficking within Albania, Nigeria, and  
19 Vietnam and support needs in the UK for these populations. These three countries  
20 have consistently been among the top referral countries for people who are denoted in

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1 the UK as ‘potential victims’<sup>5</sup> when referred into the UK’s National Referral  
2 Mechanism (NRM). For example, in the four years from 2014 to 2017, these countries  
3 represented 38 per cent of referrals (5,485 referrals out of a total of 14,556) to the  
4 UK’s NRM. The study was funded by Phase 1 of the Modern Slavery Innovation  
5 Fund (MSIF) established by the UK Home Office in 2016 to support operational and  
6 research projects tackling the root causes of modern slavery. The research was  
7 conducted independently by a research team led by a UK-based university research  
8 team (University of Bedfordshire) and IOM team members in the four countries  
9 involved. Country-based expert researchers with extensive experience of human  
10 trafficking research were competitively recruited. An Expert Reference Group of  
11 academics, practitioners, and policy makers was convened to provide oversight,  
12 governance, ensure high academic standards, and ensure research integrity.

13 The associated literature review of grey and peer-reviewed literature found a  
14 significant gap in empirical studies exploring the perspectives of those who had  
15 experienced trafficking-related exploitation (Brodie et al, 2019; see also Gozdziaik et  
16 al, 2015). Geographically, it was found that existing literature on Albania, Nigeria,

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<sup>5</sup> These terms are contestable, with the OSCE (2004) referring to ‘presumed victims’  
of trafficking when there are ‘reasonable grounds’ for considering that  
someone might have been trafficked.

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1 and Vietnam gave scant reference to the UK as a destination country with a far greater  
2 focus on trafficking accounts within their respective regions.

3         The study was grounded in a feminist approach that is rooted in a deep  
4 commitment to applied research and knowledge production based around seeking  
5 positive change for people (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), meeting the imperative  
6 to improve the lives of the people concerned. To develop this stance further and  
7 ensure knowledge about each country was incorporated from the outset, Shared  
8 Learning Events (SLEs) were organized in Tirana (Albania), Hanoi (Vietnam), and  
9 Lagos (Nigeria) (Hynes et al, 2018a,b,c). These SLEs were designed to share what  
10 was already known about trafficking and explore contextual factors that led to  
11 trafficking in each country.

12         Following the appointment of local-expert researchers, the SLEs allowed for  
13 discussions of the project and ethical practice when conducting research across a  
14 broad range of practitioners.<sup>6</sup> While the idea around co-creation of the study had some  
15 limitations given funding structures and expectations around key milestones, working  
16 on the co-development of the ‘living’ Ethical Research Protocol at this point allowed

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<sup>6</sup> In total 94 participants took part in SLEs, including representatives from a broad  
range of civil society, government agencies, law enforcement, health services,  
and academia.

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1 for co-design of research questions, information sheets, and informed consent forms,  
2 each refined to suit each country context with ethics as a foregrounding principle. The  
3 development of the ‘living’ Protocol formed the basis for ongoing discussions with  
4 IOM partners and from this point onwards was continually updated to ensure the  
5 involvement of people in this research was ethically sound.

6 From the outset it was understood that children were not to be interviewed<sup>7</sup>  
7 but that there was a possibility that adults interviewed had experienced trafficking  
8 when they were children. It is also the case that, under Vietnamese law, a person is a  
9 child when (s)he is under 16 years of age and the transition to adulthood is 16 rather  
10 than 18 years ([Barber and Nguyen, 2016](#)). Interviews in Vietnam for this study were  
11 only conducted with those above 18 years. As such, age reckoning was an issue that  
12 researchers needed to pay attention to in relation to national versus international  
13 standards highlighting the need to think transnationally when devising research and  
14 research questions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The decision to not include children was taken during days 2 and 3 of the SLEs  
independently in each country.

<sup>8</sup> Including taking into account the passing of each lunar year wherein newborns start  
at 1 year old, with the first year of life counted as 1 instead of zero. ‘Cultural  
age’ and ‘calendar age’ may therefore differ.

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1           A method of overcoming the sometimes-static view provided by ecological  
2 models related to the use of timelines to capture change over time in relation to  
3 human trafficking, broader migration, and key socio-economic and political events  
4 relating to processes of migration. In this sense [Bronfenner's \(1979\)](#) chronosystem  
5 added a useful dimension to ecological approaches – time – which captures all  
6 experiences individuals have lived through, such as major life transitions and  
7 historical events, change, and continuities in the environment. Research into  
8 migration is often ahistoric and the development of historic timelines during the SLEs  
9 addressed this by capturing key political events and accounts of past migrations.

10           A full account of the methodology and methods have been recounted  
11 elsewhere (Hynes et al, 2019) with the development of the 'living' Ethical Protocol  
12 running alongside the refinement of aims, sampling strategy, questions around access,  
13 informed consent, and fieldwork. A total of 164 qualitative semi-structured interviews  
14 were conducted in the four countries involved with key informants (n=96) and adults  
15 who had experienced trafficking and/or exploitation (n=68). Of the 68 individuals  
16 with lived experience, 21 were Albanian, 18 Nigerian, and 29 Vietnamese,  
17 interviewed either in their countries of origin to which they had returned or in the UK.  
18 Qualitative data from SLEs and interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed, and  
19 where necessary, translated into English. All transcripts and other source material

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1 were password protected and stored securely to avoid data falling into the wrong  
2 hands.

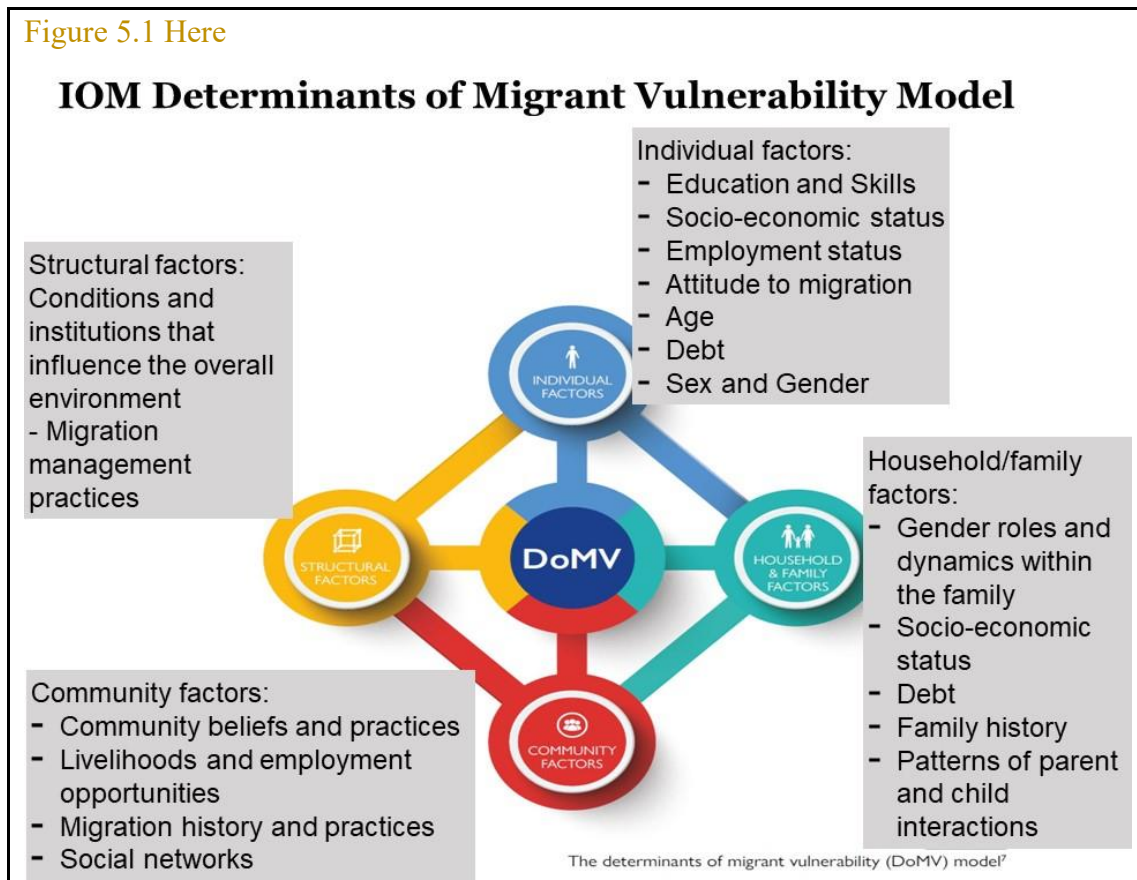
3 To manage the large amount of qualitative data generated, NVivo11 social  
4 sciences software was utilized to analyse the data. This introduced a limitation at the  
5 data-analysis stage to having all team members involved in coding as, beyond the  
6 logistics of analysis across four countries, licensing considerations became a barrier.  
7 The UK-based team coded data iteratively and thematically using a range of  
8 descriptive and analytic categories (Bryman, 2012). Coding thus broke down the data  
9 into component parts with constant comparison between the study aims, data, and  
10 findings as they emerged. This led to additional codes around country-specific issues,  
11 such as the position of Roma and ‘Egyptian’ groups as well as ‘honour’ codes in  
12 Albania, oath-taking and the prestige of migration to Europe in Nigeria, and the sale  
13 or mortgage of property to fund the cost of journeys in Vietnam. A final sense check  
14 was then conducted across team members in all four countries.

15 Developing a logic of comparison in this cross-national research was  
16 important. During the analysis stage this led to clearer understanding that social  
17 stigma spanned all four countries and was found to be a driver of human trafficking as  
18 well as an outcome (see later; Hynes et al, 2019). Negative terminology was also  
19 found in all four countries. Thinking beyond nationally based constructs and  
20 incorporating backstories was built into data analysis by developing themes that went

1 beyond the individual country level. Thematic codes around journeys undertaken had  
2 pre-migration, transit, destination, and return to reflect the circular nature of  
3 migration.

4 Data analysis – utilizing IOM’s DoMV model – also allowed for contextual  
5 and thematic analysis at individual, family/household, community, and structural  
6 levels. As can be seen in Figure 5.1, the DoMV levels were then disaggregated into  
7 specific risk and protective factors. Those shown here relate to the relative quantity  
8 and order of data generated during the study. For example, at the family/household  
9 level, gender roles and dynamics within the family were key and at the structural level  
10 migration management practices were mentioned most frequently.

1 **Figure 5.1 Here**



2  
3 Beyond these four levels, and between the individual and family/household levels, the  
4 importance of relations with peers emerged out of data analysis. Peers included  
5 friends and associates who were influential in terms of function, and who had a  
6 transnational element, allowing for transnational social networks to be described.

### 7 **Procedural ethics and existing ethical guidelines**

8 From the outset, the development of the 'living' Ethical Protocol incorporated  
9 existing ethical guidelines and literature for conducting ethical social research,  
10 research on human trafficking and forced migration, as well as some reference to

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1 literature and emergent guidance on qualitative and quantitative research with  
2 children ([UNICEF, 2012](#)) with the aim of embedding a ‘culture’ of ethics within the  
3 process of research. To allow ethical approvals from the UK, the research was  
4 informed by UK-based ethical frameworks for conducting social science research, the  
5 Social Research Association (2003) intended to inform and advise on ethical practice  
6 in research,<sup>9</sup> the British Sociological Association (2017) intended to make members  
7 aware of the ethical issues that may arise during the research process and encourage  
8 them to take responsibility for their own ethical practice and recognizing conflicting  
9 interests of those involved,<sup>10</sup> and the Economic and Social Research Council (2010).<sup>11</sup>  
10 In this study, weighting of primary responsibilities was towards participants and those

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<sup>9</sup> These guidelines detail ethical obligations to society, funders, employers, colleagues, and the subjects of research. For details, see: <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> This statement of ethical practices includes sections on professional integrity, relationships with research participants, the use of covert research, and clarifying obligations to funders and other key principles. For details, see: [www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa\\_statement\\_of\\_ethical\\_practice.pdf](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> For details, see: [www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/)

1 who carried out the field research, although ethical responsibilities towards the  
2 discipline, wider society, and the funder were considerations.

3 The research required applications to university-level research ethics  
4 committees, plus endorsement and oversight by national bodies within Albania and  
5 Nigeria, although no influence over methods or findings were involved.<sup>12</sup> Ethical  
6 guidelines by the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking  
7 (UNIAP) (2008) in Vietnam<sup>13</sup> and in Vietnamese was only discovered after the end of  
8 the research project. There was little available research detail of ethics in relation to  
9 human trafficking in and from Albania or Nigeria.

10 Beyond these nationally based frameworks, there are World Health  
11 Organization (WHO) ethical guidelines available on interviewing trafficked women  
12 ([Zimmerman and Watts, 2003](#)) – the *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for*

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<sup>12</sup> The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)  
provided approval for the study in Nigeria and the Data Protection  
Commissioner provided approval for the study in Albania. No national  
oversight of research was required in Vietnam.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (2008) *Guide to Ethics  
and Human Rights in Counter-Trafficking: Ethical Standards for Counter-  
Trafficking Research and Programming*, UNIAP, Bangkok, Thailand.

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1 *Interviewing Trafficked Women*. These guidelines mirror the way human trafficking  
2 was invariably related to women at that time. These intended to address the adverse  
3 impacts that researchers and other investigators such as journalists could cause to  
4 women experiencing trafficking for sexual purposes. The WHO recommendations  
5 highlighted ten principles, beginning with ‘do no harm’ and how women should be  
6 treated as if the potential for ‘harm’ is extreme until there is evidence to the contrary.  
7 Further principles included how researchers should be prepared to provide  
8 information in a respondent’s language about services and referral if requested and the  
9 need not to re-traumatize women through questions intended to provoke an  
10 emotionally charged response. Principle 10 went further, aligning with the imperative  
11 of being policy relevant: ‘Put Information Collected to Good Use: Use information in  
12 a way that benefits an individual woman or that advances the development of good  
13 policies and interventions for trafficked women generally.’ This echoed a  
14 recommendation in the WHO’s ethical recommendations for research into domestic  
15 violence published a few years earlier. [UNICEF \(2003\)](#) also published a set of  
16 guidelines on how trafficked children should be protected in South East Europe,  
17 following the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. These were followed by a set of  
18 ‘technical notes’ for global reference ([UNICEF 2006](#)). This mentioned ethical  
19 principles, but there was no suggestion that researchers should pay attention to how  
20 findings were used by others.

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1 Other relevant publications discuss these and other aspects of ethical conduct  
2 ([Cwikel and Hoban, 2005](#); [Duong, 2015](#); [Siegel and Wildt, 2016](#)).<sup>14</sup> There are also  
3 useful ethical guidelines available for conducting research on forced migration which  
4 prioritize relations with and responsibilities towards research participants through  
5 honouring trust, avoiding undue intrusion, and, as far as possible, involving people  
6 being studied in the planning and execution of research projects ([Refugee Studies  
7 Centre, 2007](#)). Since 2018, the International Association for the Study of Forced  
8 Migration (IASFM) has also produced a code of ethics for research in situations of  
9 forced migration that recognizes unequal power relations, legal precariousness, and  
10 politicized research contexts in which research takes place ([IASFM, 2018](#)). Peer-  
11 reviewed papers on conducting research with refugees spell out principles of non-

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<sup>14</sup> Since the research was completed, the Nexus Institute has published a set of detailed advisory volumes on human trafficking research: see, for example, R. Surtees, A. Brunovskis, and L.S. [Johnson \(2019\)](#) *The Science (and Art) of Understanding Trafficking in Persons: Good Practice in TIP Data Collection*, Washington, DC: NEXUS Institute. Available from: <https://nexusinstitute.net/publications/research-methods-and-ethics/>

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1 maleficence,<sup>15</sup> beneficence,<sup>16</sup> integrity, respect, autonomy, and justice (Mackenzie et  
2 al, 2007).

3 Although children were not part of this study, ethical guidelines and literature  
4 relating to children were discussed due to the possibility that adults being interviewed  
5 might have been children at the time they were trafficked and the fallibility of age  
6 assessment procedures in the UK. There are no internationally recommended ethical  
7 guidelines for research on violence against children<sup>17</sup> but there are useful interview  
8 guidelines available.<sup>18</sup> There is also a global momentum to improve the ethical  
9 treatment of children during research with useful guidelines being developed through

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<sup>15</sup> The principle of non-maleficence relates to the expectation of minimizing risks of  
harm or discomfort to participants.

<sup>16</sup> The principle of beneficence relates to the obligation to maximize possible benefits  
while minimizing possible harm.

<sup>17</sup> Child Protection [Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group \(2012\)](#) *Ethical Principles, Dilemmas  
and Risks in Collecting Data on Violence against Children: A Review of Available Literature*,  
UNICEF: New York.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see: B. McDonald and P. [Rogers \(2014\)](#) *Interviewing, Methodological Briefs: Impact  
Evaluation 12*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence. Available from:

[https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/brief\\_12\\_interviewing\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/brief_12_interviewing_eng.pdf)

[Accessed 14 May 2021].

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1 the international Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) project ([Graham et al,](#)  
2 [2013](#)).<sup>19</sup> These subject-specific guidelines added to the ethical frameworks outlined  
3 previously. Gilligan's (1977) 'ethics of care', with its emphasis beyond justice and  
4 rights but also stressing people's relationships with one another, was also highly  
5 relevant. Current gaps in ethical guidance include issues around boys and men who  
6 have experienced trafficking.

7 Beyond the WHO guidelines on interviewing women who had experienced  
8 trafficking and UNICEF's guidelines, research concerning other forms of  
9 exploitation, and the 'exploitation creep' over time discussed by [Chuang \(2014\)](#), has  
10 not been the subject of further ethical guidelines at global level. Given the elements of  
11 ambiguity surrounding terms used in the UN Trafficking Protocol ([Gallagher,](#)  
12 [2015a,b](#)), these other forms of exploitation require further exploration, including  
13 looking at the ethics of conducting research into other forms of exploitation beyond  
14 sexual exploitation.

15 From these guidelines, literature and known ethical challenges in research  
16 with vulnerable migrants (van [Liempt and Bilger, 2012](#)) plus an NSPCC<sup>20</sup> Ethical

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<sup>19</sup> See also <http://childethics.com/> – a joint initiative between UNICEF and

ChildWatch – for further resources and guidelines.

<sup>20</sup> National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), UK.

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1 Protocol for work in contexts of child abuse and neglect ([Radford et al, 2011](#)), a range  
2 of pre-identified ethical considerations included:

- 3 • Risks and benefits of participating in the research.
- 4 • Minimizing ‘harm’ or potential distress to participants involved in the  
5 research and maximizing benefits.
- 6 • Negotiating ‘informed consent’ with participants and ensuring  
7 voluntary participation.
- 8 • Data protection, confidentiality, limits to confidentiality, and  
9 guarantees of anonymity.
- 10 • Child protection responsibilities if abuse, the threat or the potential of  
11 significant harm or abuse is disclosed, and reporting mechanisms to  
12 available services in Vietnam, Albania, and Nigeria and/or child  
13 protection services in the UK in such instances.
- 14 • Ensuring distress to research team members is minimized and their  
15 safety ensured.

16 There are also some recommended principles and guidelines on human rights and  
17 human trafficking, developed to provide rights-based policy guidance on prevention

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1 and protection in human trafficking cases, as well as facilitate the integration of  
2 human rights perspectives into anti-trafficking legislation and policy.<sup>21</sup>

3 From the outset it was known that this research fell into the University of  
4 Bedfordshire Research Ethics Committee's categorization of 'sensitive' research,  
5 defined around research topics considered in some way taboo, morally or legal  
6 ambiguous, and/or emotionally challenging. This is in line with [DoCarmo's \(2019\)](#)  
7 suggestion that research on trafficking intersects with other 'sensitive' domains such  
8 as gender, sexuality, sex work, and legal status. There is an expectation that some  
9 topics are considered inherently sensitive, such as child sexual abuse, rape, domestic  
10 violence, or sexual exploitation, with participants classed as 'vulnerable'. Under the  
11 Research Ethics Committee's categorization, young people working in cannabis farms  
12 would be considered 'vulnerable' and the research 'sensitive'. It is also expected that  
13 other topics are rendered sensitive by moral or political climates surrounding the  
14 activity being investigated with situations of 'vulnerability' created. People on  
15 migratory journeys can – rightly or wrongly – fall within both categorizations,  
16 dependent upon context and circumstances.

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<sup>21</sup> For details, see:

[www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/commentary\\_human\\_trafficking\\_en.p](http://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/commentary_human_trafficking_en.p)

[df](#) [Accessed 14 May 2021].

1 **Ethics in practice**

2 As outlined earlier, ethical guidelines and literature had pre-identified a range of  
3 ethical practice which the ‘living’ Ethical Protocol was based upon and began to  
4 capture in a country-specific way. The pre-identified ethical issues will be discussed  
5 briefly and, thereafter, details of a mentoring process and creation of a Community of  
6 Practice are detailed. Country-specific issues, some of which are related to legacies of  
7 history, will conclude this section.

8 **Pre-identified ethical considerations**

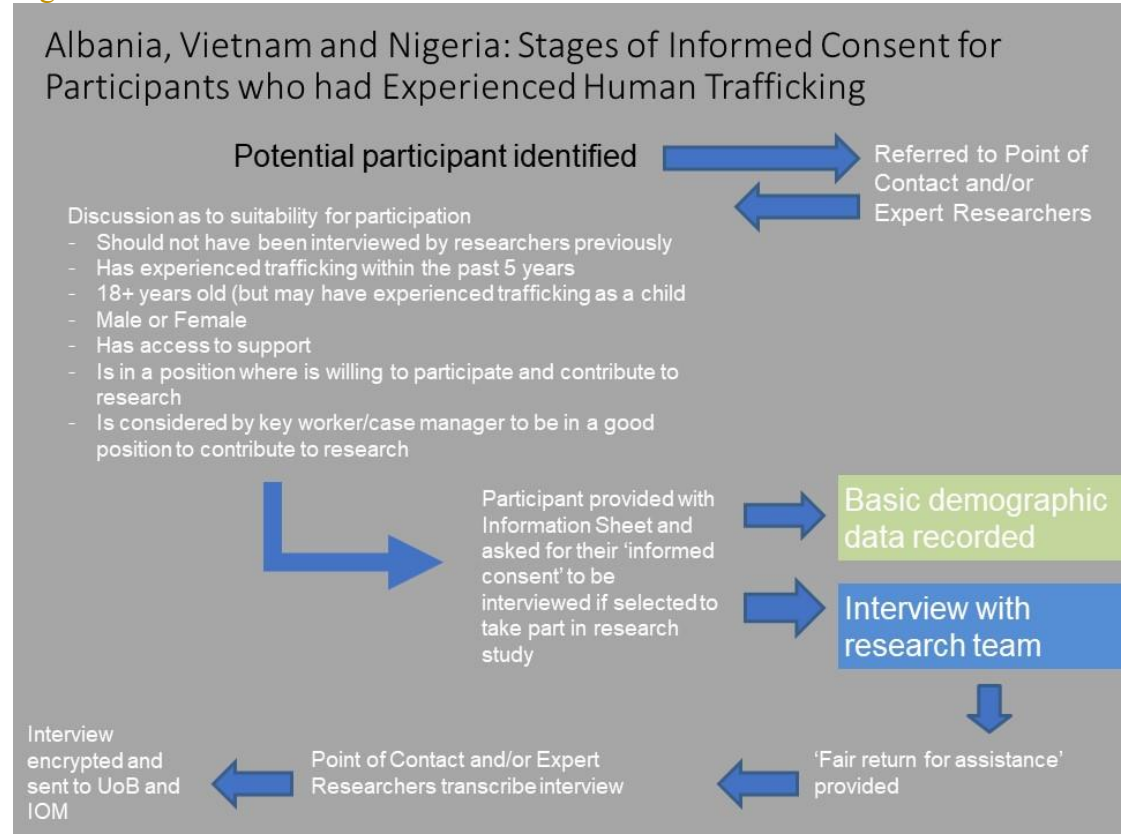
9 The risks and benefits of participating in the research were clearly outlined in  
10 Information Sheets about the project relating to the desire to minimize ‘harm’ or  
11 distress to participants while maximizing the likely ‘benefits’ of the research. It was  
12 made clear that the research related to the causes, consequences, and support available  
13 for those with trafficking experiences, rather necessitating the recounting of traumatic  
14 experiences. In terms of minimizing ‘harm’ or potential distress to participants, up to  
15 and following initial ethical approvals, there were ongoing discussions about the  
16 balance of ‘harm’ and ‘benefit’ and the consequences of participation. A range of  
17 likely scenarios was discussed as a preparedness exercise during SLEs and prior to  
18 any interviews taking place. The potential for individual harm was explored through  
19 an informed consent process, detailed as follows. It was found that some participants  
20 wanted to disclose their accounts to researchers, particularly if they were at a point in

1 their lives where they felt safe to do so and having someone ‘bear witness’ to their  
2 accounts were considered helpful even though the study did not require this. A fine  
3 line between these points must be trod by a researcher, with the recognition that  
4 ethical thinking should lead these decisions, as sharing accounts of causes and support  
5 structures might take individuals through associated abusive and exploitation  
6 memories.

7         Negotiating informed consent and ensuring voluntary participation was a  
8 major undertaking and the wording of Information Sheets and Informed Consent  
9 forms was debated, particularly around terms that did not translate easily.<sup>22</sup> These  
10 were also designed to be context-, age-, and language-appropriate. Informed consent  
11 considerations were slightly different in each country but broadly speaking followed  
12 the process outlined in Figure 5.2.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the term ‘resilience’ did not have a straightforward translation in  
Albania but was part of the DoMV risk and protective factors descriptors.

1 **Figure 5.2 Here**

2

3 Informed consent was requested in stages and pre-discussions around criteria for

4 involvement were part of this. For example, in Albania, first considerations around

5 informed consent related to confining participation to those who already had access to

6 or already receiving support and were already 'held' in some way within service

7 provision. Most knowledge about human trafficking is based on people who receive

8 assistance rather than those who decline or avoid support ([Brunovskis and Surtees, 2007](#);

9 [Surtees and Craggs, 2010](#); Tyldum, 2010; [Surtees, 2014](#)). The ethical

10 consideration to minimize distress was considered more important in this instance.

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1 However, ethically sound research on avenues for safely sampling unidentified and/or  
2 unassisted ‘victims’ is warranted to understand the needs of these less visible  
3 individuals. Other considerations included individuals not having been interviewed  
4 for research previously, having experienced trafficking within the past five years,  
5 being male or female, being willing to participate, and being 18 years and above,  
6 although trafficking may have occurred during childhood. It was also unanimously  
7 agreed by the research team that discussions should also take place with key workers  
8 or case managers around whether individuals were in a ‘good place’ to contribute to  
9 research. This protective element relates to relationships of trust between key workers  
10 and individuals, and any therapeutic alliances formed. It also needs to be  
11 acknowledged that such relationships will have power imbalances and the protective  
12 element may be either misplaced or relate to how organizations wish to represent  
13 themselves ([Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010](#); [DoCarmo, 2019](#)).

14 Ensuring voluntary participation was a key aim when gaining informed, and as  
15 unambiguous as possible, consent. To do this, details of the study, funder, intended  
16 use of the research, and how information would be stored and kept confidential were  
17 included in the Information Sheets along with details of staff members and contact  
18 points for any concerns or complaints. Informed Consent forms contained a checklist  
19 for consent, which included knowledge of the study and the opportunity to ask  
20 questions; an understanding that participants could change their mind about

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1 involvement, recording, and subsequent transcription for further analysis; non-  
2 identification and the opportunity to provide a chosen pseudonym; and details of how  
3 the recording and transcripts would be stored. Despite these assurances, the question  
4 remained whether informed consent could be described as completely unambiguous  
5 given the nature of subsequent data analysis involved and inability to check with  
6 participants about how they had been represented in the research. There were also  
7 limitations of dissemination to participants as it was unclear if there was a safe way of  
8 providing copies of the ultimate reports and research briefings to participants.

9 [DoCarmo \(2019\)](#) outlines how careful assessment is needed about sharing findings  
10 with participants, particularly to avoid making promises that are not followed through.

11 The sometimes silent taboo around payment for taking part – or the principle  
12 of ‘fair return for assistance’ – for participants resulted in different approaches in each  
13 country<sup>23</sup> based around a principle of reciprocity ([Lammers, 2005](#); [Israel and Hay,  
14 2006](#); [Refugee Studies Centre, 2007](#)). For example, reimbursement in Nigeria  
15 involved compensation in exchange for the time and help provided by participants for  
16 this study to take place, including costs of transportation and other logistical costs to  
17 attend interviews.

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<sup>23</sup> In Vietnam and Nigeria, money was considered most appropriate. In Albania, a  
small gift of toiletries was made.

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1           The Informed Consent checklist also included the limits of confidentiality  
2 should any information about serious abuse, exploitation, or the likelihood of  
3 someone being in danger of imminent or immediate harm be disclosed during  
4 interviews. Although the study did not interview children directly, researchers could  
5 have encountered situations wherein ethical dilemmas could arise. In the event of a  
6 disclosure of harm towards children, detailed steps were in place to respond with  
7 named points of contact. As [Radford et al \(2011\)](#) found in a study of child abuse in  
8 the UK, child protection responsibilities were found to legally override  
9 responsibilities for data protection. Available child protection mechanisms and  
10 services in Albania, Nigeria, and Vietnam were identified in advance.

11           Data protection laws in each country were discussed and made known,<sup>24,25</sup> as  
12 were IOM Data Protection procedures. During early discussions in Albania, it became  
13 clear that data protection is a particularly problematic area, with participants in the  
14 SLE stating this was the most important area to highlight in Information Sheets. It  
15 was also asserted that confidentiality needed to be guaranteed in respect of not sharing

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<sup>24</sup> In Albania this meant compliance with the law on Personal Data Protection, No. 9887, dated 10 March 2008 and in line with 95/46/EC Directive.

<sup>25</sup> In Vietnam this related to a range of legislation and Article 21 of the Final Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam, adopted in 2013.

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1 details with people in authority. Under Nigerian anti-trafficking law, victims of  
2 trafficking have their identities protected such that investigation, detection, evidence  
3 gathering, and interpretation of evidence are conducted in a manner that seeks to  
4 minimize intrusion into the personal histories of individuals. A particularly crucial  
5 message was about the need to anonymize identifiable details so that, in future,  
6 individuals and their family members were not discriminated against. This potential  
7 for future discrimination or harm at individual, family, or community levels related to  
8 marriage, seeking employment, and acceptance within the community.

9       Ensuring distress to research team members was minimized and guaranteeing  
10 their safety required attention. Debriefing of the research team involved creating a  
11 scaffold of regular debriefing sessions. These structures proved to be adequate most  
12 of the time but in need of improvement overall as the importance attached to them  
13 waxed and waned according to other priorities. This research was both sensitive and  
14 difficult and it was recognized that ‘emotional labour’ ([Pearce et al, 2013](#): 44) was  
15 involved in the topic being researched.

16       A mentoring process was put in place to resolve ensure ethical dilemmas as  
17 they arose, allowing for practice issues to be discussed informally, and, where  
18 necessary, debated within the research team. As ethical dilemmas began to emerge,  
19 they were recorded and logged during mentoring sessions held every three weeks and  
20 then discussed in team meetings between University of Bedfordshire (UoB) staff and

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1 IOM staff in London, and then via IOM offices in Albania, Nigeria, and Vietnam,  
2 which provided space for reflection and enhanced ethical practice.

3 The creation of a Community of Practice (CoP) across the four countries  
4 proved to be a lesson in being overly ambitious within the constraints of time and  
5 technology available. The two-year framework did not allow for sufficient time to  
6 consider practice in depth across different contexts and different time zones. Early  
7 attempts to do this were defeated by technology and the beginnings of a CoP only  
8 emerged towards the end of the study when teams met in person.

### 9 **Country-specific considerations**

10 During the SLEs, a range of country- and context-specific issues emerged that  
11 required adaptation of research tools and approaches. For example, in Nigeria,  
12 questions about sexuality were consciously omitted from research tools due to the  
13 criminalization of homosexuality within the country. To ensure a logic of comparison  
14 in the design of tools across the study, these questions were omitted across the full  
15 range of countries.

16 Fewer key informant interviews were conducted in Vietnam (n=9) due to the  
17 challenges around the sensitivity of the topic, a complicated procedure for getting  
18 permission from superiors to take part in research, plus an acknowledged limited  
19 knowledge of Vietnam to UK trafficking. A team-based, ethically informed decision  
20 to not seek further key informant interviews was therefore made.

1           Also in Vietnam, interviews with adults who had been to the UK were  
2 undertaken. However, no Vietnamese national in Vietnam who had returned from the  
3 UK was identified who was known to have been formally recognized as a victim of  
4 trafficking either through the UK NRM or within Vietnam, having been categorized  
5 in the UK as cases of irregular migration or human smuggling during their arrests,  
6 imprisonment, in some cases, and return. As such, none of the adults interviewed in  
7 Vietnam had any formal status as a ‘victim’ of trafficking. It was important for both  
8 the research team and IOM offices to acknowledge this lack of formal identification.  
9 Use of a Sampling Inclusion form,<sup>26</sup> designed to overcome this barrier, meant that all  
10 but one of the 21 interviewees were considered by the UK research team to have  
11 described experiences which would meet the definition of human trafficking under the  
12 UN Trafficking Protocol. This highlighted the need for better identification processes  
13 and also how inclusion of those not formally identified was necessary in practice.

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<sup>26</sup> A Sampling Inclusion form was devised to detail the form of exploitation experienced, set against ILO Operational Indicators of Trafficking in Human Beings and the ‘act’, ‘means’, and ‘purpose’ set out in the UN Trafficking Protocol.

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1           In Albania a key focus was on people who had been trafficked to different  
2 destinations such as Italy and Greece rather than the UK and decisions were made  
3 around not highlighting aspects of individual cases that involved UK journeys.

4           In Nigeria, a key focus was on women and girls from Edo State to various  
5 European destinations, although a much broader range of states were reporting cases  
6 of trafficking. Also in Nigeria, the focus of most agencies and key informants (n=27)  
7 was at the time understandably on people returning from detention centres in Libya  
8 and other countries through EU-funded return programmes. This critical moment in  
9 responses to migration from Nigeria overshadowed work to understand Nigeria–UK  
10 linkages.

11           Ultimately, the ‘living’ Ethical Protocol devised to support this research  
12 provided direction for the research team. It was useful to detail ethical consideration  
13 prior to and during the research. Beyond fairly standard research and ethical  
14 considerations as outlined previously, it became clear that thinking about the ‘do no  
15 harm’ principle involved thinking about trafficking-specific issues of trust and  
16 mistrust, social stigma, and the use of negative terminology within current trafficking  
17 debates. These and other suggestions to go beyond ‘do no harm’ and standard  
18 research practice in human trafficking research are now outlined.

19 **Beyond ‘do no harm’**

---

1 Moving on to what we found when considering research beyond ‘do no harm’ and the  
2 question of whether the principle of ‘do no harm’ is enough in human trafficking  
3 research, issues around social stigma and negative terminology emerged early in the  
4 study and became integral discussions on ethics and the approach to the research.

5 Being identified as a ‘victim’ of human trafficking can itself be a stigmatizing  
6 experience. This potential for ‘harm’ or ‘risk’ was identified during the SLEs and  
7 early enough to be a key consideration when interviews were being arranged. In  
8 Albania, social stigma and discrimination were outlined to be a key issue faced by  
9 ‘victims’ of trafficking who were often referred to as ‘prostitutes’ and other  
10 discriminatory labels. People working with this population in support roles were also  
11 described as being stigmatized. Support workers advised people who had experienced  
12 trafficking not to share personal details with others so they, and their children, could  
13 avoid being stigmatized. Rejection by family members was reported as being a  
14 common response to people who had experienced exploitation and/or human  
15 trafficking, as was the loss of employment and livelihood if this experience became  
16 known. Children who live in shelters were reportedly being asked to keep their  
17 addresses confidential, but teachers would sometimes identify children living in such  
18 accommodation. This stigma permeated other necessary entitlements, such as  
19 accommodation and health services. Social stigma and discrimination as a result of a  
20 trafficking experience were highly problematic. As one key informant in Albania

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1 succinctly recounted: “A victim of trafficking is not rehabilitated, she is stigmatized”  
2 (interview 91, key informant, Albania, June 2018).

3 Part of the explanation of this was around social stigma being made worse by  
4 poor media reporting that identifies ‘victims’ with their initials, names, ages, places of  
5 origin, and, in some cases, photographs. For example, in Albania, participants at the  
6 SLE described how press reports contained actual initials of ‘victims’ returning to  
7 Albania, such as ‘AB’, plus extensive family details, the initials of parents, and  
8 locations. With the relatively small population size combined with the strength of  
9 family ties and knowledge of the histories of other families, this was highly  
10 problematic for individuals, their families, and the wider community. Participants at  
11 the SLEs also outlined how, in Albania’s history, there had been times when audio  
12 recording had occurred without a person’s consent and the possibility of  
13 contemporary reticence around the use of recording devices. Primary and secondary  
14 data protection legislation was evident<sup>27</sup> but this remained a key consideration.

15 There was a similar focus on social stigma and discrimination in Vietnam with  
16 stigma around particular forms of exploitation, as well as returning without having  
17 made a financial ‘success’ of migration. As one Vietnamese man recounted after

---

<sup>27</sup> For example, Personal Data Protection, No. 9887, dated 10 March 2008, in line  
with 95/46/EC Directive.

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1 having been deported to Vietnam: “My neighbours despise me” (interview 59,  
2 Vietnam, April 2018). The neighbours he describes were aware he had returned home  
3 with little money and he was living with this stigma, plus further stigma around his  
4 divorce upon return, and he was planning to travel again. A similar scenario was  
5 found in Nigeria, with stigma directed at people who had lived abroad and had  
6 returned ‘empty-handed’ who were reportedly considered to be ‘failures’ and a  
7 disgrace to their families (see also [Pennington and Balaram, 2013](#)). A key risk of  
8 participation in research was therefore associated with this social stigma, which was  
9 often gendered in its manifestations. Civil society actors were aware of this and, as  
10 one civil society key informant suggested: “We need to raise awareness in these  
11 communities, that they are not spoiled people” (interview 159, key informant,  
12 Vietnam, February 2018).

13 In Nigeria, social stigma prior to trafficking was outlined in cases around the  
14 inability to conceive a child, unwanted pregnancies, abortion, as well as in cases of  
15 adoption. Family rejection was reported in cases of ‘failed migration’ and when return  
16 was somehow associated with shame or dishonour. As one interviewee outlined:  
17 “Even when I came back, they mocked me a lot. My family mostly. They say ‘go  
18 away, you’re not ashamed of yourself, you travelled, you didn’t build a house, you  
19 didn’t do anything and came back with shame’” (Favour, interview 18, Nigeria, July  
20 2018).

---

1 Another interviewee discussed the stigma associated with sexual exploitation:

2

3

‘You know in Nigeria, we still have the issue of “how will you marry Ashewo”

4

[word in Yoruba for prostitute]. If they get to know that she was once a prostitute,

5

there is stigma. But abroad, love can cover it and it is easy for that love to be blind.

6

Nigeria love still has eyes.’ (Interview 99, key informant, [Nigeria, May 2018](#))

7

8 Negative terminology was found to be entrenched in discussions around human  
9 trafficking and perpetuated stigma and mistrust. A range of terms and associations  
10 have been revealed throughout this study – from people who have experienced  
11 trafficking being ‘lazy’, ‘materialistic’, and ‘greedy’. As key informants in Nigeria  
12 outlined: “Because some of them it’s greed ... the selfish and greedy search for  
13 greener pastures ...” (interview 103, key informant, [Nigeria, June 2018](#)). In Vietnam,  
14 the idea of people being ‘lazy’ and only interested in ‘material wealth’ and an ‘easy  
15 life’ was recurrent. During the SLE participants also recounted how children returning  
16 to Vietnam with their parents had been held up as ‘bad examples’ in classrooms due  
17 to the stigma associated with experiences of parents. Children had been obliged to tell  
18 their stories in class as a warning about the ‘dangers’ of migration.

---

1 Human trafficking and modern slavery were being described as a ‘scourge’ or  
2 a ‘plague’ on society. At the time of the study there was no specific mention of  
3 ‘modern slavery’ in Albania, with practitioners recounting the ‘act’, ‘means’, and  
4 ‘purpose’ of trafficking when this term was mentioned.

5 In Nigeria, there was reticence around use of the term ‘modern slavery’, in  
6 part as a result the history of slavery within the country. Indeed, when a different  
7 project financed by a UK government department with the title ‘Stamping out slavery  
8 in Nigeria’ was launched in 2019, staff in Nigeria renamed it ‘Stamping out  
9 trafficking in Nigeria’. A key informant in the UK discussed how the term ‘modern  
10 slavery’ was not accepted by individuals who would not self-identify as either having  
11 ‘been trafficked’ or as being a ‘modern slave’: “I just think that modern slavery  
12 doesn’t really encompass what really happens to the clients” (interview 130, key  
13 informant, [UK, March 2018](#)). Another linked this term with current debates and  
14 funding streams: “So with the women themselves we would never refer to modern  
15 slavery or trafficking and not hurt their feelings. We might say bad experience of  
16 something like that ... Yes. No-one wants a label like that. My goodness. But you  
17 know, for fundraising, we talk about it” (interview 131, key informant, [UK, May  
18 2018](#)). A key informant working with young people in the UK also suggested the  
19 harmful effects of this label:

1  
2  
3  
4  
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7

‘I wasn’t happy with them when it came along and I feel frustrated that it is something we’ve been forced into having to use. ... If you talk to young people, they don’t relate to that term at all and don’t like it, being called a modern slave, it’s not a term anyone would want to describe themselves.’ (Interview 132, key informant, [UK](#), [April 2018](#))

8 In addition to the pejorative terms and labels used, acronyms like ‘VoT’ (victim of  
9 trafficking) and ‘PVoT’ (potential victim of trafficking) permeated discussions.  
10 Conducting research in a way that attempted to avoid ‘harm’ meant engaging with the  
11 construction of these terms and acronyms in an attempt to ensure their potential  
12 stigmatizing effects were recognized but not reified during the research process. The  
13 question whether taking part in research itself could have the potential to stigmatize  
14 people simply by identifying them as ‘trafficked’ was keenly understood.

15 These questions around social stigma and terminology became key in thinking  
16 beyond the need to ‘do no harm’. There was a need to go beyond ‘do no harm’ at the  
17 individual level to also engage in the socially constructed ‘harms’ surrounding this  
18 population. This led to framing enquiry around the agentic aspects of the everyday  
19 lives of people living with the impacts of stigmatizing labels and negative  
20 terminology. On reflection, and when carrying out future research, a key point of

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1 learning would be to dedicate more time, and earlier in the research, to discuss these  
2 issues around stigma and terminology. Additionally, the meaning of words used in  
3 context such as ‘exploitation’, ‘community’, ‘resilience’, and ‘vulnerability’ could  
4 themselves be fruitful areas for discussion and clarification.

5 Moving further towards the principle of beneficence<sup>28</sup> in research of  
6 maximizing possible benefits while minimizing possible harms, or ‘doing good’ in  
7 this type of research, [Mackenzie et al \(2007: 299–319\)](#) argue in relation to research  
8 with refugees:

9  
10 researchers should seeks ways to move beyond harm minimization as a standard for  
11 ethical research and recognize an obligation to design and conduct research projects  
12 that aim to bring about reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or  
13 communities.

14  
15 This necessity of going beyond ‘do no harm’ – and ‘doing good’ – relates to Jacobsen  
16 and Landau’s (2003b) policy relevance imperative and influencing legislation, policy,  
17 and practice. That research is both of a high academic standard and is policy relevant

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<sup>28</sup> A responsibility to do good.

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1 relates to the impact agenda for research in the UK. Such impact is now considered in  
2 the next section, on the context and wider construction of harm, the approach,  
3 framings, use, and impacts of research.

#### 4 **Context and wider considerations**

5 Finally, we move on to what we need to consider when carrying out applied research  
6 that is rooted in a commitment to high standards of knowledge production but also  
7 policy relevance and to enable positive changes for people. The bigger picture and  
8 context in which research is being conducted is a key question – as is the impact  
9 research will have on policy, legislation, and/or practice.

10 [Vertovec \(2020\)](#) has given ‘two cheers’ to migration studies. The first of these  
11 ‘cheers’ is how this area has seen an increased number of academics involved, across  
12 a range of disciplines, producing more academic outputs and, as such, migration  
13 studies has become institutionalized. The second ‘cheer’ relates to how this has led to  
14 transformative concepts such as ‘transnationalism’ wherein it is recognized that  
15 migrants maintain extensive links with places of origin and create lives that combine  
16 origin and destination countries. The second ‘cheer’ also relates to progress on the  
17 avoidance of ‘methodological nationalism’ and the need to critique the nation state as  
18 a container of laws, people, and/or heritage – breaking free from doing research inside  
19 such containers by looking at processes, social networks, and how migration decisions

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1 are made by entire households and family networks rather than individuals (see also  
2 Chris O’Connell chapter in this volume).

3 The lack of a ‘third cheer’ for migration studies relates to impact, specifically  
4 the low level of impact that academic studies have had on public understanding or  
5 government policy in this area while good research is being done ([Vertovec, 2020](#)).

6 Vertovec recognizes that research may have little impact on policy, with findings used  
7 selectively or, perhaps worse, disregarded. Vertovec also points to how media  
8 headlines remain misleading and how good research is still needed to provide  
9 correctives, counter these narratives with factual data, and improve understandings on  
10 the multiple causes of migration, beyond binary views.

11 Gallagher (2015a) has also given ‘two cheers’ for the UN Trafficking Protocol  
12 – outlining how the nature and pace of developments since 2000 would have been  
13 different without the impetus and foundation provided by the Protocol. Gallagher  
14 outlines how the inclusion of a definition of ‘trafficking in persons’ within this  
15 Protocol has provided a roadmap for change, placing trafficking firmly on the  
16 international political agenda. It is also considered that actions following the Protocol  
17 included intergovernmental bodies within and outside the UN system, along with civil  
18 society groups, who have become involved in researching the issue and initiating or  
19 supporting anti-trafficking efforts. Gallagher does then go on to suggest that there is a  
20 heavy burden of human rights violations associated with the Protocol – the ‘collateral

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1 damage' detailed earlier in this chapter – which 'cast a shadow' (*sic*) (Gallagher,  
2 2015a) on the Protocol's achievements given the:

3

4 well-documented reality as measures taken in the name of addressing trafficking and  
5 related exploitation have been shown to have a highly adverse impact on individual  
6 rights and freedoms'. (Gallagher, 2015)

7

8 This landscape of Vertovec's positives of increased academic focus and  
9 transformative concepts and Gallagher's positives of definition and increased  
10 understanding is set against the respective negatives of a lack of impact and potential  
11 for increased harms against individuals. While understanding and research throw light  
12 on the drivers and processes of migration and human trafficking, responses continue  
13 to be rooted outside of empirical enquiry. High-quality, good, and vigorous research  
14 is being carried out but this same research often has little impact.

15 [Levy et al \(2020\)](#) have documented the rise and growth of migration studies as  
16 a research field. It can be questioned where investigating the experience of people  
17 who were said to have been trafficked sits within migration studies and the need for  
18 historical analysis and interdisciplinary work that spans the social sciences, bringing  
19 in global systems theories that consider structural inequalities – studies on how 'race'

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1 and ethnicity are relevant to current debates. It can also be questioned where  
2 criminological accounts, economics, anthropology, demography, and other disciplines  
3 sit in relation to human trafficking within migration studies. In many ways it is not  
4 possible to separate research on human trafficking from research on other forms of  
5 migration, particularly where some element of forced migration is involved.

6 Certainly, describing and approaching human trafficking as a social problem  
7 to be solved through existing criminal justice approaches has proved to be inadequate.  
8 The way we frame human trafficking and now modern slavery is part of this bigger  
9 picture and is an ethical consideration in itself. Literature about human trafficking can  
10 locate this social ‘problem’ within the bodies and minds of people labelled as  
11 trafficked, rather than locating this within broader historical and contemporary  
12 understandings of the circumstances that contribute to movement, the sometimes  
13 oppressive social norms or violence that can create situations of ‘vulnerability’, or the  
14 simple need to migrate to fulfil family and community obligations.

15 It is long known that political contexts within which social research is  
16 conducted has historically concentrated on the ‘poor’ and/or ‘vulnerable’ and that to  
17 be described in these ways can itself be damaging, stigmatizing, and contribute to  
18 disempowerment ([Dean, 1996](#): 4). Within research on human trafficking, we need to  
19 be asking what it might feel like to be approached on the basis of such constructed  
20 ‘vulnerability’ and associated lack of dignity. Historically, social research on a broad

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1 range of social issues has been conducted *on* rather than *with* participants, done *on* the  
2 relatively powerless *for* the relatively powerful with research processes often beyond  
3 the control of people ([Dean, 1996](#): 32). There is a need to ensure human trafficking  
4 research moves beyond these known confines.

5         Impacts of the study were recorded in a final meeting of the research team and  
6 then again six months after the study ended. Impacts included raised awareness of the  
7 need to consider atypical ‘victims’ of human trafficking who may not fit dominant  
8 narratives, such as middle-aged men from Vietnam, a further focus on support  
9 services for boys and men, and, in Nigeria, focus on the mental health needs of people  
10 returned.

11         In studies around human trafficking, the use and impact of our research is an  
12 area for consideration when attempting to improve public understanding, policy, and  
13 practice. It is well known that categorizations and labels simplify the lived  
14 experiences of people and given to people who migrate rarely capture the  
15 complexities and nuances of the experience (Richmond, 1993; Zetter, 2007, 2018;  
16 Crawley and Skleparis, 2017). Should we be addressing how useful these  
17 categorizations and labels constructed by policy makers are in practice? In human  
18 trafficking debates, are the terms of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ suitable or dignified  
19 labels? What might we address in terms of the stigmatizing terminology regularly  
20 used in this arena?

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1           What parts of an ecological model are focused upon – individual, family,  
2 community, or structural – is crucial as this affects how ‘harms’ are constructed in the  
3 context of existing social norms. These social norms may normalize violence and  
4 have unwritten rules that allow for husbands to discipline partners, boys to be  
5 considered more useful than girls, and other ‘personal troubles’ that are yet to become  
6 ‘public issues’, such as what happens in the home must stay in the home ([Wright-](#)  
7 [Mills, 1973](#)). Further, the concept of human trafficking was developed to fight crime  
8 between nation states and to hold individual criminals responsible, rather than  
9 acknowledge or modify structural issues.

10           The four-country study resulted in a report entitled ‘Between Two Fires’  
11 which detailed some of these existing social norms and an individual participant  
12 asserting the need to move out of harmful and intolerable familial circumstances and  
13 their resistance to such social norms. It was found that several participants had  
14 resisted ‘vulnerabilities’ in the private sphere, attempting to resolve their own  
15 circumstances but had then encountered structural and exploitative circumstances.  
16 While this was a consistent account given by interviewees in different locations, these  
17 backstories remained largely untold and decontextualized. Individual accounts of  
18 ‘vulnerability’ can detract from the more structural issues then encountered, such as  
19 migration management and increased securitization of borders that constrain the  
20 abilities of people to move. Transnational realities of deterrence, hard borders, and

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1 containment of migration in regions of origin are part of the human trafficking  
2 experience, however removed they may feel to those who conduct research.

3         This study was about the UK as a destination country and the manifestation of  
4 these transnational realities; the ‘hostile environment’ policy adopted in the UK  
5 government meant that ‘harm’ needed to be understood broadly to incorporate  
6 contexts of hostility, disbelief, control, surveillance, and the need for some to travel  
7 under increasingly dangerous and difficult conditions to reach the UK. Many have  
8 asserted that framing the ‘problem’ of anti-trafficking does ‘more harm than good’  
9 ([LeBaron and Pliley, 2021](#): 3).

10         In light of the experience of using a ‘living’ Ethical Protocol and on the basis  
11 of two decades of research related to human trafficking since the introduction of the  
12 UN Trafficking Protocol, is it possible to draw conclusions about the obligations of  
13 researchers to go beyond the ‘do no harm’ principle and other conventional provisions  
14 of ethical protocols? The idea of such an ethical obligation is challenging both to  
15 apply and to monitor. It requires researchers to try to predict how individuals and  
16 institutions who are informed of their research findings might use them, whether law  
17 enforcement officials, policy makers, or practitioners. There is a need for strong  
18 ethical reflection on the use and dissemination of research findings. Questions remain  
19 around how aware of potential audiences researchers should be when publishing

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1 potentially sensitive findings and how ‘harms’ can be anticipated in such  
2 circumstances.

3         Along with the imperative to inform policy and practice, there is often a fear  
4 that findings might be misused in some way and, at worst, cause prejudice or stigma  
5 to people who have been trafficked and/or others who might migrate in the future  
6 ([Dottridge, 2018](#)). It is this complexity and heterogeneity that makes it undesirable to  
7 be prescriptive about ethical practice or to specify precisely how researchers should  
8 behave. Establishing a ‘living’ Ethical Protocol provided a valuable space for regular  
9 discussion about ethics and the possibility of recording such ethical dilemmas.

## 10 **Conclusion**

11 Social research with displaced populations can involve a ‘dual imperative’ to satisfy  
12 academic standards while ensuring policy and/or practice relevance. In this chapter it  
13 has been argued that there is also an imperative for ‘harm’ to be broadly conceived to  
14 include contexts within which people are moving from and to in human trafficking  
15 research.

16         When addressing human trafficking, ‘harm’ may emanate from policy,  
17 legislation, and global structures around migration management and it is therefore  
18 important that research does not replicate these harms or reify harmful perceptions  
19 about people who have experienced human trafficking. Locating the ‘problem’ of  
20 trafficking within the bodies and minds of people labelled and classified as trafficked

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1 rather than a broader understanding the circumstances that cause ‘vulnerability’ to  
2 trafficking needs careful consideration. Social stigma can ruin lives and avoidance of  
3 stigmatizing individuals through participation in research is key. Negative  
4 terminology, labelling, and the way trafficking is framed is part of this and needs to  
5 be challenged where necessary.

6         Given the policies of containment and deterrence developed around migration  
7 in recent decades, it is essential that working with and/or conducting research with  
8 those with lived experiences is carried out ethically. In contexts where power  
9 imbalances are built into responses, people can be rendered ‘vulnerable’ and it is vital  
10 to maintain a critical consciousness of these unequal power structures and legacies of  
11 the past. In other words, to study trafficking we have to study global migration  
12 management structures and the structural causes of ‘vulnerability’. Questions around  
13 whether maintaining dignity in such contexts of disbelief are very relevant to  
14 responses to trafficking. It is challenging to consider ‘what works’ in a context of  
15 disbelief where people are not listened to or have their accounts believed, and simply  
16 ‘bearing witness’ may not be enough. Systemic issues and state policies that render  
17 people ‘vulnerable’ to exploitation, be it in source or destination countries, have to be  
18 factored into research into human trafficking. Such structural-level ‘harms’ and  
19 migration management regimes require more scrutiny. We also have to ask how we

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1 can fulfil the imperative that research improves the lives of those involved in such  
2 contexts.

3 The paradigm shift within migration studies towards ‘transnationalism’ that  
4 critiques the nation state as a natural container of social processes is relevant to  
5 human trafficking research. Understanding the backstories of individuals as well the  
6 barriers and gateways available to them also requires conscious and continuous  
7 ethical consideration. The topic of human trafficking demands that an ethical  
8 approach is undertaken and, if rights and dignity are to be at the heart of research into  
9 human trafficking, there is an imperative to conduct research ethically.

10 The ‘living’ Ethical Protocol was found to be a good way of building in these  
11 conceptual issues as well as key ethical principles and what emerged as trafficking-  
12 specific ethical questions in this study. It also allowed the research team to reflect and  
13 refine their practices during the lifetime of the study. As such, this contribution  
14 identifies key principles that could be replicated in future research on human  
15 trafficking, and it is suggested that researchers ask themselves similar questions  
16 before proceeding with research.

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8 Figure 5.1: IOM Determinants of Migrant Vulnerability model with study annotations

9 Source: Reused with permission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

10 Figure 5.2: Stages of Informed Consent