Peru Podcast

Transcript

Dr Marta Furlan, Research Program Officer, Free the Slaves

Hello everyone and welcome to this new episode of "Conversations on Modern Slavery", Free the Slaves' podcast series. In these podcasts we present Free the Slaves' research projects and discuss modern slavery in its different forms, in different regions of the world, from different angles, and with the participation of different experts. My name is Dr. Marta Furlan and I am Research Program Officer at Free the Slaves. With me today are Gemma Bardaji Blasco, Regional Manager for Latin America and Europe at Free the Slaves, and Nancy Cinthya González, President of the NGO Onotzi.

In today's episode we are going to talk about the intersection between human trafficking, illegal mining and logging activities, and the vulnerability of indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon. The podcast is based on the research "Between Abandonment and Exploitation: Four Case Studies in Native Communities in the Peruvian Amazon", which was conducted by Free the Slaves and Onotzi and published a few months ago. The publication is available on the Free the Slaves' website in 3 languages - English, Spanish and Asháninka. In addition, a month ago Free the Slaves organized a webinar on the research, which you can watch on Free the Slaves' Youtube channel.

What findings has this research produced?

In Peru, slavery has a very long history, with numerous groups such as Indigenous communities and African communities systematically subjected to trafficking, exploitation, and enslavement. Today, despite the efforts made by the government to combat the phenomenon, slavery continues to prevail throughout the country. Prompted by these considerations, Free the Slaves and Onotzi undertook a research project to explain the reality of modern slavery among Peru's Indigenous communities. Following extensive fieldwork among four Indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon regions of Ucayali and Huánuco, the report found that Indigenous peoples are becoming increasingly vulnerable to slavery due to a series of interconnected, multidimensional vulnerabilities.

Over the years, illegal activities of mining and logging have increased dramatically throughout the country, where they are facilitated by the State's inability to adequately regulate and monitor them. As Indigenous communities live in the territories with the greatest abundance of natural resources, their paths have inevitably crossed with those of illegal extractivist companies. Without regulation and control by the State, illegal logging has contributed devastatingly to deforestation in the Amazon. Illegal mining, for its part, has been contributing to the contamination of water sources through the use of mercury used to separate gold from

rock fragments. Mercury is a highly toxic mineral that can spread over vast territories and generate serious health consequences.

These illegal extractive activities destroy the surrounding environment, worsen the effects of climate change, and contribute to the ecosystem's degradation. In this context, Indigenous peoples have been progressively deprived of their traditional livelihoods, such as forestry and agriculture. As they lose their livelihoods, they become easier prey for traffickers eager to exploit them for their own material gain.

These dynamics, however, do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they feed on pre-existing vulnerabilities that have traditionally affected Peru's Indigenous peoples.

First, poverty. Due to a precarious local economy, structural discrimination against Indigenous communities in the labor market, and State neglect, poverty is chronic among indigenous peoples. Ultimately, this forces many people, especially among the youth, to accept jobs in informal and unregulated sectors, where the probability of exploitation is very high. The lack of alternative job opportunities also pushes young people into dangerous extractive industries. Finally, due to widespread poverty, many children are forced by their families to participate in agricultural work and contribute to the family's economic survival.

Another vulnerability factor is limited access to education. The existing school system is highly inadequate in Indigenous areas, as it does not guarantee access to bilingual intercultural education. As a result, Indigenous children are excluded from the opportunities that a good education opens up later in life for their counterparts in non-Indigenous territories. Students generally do not advance to secondary education and discrimination is a major factor inhibiting children and adolescents from continuing their education in larger towns or cities. The work responsibilities of children from poor households also contribute to higher rates of early school dropout.

Third, there is violence against women. The widespread occurrence of gender-based violence combines with economic insecurity to create an environment conducive to early and forced marriages that are de facto normalized among local families. Forced marriages at an early age have also become increasingly accepted in a context where childhood is short and working children are pressured to marry and have children as young as 12 or 13 years old.

Finally, there is the negligence of the State. The lack of government support and oversight has created a reality in which Indigenous communities are de facto left to themselves, with no support or protection from central authorities. This limits the ability of communities to access legal mechanisms, justice and protection services for victims of trafficking and exploitation, leaving them more vulnerable to modern slavery and less likely to find ways out of exploitation.

Now Nancy, from those findings, can you please elaborate on the reality that Indigenous communities in Peru face?

Nancy Cynthia Gonzales, President of Onotzi

Of course. As you have mentioned now, and as the study that has been done in my country says, the State has abandoned us [Indigenous communities]. That is why to this day there is labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, modern slavery against the Indigenous peoples of my country, against the Asháninka people. We do not have the access to the mechanisms that allow to denounce injustices, we do not have a police station near us. We do not have authorities that watch over the rights of children and young people, of all my Asháninka brothers in Peru. They [the authorities] are far away. If we go to denounce [abuses], we are not listened to. We are discriminated against. They [the authorities] make fun of us and corruption is prevalent. Those who have money can do with us, the Indigenous peoples, whatever they want because we do not have sufficient knowledge, we do not have the economic resources to move with lawyers, to take this complaint where it should go.

That is why we also continue with this problem in the Amazon. Since these illegal [extractivist] companies have entered the Amazon, we have been suffering from modern slavery. And, really, I am very grateful to the organization Free the Slaves for the support, to bring this voice of my brothers of the Amazon, to say "enough, we need to strengthen ourselves with all the organizations that watch over the rights of this humanity at a national and global level".

The children [in Indigenous areas] do not have the best education, there are no good teachers. We are being abandoned. There are no authorities who come to help us, because corruption is always present. On the contrary, the authorities want to make us disappear. They almost want to take away our territories. That's why sometimes our brothers rise up. Why do they rise up? In this struggle of resistance, to make their voices heard, to say that these lands that are here belong to us, as original peoples.

We were born there, our great-great-grandparents have lived there. And that is why we continue in this resistance so that they listen to us, so that our government listens to us. That is why we continue this way. When we raise our voices, there are leaders who have been killed by these mafias. And so far there is no justice for those brothers and sisters. But we continue the struggle to protect our rights as Asháninka people. We think of our children because they are the future of our country.

Marta

Thank you very much, Nancy. Gemma, drawing on your extensive knowledge of the region, how do the results of this research relate, and what Nancy just told us, to the broader reality of Latin America?

Gemma Bardaji Blasco, Regional Manager for Latin America and Europe, Free the Slaves

Indeed, both the results of the study and all the testimony that Nancy is providing are a reflection of the symptoms that Latin American democracies are currently suffering. They are

experiencing a deep crisis in Latin America, but it is also happening in other parts of the world. For example, and this is evident in the study, institutions are not being efficient to effectively channel citizens' demands. On the other hand, there is an economic context of low growth or stagnation, especially in the post-COVID era, which has increased inequalities and historical structural problems that had already been dragging on.

There is also a trend that we can observe in the region, but which is also occurring in other parts of the world, which is the tendency for certain authoritarian regimes or leaderships to take hold. In fact, we are very concerned that this type of leadership model is gaining more and more ground. For example, here in the region we have the case of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Bukele in El Salvador, Maduro in Venezuela – these are models of personalist leadership that promote systems of centralized power that we thought we had overcome in the region and that make them hyper-presidential political systems. Therefore, the legislative and judicial powers have lost their power, they do not have enough autonomy to be able to exercise authority and control over the Government. As a result, the spaces for opposition parties are also increasingly limited. We can see the case of Ecuador where, prior to the elections, one of the presidential candidates was assassinated.

This new configuration of state structures, led or guided by these more centralized models of power, obviously also affects freedom of expression, which is another issue of real concern in the region. We are also very concerned about the role of the Armed Forces. Many of these presidential or authoritarian powers are increasingly acting together with the Armed Forces, which is intimidating for the population and especially for those groups that are in a situation of vulnerability in the face of demands that have been historically unheeded.

This is a situation that has been dragging on for years. They are relatively young democracies that require urgent and profound support. That is why they are being so ineffective, why there is a progressive abandonment of the citizens on part of the State.

And then another thing that we cannot forget that is happening in the region is the serious crisis of representativeness of political parties. The Latin Barometer confirms this trend because even today the Latin American population that supports democracy does not reach 50%. In fact, in the last decades, we could say that the greatest political force that has grown in Latin America is abstention. This crisis of representation, this crisis of democracies, is happening in all latitudes of the planet. This generates a lot of social frustration, which implies that that less legitimacy given to democratic institutions - and it is a bit of a vicious circle (and obviously COVID did not help). What it [COVID] did was to make visible an endemic evil that had been dragging on for years, and that with a kind of economic bonanza was not as evident.

I believe that what our study in Peru expresses is a symptom and a reflection of what is happening in Latin America, but let us also say that it is a small piece of an example of what is happening in other latitudes. There is someone who said that the Latin American democracies that have arrived fatigued to 2020, with the COVID issue, and the and when coming out of the pandemic have not only become weaker, but they have also been harassed precisely by this

economic instability, by this growing authoritarianism that has implied that other ways of scheduling social demands and channeling them are being configured in a natural way.

We are really concerned because sometimes in Latin America the same attention is not being paid and at this moment we are experiencing serious political and economic crises that are calling into question the foundations of democracy - and not only in Latin America, but also in our close brothers in the Caribbean - and I am thinking here of everything that is happening in Haiti. So this is a small example that is appropriate to a concrete reality which is in Peru and with the indigenous communities, and let us say that the gravity is even worse because there is a serious crisis of representation because they have hardly any political representation. And this already comes from a colonial historical issue, where slavery has never stopped occurring, it has just changed and modernized.

We hope that this study will help us to continue and support more efforts and involve more people and actors in this struggle that we will continue to carry out and we hope that our colleague and other organizations in Peru and other Latin American countries, especially indigenous organizations, will continue to work along these lines.

Marta

Thank you very much, Gemma. As always it was super interesting to hear your comments. As we approach the end of our episode, I would love to know what for you is the most important message coming out of the research? And maybe Nancy you could answer from an indigenous and Peruvian perspective and Gemma from the perspective of your role as Regional Manager for Latin America at Free the Slaves.

Nancy

The message would be that this investigation has shown the need for the government of my country and other governments of different countries to change.

Enough that my brothers and sisters are deceived, exploited. The government has to recognize that we are humans, we are not aliens. We demand that our rights be respected. And through this research, we want to raise our voice, to be more visible to the world as the original people of the Amazon. We want our rights to be respected.

And also with this investigation we want to bring to light what has been hidden for many years, what is really happening with my Asháninka brothers in the Amazon, what these illegal mining and logging companies, drug trafficking, terrorism are doing. All these people that come to kidnap children, young people, to kill as if nothing - and the government is not doing anything. With this investigation we are carrying this voice of my Asháninka brothers so that the truth is known, so that what is really happening, what has been hidden for many years, is known.

We have to defend our brothers because, as Gemma said, we have no representation. We don't have politicians, parliamentarians, who want to make laws in favor of my brothers.
We are as intelligent as all human beings - we think, we know... Sometimes we see professionals who have their ties, but they do not know, they do not know the reality of what is happening in the Amazon. We know because we live in our community, we have that connection with Mother Nature. As always, I have said that the forest is our pharmacy because that is where the medicinal plants are. The water is life, and there are also the fish, which feed us.
We want to put an end to these people who are going to contaminate our water, who are going to appropriate our land, who kidnap our children, who kill our leaders.

And from here I call again on all the organizations to help us. We want to work with other organizations and involve them. That is what I want to do, I call on all the organizations to join us, to support us here in Peru. Thank you very much.

Marta

Thanks Nancy. Gemma, do you want to add the last words?

Gemma

I would like to add a little bit in relation to what I was commenting before. That we must not forget that rights that have been won can be lost again. Vigilance and the struggle to maintain them must be constant. In other words, history has shown us on many occasions that after gaining rights we have gone backwards. So sometimes I have the feeling that there is an inertia in believing that some social struggles achieved, or rights achieved, that nothing more needs to be done because they are already there.

I believe that democracy, which is the sustenance of our political systems, is really in a deep crisis and I think we have to take it very seriously. Because if not, this enables all this kind of illegal, terrible illegal actions. Especially against Indigenous communities, because there is this kind of impunity in which nobody ends up paying for the abuses that have taken place. And that is deeply undermining democratic systems, and I think we must always be clear that there is nothing that guarantees rights. We must always have a permanent vigilance and a constant struggle to maintain, guarantee, and achieve new rights.

So I hope that this study will help us to understand that this is not a one-time problem, that it is a structural and deep problem, and that we need the coordinated support of different actors. We cannot think that an NGO or a political party is going to fix everything. We all have to get involved. That is why at Free the Slaves we are looking for collaboration with other organizations, with United Nations agencies, with governments. It is necessary to open these bridges of dialogue with governments, especially in relation to forced labor and labor exploitation. We also need to talk to companies and trade unions.

This problem can only be solved with the collaboration of different entities, organizations and relevant actors. These are, for the moment, my words, Marta. I yield the floor to you.

Marta
Thank you so much Gemma and Nancy. That was super interesting. And thank you so much also to our audience for joining this conversation and staying with us until the end.

As I said at the beginning, if you want to read the research you can download it in three languages - English, Spanish and Asháninka from the Free the Slaves' website. And if you want to watch the video of the webinar in which we discussed the research you can watch it on the Free the Slaves' Youtube channel.
Also, we invite you to follow our social media for the next episode of "Conversations on Modern Slavery". Thank you very much.