



## **Elmore Community Services: Preventing Modern Slavery Podcast**

**Podcast duration:** 33 minutes

**Host:** Ben Anderson, Sound Rebel

**In conversation with:** Dame Sara Thornton DBE QPM, the UK's Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2019-2022)

### **Podcast Episode Transcript**

Ben Anderson: Modern slavery. What is it? How prevalent is it in the UK? And what is being done to tackle it?

Welcome to this podcast from Elmore Community Services. My name is Ben Anderson, and today we will be talking about the prevention of modern slavery, the identification of victims and the support that survivors can get.

To have this conversation I am joined by Dame Sara Thornton, the UK's Anti-Slavery Commissioner and former Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police.

Dame Sara, first of all thank you ever so much for your time today. It is a pleasure to meet you.

Dame Sara: A pleasure to meet you too.

Ben Anderson: Dame Sara, before we talk about the subject area itself, could you tell me a bit more about you and the role that you carry out as the UK's Anti-Slavery Commissioner?

Dame Sara: I have been the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner since May 2019, so very nearly three years. And this is a role that was set up by the Modern Slavery Act 2015. My job title is set out in the statute, in the legislation.

And it is basically to encourage good practice in terms of investigating and detecting modern slavery offences but also in identifying victims. And, importantly, thinking also about, "How do we prevent modern slavery from happening in the first place?"

Ben Anderson: Modern slavery is a term that we have heard a lot in the last couple of years, unfortunately. You say the Act was established in 2015. Could you tell me the definition of modern slavery? Before we talk about how to prevent it and support survivors, what is modern slavery and what does that term include?

Dame Sara: It is a term we use in the United Kingdom, and it is very much set out in the law, as I have explained. Lots of other countries in the world don't use it, but we think it is important to use it, the word 'slavery'. And it is quite shocking, but I think that is important because what is happening is shocking.

It is an umbrella term. So it includes exploitation in terms of

labour, so forced labour, when people are giving their labour and it is not voluntary. They are not independently working for somebody. They are being forced to do so.

It might include trafficking for sexual exploitation, where people are forced to work in the sex industry.

It could also be exploitation in terms of crime. Particularly children or vulnerable adults are forced to commit crimes.

It also includes quite a hidden aspect, which is known as domestic servitude, where people are living in another person's home, carrying out household chores for many hours a day, seven days a week, with tremendous restrictions on their freedom – frequently they are not allowed to go out of the house – and either paid very, very little or nothing at all.

And then there are also issues such as organ harvesting, which are less frequent, but that takes place when somebody's organs might be harvested for sale. And of course that is a real, real concern.

So it is very much a broad term. It includes both the trafficking, so the movement of people, but also the enslavement and servitude of people wherever they are.

And of course it is not something that just happens in the UK. It is something which is a global phenomenon.

Ben Anderson: Well, actually, that is what I was going to ask, because just talking through those different terms then, things like

domestic servitude, organ harvesting, it is incredibly shocking to hear and as a member of the general public you would think that this wouldn't happen in a culture like the UK. We are a Western society that is developed. How prevalent is this in our country, in the United Kingdom?

Dame Sara: It is a really good question, and it is quite hard to answer accurately because this is a hidden crime.

What is known as prevalence of modern slavery is much debated. But what we do know is that about seven or eight years ago the Home Office did some work to try and estimate the number of victims, and at that point they suggested between 10 or 13,000 victims. And I think that was very low.

The Global Slavery Index, which was published in 2016, suggested there were 136,000 victims in the UK. I think that was probably a bit high. A lot of experts say it might be around the 100,000 mark. But we don't know.

The thing we do know for sure is how many potential victims are identified every year and referred to what is known as the National Referral Mechanism. That is basically a way for them to receive prompt support. The last four-year figure we have is 2020, and that was 10,600.

And I know, although we haven't got the figures for 2021 yet, it will be more than 10,600. My guess is it will be about 12,000. So that is the number of victims we have identified in a year. So it is a significant issue in the UK.

If you were to ask me about the global figures, the Global Slavery Index also estimated global figures, and in 2016 they suggested that was 40.3 million.

Ben Anderson: Which are unbelievable figures really. When you talk about people being identified, what is really quite shocking about this subject area as a whole is the number of people that are identified. And of course, like with anything, there will be a huge amount who aren't identified and living this life at the moment.

How do you identify somebody who is a victim of modern slavery? What are the kinds of indicators of modern slavery that help to identify these victims in the first place?

Dame Sara: It is important, I think particularly for people who work in statutory agencies, in services, that they are able to understand what they might be looking for. But I think it is also applicable to the general public. And it is not easy and straightforward.

But the sorts of things I would suggest people should be looking for is their appearance. Does it look like it is neglected? Do they appear malnourished? Are they with somebody who appears to be controlling them?

Particularly if they are going to see medical staff, if they are going to banks or shops, are accessing maybe housing services. Does it appear that somebody is trying to control them? Or maybe they just appear very withdrawn.

People in this situation can be really mistrustful of agencies. Particularly because the traffickers and the enslavers will have said to them, “Do not trust these people. They will not help. And if you try and ask for help your life will be so much worse for you.” So they are threatened not to ask for help.

So those are the sorts of things that we should be looking for.

Ben Anderson: And what should somebody do? If somebody spots the appearance might be an identifier, behaviour may be slightly off, as a member of the general public what should you do next?

Dame Sara: There is a helpline run by the charity Unseen. If you Google it there is a phone number still, but actually I think most people contact them now online. And you can tell Unseen what you have come across and they can refer to the appropriate people.

If you are concerned about being anonymous you can call Crimestoppers. They receive a lot of calls about modern slavery.

If you know somebody is in real danger and you are very worried about them then you should call the police because they are a victim of crime.

Ben Anderson: We are going to move on to talk about the report from Elmore. Elmore have created a report that looks at the extent of modern slavery. We will talk about that in a second.

But before we do, just sticking with victims of modern slavery, are there any particularly vulnerable groups?

Dame Sara: I think that potentially a broad range of people are vulnerable, but we specifically see, I think, three groups.

Migrants to this country are vulnerable. They might well have been trafficked on their way here. They might have been tricked or deceived, promised something, promised a job, and when they get here they end up working in the sex industry for example.

Or migrants, once they are here, particularly if they are not documented, so they are not allowed to work, they will be desperate and so sometimes they might be tempted to work for employers. And any employer who is willing to do that is working outside any form of the law, and therefore somebody is highly vulnerable to exploitation in this country.

So migrants are very definitely a vulnerable group.

But also children. We know that child criminal exploitation is a shocking issue, and I am afraid it is on the increase in this country, where children are forced to commit offences.

Frequently that is drug-trafficking offences. But I saw last week in London a gang were convicted of forcing vulnerable

young people, 15/16-year-old girls, to do mass shoplifting and commit mass fraud. So it can be other offences. So children.

But also vulnerable adults. Do you remember the case a couple of weeks ago about the man who had been held in a shed in Cumbria for 40 years? He was a vulnerable adult.

So sometimes people's vulnerability is exploited by the traffickers. Maybe people have got substantial drug addictions. They are often seen as very attractive by the traffickers, the sorts of people that they think they can exploit.

Ben Anderson: I would like to move on to the Elmore report now. Could you tell us about the report and what it told us in terms of the prevalence of modern slavery? Because it really does sound like the recorded number of cases, as we discussed earlier, is the tip of the iceberg.

Dame Sara: I think the Elmore report is really valuable because it begins to try and answer this question about prevalence. How many victims in Oxford City? And we know it is a hidden crime. I think the police in the period that we are looking at, which is just over three years, had identified 123 cases.

But the Elmore project thinks that actually it is between 300 and 400. So much higher. Because what they have done is go to all the different agencies and using those multiple systems and multiple agencies tried to work out what looks like a more realistic figure.



That doesn't surprise me, that it is considerably higher than the number of victims that were identified by Thames Valley, and I suspect that will be played out across the country.

Ben Anderson: And please forgive my ignorance, Dame Sara, with this question but Elmore used a case-based methodology in this report. Would you mind explaining that term, the case-based methodology?

Dame Sara: Well, what I understand from reading the report is that they have gone to multiple agencies, identified the cases and built that up.

Ben Anderson: And that is the easy part.

Dame Sara: Yes. But, similarly, I mentioned the estimate that the Home Office made I think in 2014. They use what is known as multiple systems estimates methodologies. Basically, they were looking at all the various data that was kept by lots of agencies to estimate.

So the idea of pooling information from various agencies is not new. But I have not seen it done like this before, where in quite a concentrated area, the City of Oxford, you have said, "Okay, let's person by person try and work out how many victims we are dealing with."

Ben Anderson: It leads on to another question about using Oxford as a microcosm. Is this happening in every area of the UK? Are there bigger problems in some regions than others?

Dame Sara: It is an issue right across the country. The features of the slavery and trafficking will vary. So maybe in some of the cities much more focus on sexual exploitation. London probably has the greatest percentage of domestic servitude cases because of the population. But then in rural areas there is a huge issue with forced labour in agriculture. So it is pretty much across the UK, but the way in which it manifests itself will vary from place to place.

Ben Anderson: Bringing it back to Oxfordshire, the report's findings have been published. And of course now they need to be understood by local agencies and recommendations that come from the report need to be implemented. What do you think are the main ways in which Oxfordshire as a region can address modern slavery now?

Dame Sara: I think it is really good that the report has an action plan. And I know that there is a new anti-slavery coordinator, which is great. And you have also got the Oxfordshire Anti-Slavery Network. So it seems to me that they are really well placed to make the most and really motor on with all those actions in the plan to drive improvement.

Having looked through the report, I would suggest there are three key areas that they need to be thinking about.

One is the whole issue about training and raising awareness, particularly for people who are in front-line services, because we know from various studies over the years that health professionals think that they probably come across [victims daily 00:13:24] but aren't confident about what to do.

Similarly, local authorities have a key role. Not just the safeguarding teams but the housing teams, people in enforcement in local authorities. Do they know what they are looking for? That has improved a lot, but I think there is still more that could be done.

And again with police and with other parts of the criminal justice system. It is a constant struggle to keep people trained and up to date with what they need to be doing. So I think a focus on that still needs to take place. Certainly-

Ben Anderson: Dame Sarah, sorry for jumping in here. Is that because this is always changing? Is it that the people who are committing these crimes are changing and adapting as the world changes and adapts?

Dame Sara: I think there are three things that are changing.

The nature of the crimes are changing. So we have seen much more criminal exploitation in the last three or four years than maybe before that.

The law changes. So particularly police officers need to

understand that.

And also staff change, don't they? There is a constant movement of staff.

So I think there are three things that are changing, which means that we always need to be on top of our game in terms of training.

The second thing I was struck by is the level of investigations but then the very low level of prosecutions and convictions in the Thames Valley. And I do think it is great that there are so many investigations, but the level of prosecutions, taking people to court, is really quite low.

Now it is low across the country, but the areas where it is most successful and most effective is where they have a dedicated team of detectives who are dealing with this complex and complicated crime.

And that is not the case still in Thames Valley. I really do think that they have got extra resources. I would urge them to think about building up expertise. Because this is not the sort of crime that the detective who is just coming on duty this afternoon picks up easily, without training in the background and the knowledge of who to go to for advice.

So I think we need to make sure there are more prosecutions. And the reason why this is important is because traffickers look at it and see the rewards as high and the risks as low. And what we really need to be doing is ensuring that the rewards

are as low as possible but the risks are as high as possible. So that is key.

Ben Anderson: So what you are saying then is it is a resource- Not problem, but it is a resource area that we need to look at.

Because I imagine that there is also with this kind of crime- You are talking about vulnerable people, and earlier we mentioned about their emotional state I suppose. Is it that they don't necessarily want to speak out against their abuser?

Dame Sara: It is both of those things and several others. These offences are complex and complicated. I understand that. Which is why all the evidence suggests that if you have a dedicated team of experts you will be more successful because they are just more familiar with how to deal to this.

But it is not just about having a dedicated team of experts. It is also about how you are dealing with very vulnerable victims who, as you quite rightly say, are hugely reluctant to trust authorities, to provide statements, to go to court. Who actually in some cases might not even appreciate that they are in fact victims.

So there are a number of different initiatives across the country run by various charities. Working with the police there are the Victim Navigators, run by Justice and Care. Hope for Justice have a programme. I also know [City Arts 00:17:09] do work. A variety of different arrangements.

And again if Thames Valley aren't working with NGOs to help victims to give evidence, to build their confidence, to be that contact point with the police, then I would urge them to do that.

But it is also about thinking about, "How can we use different ways to gather evidence?" I have done a lot of work saying that, "With these cases it is about an economic crime. People are trafficked and enslaved to make money. So what is the old adage? 'Follow the money'."

So how good are we at financial investigation? How many financial investigators do we put on these cases? How good are we at following those illicit financial flows? To prove the offence but also to identify all the money and the profits that have been made by the criminals, so we can put those into the system and give them back to victims.

So there is a whole range of things that can be done. I know it is not easy or straightforward, but I think if you don't have the resource to match your commitments then you are really starting off from a very difficult point.

Ben Anderson: Has COVID had an impact on these crimes? Obviously, we are all stuck indoors. We can't go anywhere. Cybercrime is being reported as being increased and defrauding and different areas. Has modern slavery changed in the last few years as a result of COVID?

Dame Sara: It absolutely has changed. Of course. When travel was much restricted there were far fewer people coming into the country. And quite a few people who had been exploited had returned home at the beginning of the pandemic. And so there are lots of assessments about the changing nature of what has been happening.

But also, right across the globe but also in the UK, the pandemic has made some people more vulnerable to exploitation and slavery because maybe they have lost their work. It has dried up for one reason or another. And they therefore find themselves in really difficult exploitative situations.

And also, despite the best efforts of lots of agencies, of course the pandemic disrupted activity which might protect victims, particularly some of the work with young people. Youth provision. Youth services. That was restricted by the pandemic. And of course children not being in school, which actually protects them from exploiters. Those sorts of things certainly increased vulnerability.

Ben Anderson: We have talked about some of the challenges in providing support, in terms of the providers themselves and the importance of training, education, raising awareness. We have also talked about the resource, in terms of trying to raise the level of prosecutions.

Are there any changes to the law itself that need to happen to help prevent modern slavery in the UK moving forwards?

Dame Sara: Normally when I am asked this question I would argue that the law is fine. It is not perfect. The law never is perfect. But the challenge is implementation and using all the tools that we have, particularly the Modern Slavery Act, to protect victims, to prosecute offenders and to prevent this happening in the first place.

But the two specifics, if you are going to push me on, “Where should the law change?” one is that the government have promised that the requirements for modern slavery statements in businesses will be applied to public bodies. So Thames Valley Police, the health bodies across Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire County Council, the city council.

And we are waiting for that proposed legislation to be brought forward. So I think to apply what we require of the private sector to public sector bodies is a really good thing and that needs to be sorted out.

The other thing that I would mention, and maybe this is quite a detailed point, but colleagues might be aware that the Nationality and Borders Bill is currently being debated in Parliament. And it is largely about nationality and borders but it does have a whole section on modern slavery, and there are some changes that the government would like to make which I hope are not made.

So it is not about how the law needs to be changed. My argument is, “The law is okay at the moment. Please don’t change it as you are proposing.”

And there are two particular issues that I am concerned about.



The first is that in the case of people who are arriving in this country the government want to say to them, “You have to tell us now or in the next few weeks whether you have been a victim of slavery or trafficking. And if you don’t do so we will view that as undermining the credibility of any later disclosure made.”

Now we are very concerned that highly traumatised, vulnerable victims cannot just tell their story to order. Some people have called it a trauma deadline. It just doesn’t seem, to me, to take any account of everything we know about victims and the suffering that they have gone through.

Secondly, there is another clause which says that in certain cases, if people have criminal records in this country or from overseas, they won’t be provided with support as victims of modern slavery. And I am very concerned that we think that some victims are deserving and some are not deserving.

But also there is a practical point that a lot of people who give evidence in these very few cases that we have do in fact have criminal records and do need that support. And if we don’t give them that support for sure they are not going to give evidence in the criminal courts. So what worries me is it might well reduce our ability to prosecute offenders, which I am greatly concerned about.

Ben Anderson: I know that you have said that you are campaigning against this, but what is the thinking behind the declaration? What is the logic behind it? Is it purely a process-driven recommendation?

Dame Sara: So the government would say they fear the process is being abused and at the point at which somebody is being deported they are raising these issues of slavery and trafficking. So what they would like to do is get the issues raised at the beginning of any contact with a migrant rather than at the end. That is basically the argument for it. So they don't want it to be used to stop deportation. They would rather the issue was raised at the beginning.

As I say, the difficulty with that is we know in lots of cases sometimes it takes years for people to have sufficient confidence to disclose what has happened to them. As I say, it just seems to fly in the face of every expert on victims and trauma.

Ben Anderson: Thanks, Sara.

I know that you are interested in the public health approach when it comes to tackling modern slavery. Would you mind explaining what the public health approach is and why you think it is important?

Dame Sara: Well, it is always really vital that we protect victims and prosecute offenders. I am really interested in how we prevent this from happening in the first place. And there are models in public health which I think can help us to think about that.

And it is about thinking about modern slavery as to how it impacts on the population as a whole. And what do we

understand about that in terms of data and information? And then thinking about how we then respond.

And people who are familiar with public health will know there is often talk about primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention.

In modern slavery terms, what can we do in terms of primary prevention? What can we do to protect the population of this country from modern slavery as a whole? What are our rules? How do systems operate so that we really are resilient in terms of the population as a whole?

Then secondary prevention is when we have people who are at risk who need protecting. What can we do there? So it is the early intervention work.

A very good example in modern slavery is we know that when people are in forced labour that is the most serious sort of labour abuse, but there are often other things that are linked which are maybe less serious. So people aren't paid sick pay. They are not given any leave. They don't have a contract that they understand. They don't have the right health and safety equipment. All those sorts of things.

So I would argue secondary prevention is making sure that actually we do enforce those labour laws, that we have high standards, we protect workers. Because if we do all that we make them less exposed to the risk of forced labour, for example.

And then tertiary prevention is really when it has gone beyond

prevention and people have been victimised. How can we protect them in the future? How can we protect them from re-trafficking? How can we help them to build lives of sustainable independence?

So I think that is a really good way of looking at. And it is particularly a good way for local partnerships because you have got everybody around the table coming from different organisations with different expertise.

And what a public health model gives you is a bit of an organising framework to think about, “Actually, what are the interventions that we are going to make as a group? How do they fit? How are we going to evaluate them? How are we going to improve the services that we provide?”

And so we have done quite a lot of work trying to develop the thinking. And we have supported pilots in quite a few partnerships across the country who are trying to use this public health approach to organise and develop their work.

Ben Anderson: So it is almost like an educational, legislation, and then the direct support comes in.

Just speaking on that first point then, is modern slavery in the public consciousness enough? Does a member of the general public understand this area as much as they need to?

Dame Sara: No, I don't think they do. I think if you compare it with concerns about damage to the environment a lot of people are

really concerned about that, and quite rightly so, but damages to people, social issues, I think are less talked about. And I think that is of great concern. When we talk about environmental concerns, actually they are often linked to harm to people, but I think that is less talked about.

And I was doing an event in the university last night in Oxford, just talking to leaders in the university about, “How can we encourage these conversations? How can we encourage our young people to be thinking about supply chains, to be thinking about the fact that all of us might just be closer to somebody who is exploited than we realise?” And if we knew we would be horrified.

So I do think there is work to be done to raise general awareness because, firstly, if we change our behaviour that will make a difference. But, secondly, if we start writing to our members of Parliament, raising these issues, then of course they raise these issues in Parliament and it puts more pressure on the government to take action.

Ben Anderson: I think that is it. It is a horrible thing to think about. But I think the point that needs to be made to the general public is that this is happening. You hear about the story of a man in Cumbria. Forty years. That is something you watch on Netflix. That is not something that happens down the road from you. People need to know that this is happening and it is happening in their communities.

Dame Sara: Absolutely. That case is horrifying.

I think it is also because, as I was explaining earlier, people who are victims of slavery and trafficking are often vulnerable. And so maybe they are on the margins of our communities and so are themselves hidden. And I think it is a real challenge for all of us about just how aware are we of other fellow human beings whose lives are not as comfortable as our own?

Ben Anderson: What we have talked about, do you think that we don't provide enough support in general to survivors to recover from their traumatic experiences? And is there anything that we could do nationally to change that and better support survivors to recover?

Dame Sara: The survivors and victims who are identified and referred into what is known as the National Referral Mechanism are supported well. There is a contract which is held by the Salvation Army, and they have a lot of subcontractors across the country who provide safe houses and outreach support. And I know that compared with probably just about anywhere in the world that is a good provision for those who are supported in that way.

The problem is that there is the gap sometimes before people get supported, so we need to get better at looking after people until they are referred into the National Referral Mechanism. There are some people who don't want to be referred and we need to think about how we support them.

But the real focus I have had is, “Once we have provided that immediate recovery period, how can we be helping people to recover their agency, so that they can live lives of independence and resilience? How can we be making sure that they would have the best support in terms of any trauma? How can we ensure that we help to build their confidence, that they have maybe had access to training, we have thought about their employability, we have maybe thought about work experience or even work?”

So I am very interested in the long-term recovery of victims because if we don’t deal with that people just end up being re-trafficked. And I think we must do all we can, once we have supported somebody, to ensure that they can move on from that, as I said, and lead the sort of lives that probably all of us would expect and take for granted.

Ben Anderson: Dame Sara Thornton, former Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police and the UK’s Anti-Slavery Commissioner, thank you ever so much for your time today. It has been lovely to speak to you.

Dame Sara: And you. Thank you.

Ben Anderson: Thank you for listening to this podcast from Elmore Community Services.

If you suspect that anyone might be a victim of modern slavery please do report concerns using the following ways.

You can contact Thames Valley Police on 101, or 999 if there is a crime in action or an immediate threat.

You can call the Modern Slavery Helpline confidentially, 24/7, to seek advice or to report a suspicion.

Or you can download the free Unseen UK modern slavery app, a simple guide to recognising the signs of modern slavery and a way to report concerns confidentially.

The Victims First Willow Project is the Thames Valley service for anyone affected by any form of exploitation and all of those with complex needs.

Clearly there is a lot of good work happening in Oxfordshire, led by the Anti-Slavery Network, co-chaired by Elmore Community Services and Oxford City Council.

Commissioned by Oxford City Council, Elmore's report into the extent and nature of modern slavery provides important findings and recommendations.

Modern slavery is a heinous crime and together we can stamp it out. Thank you.