



# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Preliminary findings and messaging based on rapid stocktaking

## Trafficking in Persons during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting the world under enormous strain, affecting the lives of everyone. The unprecedented measures adopted to flatten the infection curve include enforced quarantine, curfews and lockdowns, travel restrictions, and limitations on economic activities and public life. While at first sight, these enforcement measures and increased police presence at the borders and on the streets seem to dissuade crime, they may also drive it further underground. In trafficking in persons, criminals are adjusting their business models to the 'new normal' created by the pandemic, especially through the abuse of modern communications technologies. At the same time, COVID-19 impacts the capacity of state authorities and non-governmental organizations to provide essential services to the victims of this crime. Most importantly, the pandemic has exacerbated and brought to the forefront the systemic and deeply entrenched economic and societal inequalities that are among the root causes of human trafficking.

## The Victims

Identification of trafficking victims is difficult, even under normal circumstances. The main reasons include the fact that trafficking victims are often exploited in illegal, informal or unregulated sectors (e.g. petty crime, sex industry, domestic settings, drug cultivation and trafficking, agriculture and construction); the capacity of organized crime to hide its operations in plain sight; the lack of willingness by the victims themselves to report their victimization or their inability to do so; and limited law enforcement capacities to detect this crime.

There are fears that COVID-19 is making the task of identifying victims of human trafficking even more difficult. They are also more exposed to contracting the virus, less equipped to prevent it, and have less access to healthcare to ensure their recovery. Essential and practical operations to support them have become a challenge, due to countries adjusting their priorities during the pandemic. Dramatic increases in unemployment and reductions in income, especially for low wage and informal sector workers, mean that significant numbers of people who were already vulnerable find themselves in even more precarious circumstances. From the garment industry, agriculture and farming, to manufacturing and domestic work, millions of people who were living in subsistence conditions have lost their wages. Those who continue

## UNODC Response

- ▶ Developing rapid assessment tools for countries to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on essential services for victims as well as on law enforcement and justice capacities.
- ▶ Providing grants to NGOs through the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking to offer services to victims of trafficking who need more support during the COVID-19 crisis.
- ▶ Facilitating cross-border cooperation at the request of countries.
- ▶ Supporting anti-trafficking units at their request to procure personal protective equipment to interact safely with victims.
- ▶ Conducting studies on the impact of the pandemic on victims of human trafficking and the modus operandi of organized crime groups.
- ▶ Establishing a Women's Leaders Network under UNODC Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling for the Middle East and Asia that will also look at the vulnerabilities of women to trafficking in persons during the pandemic.
- ▶ Offering many of its courses against trafficking in persons on its eLearning platform free of charge and in different languages starting from the region of South Eastern Europe.

to work in these sectors, where trafficking is frequently detected, may also face more exploitation because of the need to lower production costs due to economic difficulties, as well as due to less controls by the authorities.

NGOs working with UNODC speak of a significant percentage of their beneficiaries losing their sources of income and access to food staples due to pandemic-related measures. They report of loan sharks promising low interest loans to these people, increasing the possibility of debt-bondage. This means a vulnerable population has now become even more exposed to the risk of severe exploitation as they try to identify means to secure their livelihoods.





Children are at heightened risk of exploitation, especially since school closures have not only precluded many from access to education but also from a main source of shelter and nourishment. In some countries, because of the pandemic, more children are forced on to the streets in search of food and income, heightening their risk of infection and exploitation. In Senegal UNODC is supporting the Government in a large-scale operation that aims to identify thousands of street children that studied in religious boarding schools. These children were often subjected to exploitation and are now at heightened risk. UNODC will support the return to their families or placement in shelters. Since their schools are closed, many children are increasingly online for learning and socializing. This may make them more vulnerable to online sexual predators. Child rights groups, law enforcement officials and international organizations report of a greater demand for online sexual abuse material and risks of online grooming.

For the victims still in confinement by their traffickers, COVID-19 measures may make their desperate situation even worse. The increased levels of domestic violence reported in many countries is a worrying indicator for the living conditions of many trafficking victims, such as those in domestic servitude or sex slavery, forms of exploitation that disproportionately affect women and girls. In an environment where priorities and actions are geared towards limiting the spread of the virus, it is easier for traffickers to hide their operations, making victims increasingly invisible. Identification of victims and subsequent referral to social protection schemes may therefore become more challenging. In addition, NGOs performing prison and immigration detention monitoring need to adjust their activities due to the pandemic-related measures, resulting in detained victims potentially not being identified in such settings.

Restriction or control of movement of victims is a common feature of trafficking in persons. Lockdowns and confinement could reinforce the isolation of victims and reduce drastically any chance of them being identified and removed from such exploitative situations. During the pandemic, there are additional obstacles to accessing services, assistance and support, due to rules on confinement at home and related closure of NGOs and government offices. Isolation and social distancing can exacerbate mental health issues and disrupt any access to informal support networks. With the reduction of government services and changes in the way they are administered, identified

victims who were already being supported by government services or community groups may face challenges.

For instance, victims who have been provided with temporary immigration documents or time-limited services linked to their status as victims of trafficking might not be able to renew them easily. The situation can worsen if borders are closed and planned repatriations cannot take place, while residence permits and related access to healthcare and social benefits have already expired. In a promising step, some States have automatically extended all temporary and transitory visas, while others have suspended fines for unauthorized stay or extended medical coverage to anyone in their territory who is awaiting a decision from the administration on their status in the current context.

COVID-related measures may disproportionately affect certain categories of people at risk of exploitation. Undocumented migrants and seasonal workers are faced with more precarious working and living conditions, resulting in greater vulnerability to falling prey to criminal networks. There are concerns that people in the sex industry and domestic work will be more vulnerable to exploitation, as health hazards and exposure to COVID-19 increase.

Referral mechanisms, which are essential for identification of victims of trafficking and their access to rights, are impacted as vital cogs slow down or cease to work. As a result, the identification of victims and subsequent referral to protection schemes becomes more challenging. In-person counselling, representation and assistance, including legal aid, are reduced to a minimum or subjected to lengthy waiting times and backlogs. Consultations, when possible, are offered online, which may introduce further barriers to accessing support.

Civil society organizations have already issued alerts about access to shelters being denied to trafficking victims because of COVID-19. Some shelters have had to close because of reported infections and others have partially suspended services. Lack of housing, healthcare, legal and other services can increase vulnerabilities both to re-trafficking and to COVID-19 infection. Promising practices have been developed by some countries that allow victims of trafficking to remain in government-funded safe accommodation while the crisis lasts.



## The responders

Restrictions on movement, closing of borders and increased police presence and controls in the streets seem to have led to a reduction of certain types of crime in many countries. However, organized crime regularly adapts to changing circumstances.

In the COVID-19 era, many criminal activities are already moving online, taking advantage of the increased time people spend connected at home, or going further underground. Crime detection and investigation are more demanding, and victims become less visible to the authorities. Services provided via the internet such as hotlines and helplines are often the only possible option for victims in the current circumstances. However, this switch is not possible in many parts of the world that lack infrastructure. Even where it is possible, providers may not be equipped to meet the sudden surge in demand, while victims may be restrained from accessing such means of communication.

Services considered non-essential, including on-site police and labour inspections, may also be affected. Governments are diverting resources to address the pandemic and the police have new tasks for the enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing, affecting their normal operational capacity. Under these conditions, there is a looming danger that investigating trafficking in persons will become a lower priority and that proactive inspections of suspect sites and cases are reduced. This may in turn have an impact on arrests, investigations, prosecutions and convictions, leading to a climate of practical impunity where traffickers can operate with even lower risk of detection and conviction.

Justice systems are limiting services. Adjudication of cases, including those on compensation, may be halted and justice delayed for victims. Filing deadlines with courts may be missed or evidence collection may not be possible, impacting judicial and investigative processes.

The ability to comply with limitation periods may also be affected and potentially create additional challenges for legal assistance providers. Access to information or translation and interpretation services for victims of trafficking is becoming a challenge, as services are reduced to a minimum.

Pandemic-related restrictions may negatively affect law enforcement capacity to cooperate internationally. Many borders are closed, and regular communication channels are breaking down due to movement restrictions and the shifting of attention to public health-related purposes in the interior of each country.

Law enforcement officials and service providers might lack basic protective gear and fear infection when dealing with vulnerable people living in precarious conditions. At the request of the police counter-trafficking unit in Jordan, UNODC supported a coordinated response by international and national agencies to procure sanitation materials, protective equipment, medical kits and COVID-19 testing units for first responders.

The transnational crime unit in Cote d'Ivoire requested similar support. UNODC will also assist shelters for victims of trafficking in the country to procure protective equipment and medical kits for shelter residents and NGO workers.







## Recommendations for Action

In the effort to halt the global spread of COVID-19 and save lives, strict control measures are in place in many countries at a scale previously unseen in peace time. In addressing the pandemic, we should not overlook the real and concrete risks that this unprecedented situation presents for vulnerable individuals and groups, who are not always very visible in our societies. A much-needed focus on alleviating the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should not and must not exclude the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Recovering from the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to look at deeply entrenched inequalities in our economic development model that feed marginalization, gender-based violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons.

Human trafficking is the result of the failure of our societies and economies to protect the most vulnerable and enforce rights under national laws. They should not be additionally 'punished' during times of emergency

- **COVID-19 responses must be continuously monitored.** Where such measures unintentionally negatively impact vulnerable groups, such as trafficking victims, adjustments must be made to minimize harm and to ensure the needs of such groups are adequately addressed.
- While prioritizing public health, a culture of rule of law needs to prevail. Anti-trafficking responses must continue to be based on human rights, while access to health care and social support without discrimination should be guaranteed.
- **Access to justice must be safeguarded.** Where feasible, technology should be utilised to facilitate access to judicial processes and enable the collection and provision of evidence, the submission of documents and the filing or adjudicating of motions or petitions to courts.
- **Law enforcement officials must remain vigilant** in addressing new and evolving crime patterns and adapt their responses to prevent human traffickers from acting with impunity during the pandemic.
- Despite the anticipated slowing down of economies because of COVID-19 and the resulting pressures on national budgets, countries must continue supporting anti-trafficking work and adapt their assistance programmes to the new and extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic and its aftermath.
- **Service providers must remain flexible** and adapt to an evolving environment in order to meet the needs of their communities.
- **There is a need for systematic data collection and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons.** There is no country immune to the pandemic and as COVID-19 does not affect all regions at the same time, experience from one country could be vital to others.

