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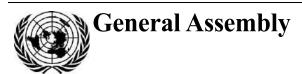
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**Advancement of women**

# Trafficking in women and girls: crises as a risk multiplier

## Report of the Secretary-General**

*Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 75/158, contains information on measures taken by Member States and activities carried out within the United Nations system to eliminate all forms of trafficking in women and girls. The report serves to highlight efforts to address the gender dimensions of trafficking, with a special focus on the nexus between the trafficking in women and girls and situations of crisis, including the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), climate change and conflict.

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# I. Introduction

1.     Trafficking in women and girls is a grave human rights violation and a form of violence against women and girls. The number of detected victims of trafficking has decreased from around 50,000 in 2018 to 45,000 human trafficking victims detected and reported by around 150 countries in 2020.[1] Trafficking in persons continues to have a disproportionate impact on women and girls. In 2020, for every 10 victims detected globally, about four were adult women and two were girls.[2] In 2020, trafficking for sexual exploitation was among the most common forms of exploitation detected. Of those trafficked for sexual exploitation, women made up around two thirds of detected victims, and girls made up a quarter.[3] Pervasive impunity and the lack of adequate responses to trafficking remain a key challenge.

2.     Mounting crises wreaking havoc across the world, including climate change, conflict and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, are exacerbating the risk women and girls being trafficked. Such crises intensify the factors that make women and girls more vulnerable to trafficking: women's poverty and economic insecurity, displacement, violence against women and discrimination. The breakdown of essential services, justice systems and social and economic structures caused by crises hampers prevention and response efforts, and provides new opportunities for traffickers to deceive, coerce and exploit women and girls. At the same time, traffickers are also increasingly using technology platforms to recruit, control and exploit women and girls as well as to hide information about their activities and identities.

3.     Normative developments since 2020 have continued to highlight the need for greater attention to the ways in which crises increase the risk of women and girls being trafficked. Through its general recommendation 38 (2020) on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women guides the implementation of the obligations of States parties to combat all forms of trafficking. According to the general recommendation, the obligations of States parties do not cease in periods of states of emergency resulting from conflict, political events, health crises or natural disasters. States also have obligations to discourage the demand that fosters exploitation and leads to trafficking.

4.     Against that background, and in accordance with General Assembly resolution 75/158, the present report is focused on the interconnections between the trafficking in women and girls and situations of crisis. In the report, promising practices are highlighted, and concrete recommendations are made for accelerating progress in the elimination of trafficking in women and girls, including the prosecution of traffickers and protection of victims. The report is based on, inter alia, information received from Member States,[4] entities of the United Nations system[5] and other organizations.

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[1] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (2022) (forthcoming).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Colombia, Czechia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Jordan, Latvia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Uruguay, Zimbabwe.

[5] International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL); International Organization for Migration (IOM); Organization of American States; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); UNODC.

## II.  Crises as a risk multiplier for trafficking in women and girls

5.      As the world continues to recover from the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency of climate change and growing climate disasters and conflicts around the world are creating a context of perpetual crises with ripple effects across the world. The impacts of crises on humanity are well known in terms of such socioeconomic impacts as the loss of housing, loss of income, health issues, loss of social networks and breakdown of services. The gendered impacts of crises are often overlooked in policy responses, including the nexus between crises and violence against women and girls, including trafficking. The pandemic has brought to the fore the gendered nature of vulnerability in the context of crises.

6.      There are important lessons to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic for the elimination of trafficking in women and girls, in particular with regard to understanding how the gendered drivers of trafficking are amplified in situations of crises. The lessons reflect an urgent priority as the world faces multiple crises caused by climate change and conflict, which are having global repercussions with increasing poverty, hunger and social unrest as a result of rising inflation, food prices and energy costs.[6]

7.      Against this background, the section below provides an outline of how different situations of crisis exacerbate the risk of women and girls being trafficked, with a focus on the pandemic, climate change and conflict. The section also highlights cross-cutting lessons learned on ways to effectively address trafficking in women and girls in crisis prevention and response.

### A.  Understanding vulnerabilities

8.      Gender inequality, along with other intersecting inequalities, increases the risk of trafficking in women and girls. Economic insecurity, the lack of viable employment options and poverty are well established as factors contributing to vulnerability to trafficking. The desperation of women and girls to improve their economic conditions is particularly exploited by traffickers in the recruitment and exploitation stages of trafficking.[7] The gender gap in primary and secondary education is closing. However, in low-income contexts, factors such as unequal access of girls to and their completion of education can contribute to the trafficking in girls and young women as a way for families to generate income and assets. The lack of access to gender-responsive social protection is also a factor increasing women's risk of poverty and vulnerability to trafficking.[8]

9.      Gender-based violence is also a factor contributing to the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking. In 2019, globally, an estimated 245 million women and girls aged 15 years and older were subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner in the previous year.[9] The connection between intimate partner violence and trafficking is becoming increasingly understood. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that in around 25 per cent of cases, trafficking survivors were subject to multiple forms of gender-based violence prior to

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[6] United Nations Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance, "Global impact of the war in Ukraine: Billions of people face the greatest cost-of-living crisis in a generation", Brief No. 2, 8 June 2022.

[7] *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.IV.3).

[8] United Nations, UN-Women and Women Count, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: the Gender Snapshot 2021*.

[9] Ibid.

being trafficked.[10] The most recent data on detected trafficking victims also found that the intimate partner was the trafficker in 13 per cent of cases.[11] The broader patriarchal culture and social norms related to men's control of women's sexuality, and acceptance and justification of violence against women, are key underlying drivers of women's vulnerability to trafficking.

10.    Migration policies and pathways are additional contextual factors that contribute to vulnerability to trafficking for women and girls. Labour and migration laws that lack a human rights and gender-sensitive approach may restrict women's ability to move freely and change employment, which increases the likelihood that women will seek employment in unregulated and informal sectors. Trafficking victims who do not have permission to work or stay in the country of exploitation face an extra layer of vulnerability.

11.    Emerging data on detected trafficking victims indicates an increasing pattern of multiple forms of exploitation, for example women who are trafficked into forced labour and are also sexually exploited. Such patterns highlight the intersecting nature of vulnerabilities for women and girls.

### 1.    COVID-19 pandemic

12.    Over the two years since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the devastating toll on people and countries globally continues, with the poorest and most vulnerable people most impacted. Early on in the pandemic in 2020, research indicated that trafficked women and girls were experiencing greater barriers to accessing support services and that public resources were diverted from prosecuting offenders and protecting survivors.[12] Research in 2021 from UNODC found that trafficking in persons had gone even further underground in the context of the pandemic.[13] While reliable estimates on the prevalence of trafficking during COVID-19 are unavailable, reports at the country and regional levels indicate that domestic trafficking, happening within countries' borders, has increased. Surveys of service providers indicate that women and girls have been more vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation in local areas and online. Data on convictions and prosecutions of traffickers from 2020 show a decrease for the first time since 2003. This trend potentially indicates that trafficking in women and girls has not been prioritized during the pandemic and post-lockdown recovery period.

13.    The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women and girls to trafficking, particularly due to the gendered economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Women have suffered the brunt of lost livelihoods because of the pandemic.[14] Economic stress increases the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking.[15] The number of employed women declined by 54 million in 2020 and 45 million women left the labour market altogether. Extreme poverty among women is also on the rise. New projections estimate that in 2022, 124 women aged 25–34 will be living in extreme poverty for every 100 men of the same age.[16] The gendered economic and

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[10] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants: A Case Law Analysis*.

[11] *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (see footnote 7).

[12] UNODC, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons: Preliminary findings and messaging based on rapid stocktaking".

[13] UNODC, *The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons and Responses to the Challenges: A Global Study of Emerging Evidence* (2021).

[14] United Nations, UN-Women and Women Count, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals* (see footnote 8).

[15] Jordan Greenbaum and others, "The public health impact of coronavirus disease on human trafficking", *Frontiers in Public Health* (October 2020).

[16] UN-Women and UNDP, *Government Responses to COVID-19: Lessons on Gender Equality for a World in Turmoil* (2022) (forthcoming).

social impacts of the pandemic have created conditions for new patterns of sexual exploitation to emerge, for example landlords using threats of eviction to coerce financially distressed tenants into sexual exploitation.[17]

14. Being out of school creates vulnerabilities for girls to trafficking, particularly for sexual exploitation or forced marriage. The pandemic has had significant impacts on girls' education. The number of young women not in education, employment or training increased in 28 out of 48 countries with available data between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the fourth quarter of 2020.[18]

15. Intimate partner violence has also intensified during the pandemic due to successive lockdowns and disruption to services, further increasing women's vulnerability to trafficking.[19] Restrictions associated with the pandemic have provided traffickers, who are often intimate partners, greater scope to coerce and control victims.[20] A survey conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) found that 45 per cent of women reported that they or a woman they know had experienced a form of violence since the COVID-19 pandemic began.[21]

16. Vulnerability to trafficking has also increased due to the disruption of gender-responsive services, the failure to adequately address gender equality or trafficking in COVID-19 responses and the diversion of resources to address the immediate health needs of people during the pandemic. For example, despite women's greater vulnerability to poverty, out of a total of 3,099 social protection and labour market measures adopted by governments in response to COVID-19, only 12 per cent supported women's economic security.[22] Accessing healthcare became an additional challenge for trafficking victims and survivors during the pandemic.

17. Border closures and restrictions on travel and migration pathways have also pushed more traffickers online, creating new vulnerabilities for women and girls.[23] For many women and girls, education and work have moved online during the pandemic, where they are at greater risk of being recruited and exploited.[24] Survey data from front-line practitioners working with trafficking victims[25] suggests that during the pandemic women have increasingly been recruited online for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and girls have increasingly been trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation online and for forced marriage[26] (see box 1).

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[17] Polaris, "Sex trafficking is still happening – and may be more violent than ever", 17 April 2020.

[18] United Nations, UN-Women and Women Count, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: the Gender Snapshot 2021*.

[19] Greenbaum and others, "The public health impact of coronavirus disease on human trafficking".

[20] UNODC, *The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons* (see footnote 13).

[21] UN-Women and Women Count, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19* (2021).

[22] UN-Women and UNDP, *Government Responses to COVID-19* (see footnote 16).

[23] OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and UN-Women, *Guidance: Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2020).

[24] Simplice A Asongu and Usman M Usman, "The COVID-19 pandemic: Theoretical and practical perspectives on children, women and sex trafficking", *Health Care for Women International*, vol. 41, No. 11–12 (November/December 2020).

[25] Front line practitioners include law enforcement background (police, immigration, border control), victim support providers, professionals in policy development and implementation, and government agencies.

[26] UNODC, *The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons*; UNICEF, "COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage", March 2021.

Box 1
**How technology is used for the recruitment and exploitation of women and girls trafficking victim-survivors**

Traffickers are increasingly using technology to profile, recruit, control and exploit their victims as well as using the Internet, especially the dark web, to hide information about their activities and identities. Such trends have escalated during the pandemic.[a] The impact of technology on trafficking in human beings is of particular concern during recruitment and exploitation. In the context of recruitment for sexual exploitation, social media channels are often used for deceptive job advertisements linked to trafficking. In fact, in the United States of America, analysis of the national trafficking hotline in 2020 saw an increase of 120 per cent in the proportion of potential victims for whom social media platforms were used for recruitment into trafficking.[b] Dating applications are also used for recruitment. In terms of exploitation, technology is used to facilitate the sale of sexual services provided by trafficking victims. While live-streaming is often connected to child sexual abuse, there is also evidence of live-streaming involving the sexual exploitation of adult women. Measuring the prevalence of technology-facilitated human trafficking and identifying victims remains very challenging.

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[a] Europol, "Exploiting isolation: offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic", 19 June 2020; Polaris, "Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data".
[b] Polaris, "Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data.

### 2. Climate change

18. Climate change is a rapidly developing and ongoing crisis across the world with devastating impacts on livelihoods, well-being and safety, particularly of the most marginalized. Climate change is a risk multiplier for gender inequalities due to its deeply gendered impacts. The impacts are more severe and visible at the intersection of inequalities. In most natural disasters, mortality among women is significantly higher than that of men, and women's poverty increases in disaster-prone areas. Evidence suggests that by impacting livelihoods, increasing poverty and triggering forced displacement, environmental degradation and droughts may also be increasing instances of violence against women. Indigenous women and women farmers are particularly at risk because of an intersection of socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including discrimination in access to land, resources and decision-making.[27]

19. Besides exacerbating gender inequalities, climate change also intensifies the broader risk factors for trafficking, particularly as people become more likely to opt for risky migration pathways. Extreme weather caused by climate change is already driving large-scale internal displacement. Early evidence suggests that climate change will increase global migration as people who are facing rising seas, more frequent natural disasters and increasingly hostile climates will have 'no choice but to move'. Although there is an increased risk of trafficking and exploitation for all displaced people, migrant women and girls, in particular, are frequently targeted by violence, harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual and labour exploitation.

20. Climate change is also set to increase social and economic inequality between and within countries, which is already a factor for the vulnerability of women and

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[27] Nicole Molinari, "Intensifying insecurities: The impact of climate change on vulnerability to human trafficking in the Indian Sundarbans", *Anti-Trafficking Review*, No. 8 (2017).

girls to trafficking. Changing weather patterns will continue to exacerbate food insecurity and food scarcity, and as a result, poverty. Families may be pushed into desperate situations to meet basic needs, including forcing women and girls to pursue risky migration pathways, or becoming vulnerable to deceptive "recruitment" from traffickers. Climate-induced disasters and slow onset climate change are also likely to continue disrupting essential services and infrastructure which can further intensify vulnerabilities to trafficking, both in locations of origin and destination.

21.    The experience of recent natural disasters, including floods, cyclones and other extreme weather events, has provided strong evidence of how climate change increases vulnerability to trafficking for women and girls. [28] A study conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) following Cyclone Aila in Bangladesh in 2009 identified women-headed households as especially vulnerable to human trafficking and associated exploitation. [29] Similarly, in Nepal, the 2015 earthquake, which affected two thirds of the population, led to an increase in cases of trafficking of women and girls. [30] Evidence from the Sundarbans delta in South Asia shows that the region's ongoing environmental pressures driven by climate change exacerbate the social and economic pressures that contribute to people's vulnerability to trafficking. [31] Human traffickers target women desperate to cross borders for employment, and as a result women and children are trafficked into forced labour in sweatshops or the sex industry.

### 3.    Conflict

22.    Ongoing, new and escalating conflicts across the world are resulting in a ripple of crises worldwide. Approximately a quarter of the world's population, 2 billion people, are living in conflict areas today and the world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945. A total of 89.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced by the end of 2021. [32] The current conflict in Ukraine is resulting in the fastest forced population movement since the Second World War, with significant implications for the trafficking of women and girls (see box 2).

Box 2
**The conflict in Ukraine and trafficking in women and girls**

As at 22 July 2022, close to 6 million people had fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries and beyond.[a] A further 7.1 million people had been internally displaced.[b] An estimated 90 per cent of those fleeing Ukraine are women and children, and they face high risk of human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation.[c]

Prior to the current crisis, Eastern Europe had been a key region of origin for victims of human trafficking in Europe.[d] The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) has warned that the criminal networks organizing trafficking in persons often have roots in the countries bordering Ukraine and may be further enabled by the influx in refugees.[e] Adding to this risk profile, there is a large population of stateless people who were living in Ukraine prior to the conflict. Of this population,

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[28] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (2022), chap. 8; UNICEF, "Are climate change policies child-sensitive?", December 2019.

[29] IOM, *Assessing the Evidence: Environment, Climate Change and Migration in Bangladesh* (2010).

[30] Plan International UK and others, "The trafficking of girls and young women in Nepal", 2019.

[31] Molinari, "Intensifying insecurities" (see footnote 27).

[32] UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021* (2021).

an estimated 60 per cent of Roma women and children do not have documentation.[f] Undocumented migrants are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, especially to trafficking for forced labour. Other groups who are particularly vulnerable include children in institutional care; separated and unaccompanied children; chronically ill, disabled and elderly people; people with non-Ukrainian nationality; and LGBTQI+ persons. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict highlighted the lack of vetting of volunteers that are offering to help refugees and the displaced, noting alarming reports of women and girls being preyed upon by opportunistic individuals seeking to exploit the most vulnerable.[g] The International Organization for Migration has reported that 55.4 per cent of calls to its Ukraine hotline for migrant advice and counter-trafficking were about human trafficking and safe travel.[h]

Women's civil society organizations in Ukraine have reported an intensification of traffickers on the borders and outside of Ukraine. An increase in sexual and gender-based violence has also been reported by civil society organizations.[i] Family separation is a significant risk, particularly for the vulnerability of girls to sexual exploitation and trafficking. The situation at border crossings and reception centres creates enabling conditions for trafficking where traffickers can exploit the desperation and fear of refugees and deceive them by offering transport and accommodation.[j]

The use of technology to facilitate human trafficking of Ukrainians is of particular concern. There are reports of human traffickers using social media to identify and contact potential trafficking victims, who may have revealed information about their identity and location while looking for help and support.[k] There have also been dramatic global spikes in demand for explicit content and sexual services from Ukrainian women, with searches for pornography related to Ukrainian women increasing by 600 per cent and searches of Ukrainian women escort services increasing by 200 per cent within months of the invasion.[l]

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[a] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Bureau for Europe, "Ukraine Situation Flash Update #22", 22 July 2022.

[b] UNHCR Ukraine, "Ukraine emergency: UNHCR operational response delivery updates: 21 June 2022", 21 June 2022.

[c] UNHCR, "Ukraine crisis creates new trafficking risks", 13 April 2022; OHCHR, "Update on the human rights situation in Ukraine", 24 March 2022.

[d] Europol, "Early Warning Notification: War in Ukraine – refugees arriving to the EU from Ukraine at risk of exploitation as part of THB", March 2022.

[e] Ibid.

[f] NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security, "Gender analysis of the situation in Ukraine", April 2022.

[g] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "Briefing of SRSG Patten about Ukraine to the Security Council", 6 June 2022.

[h] International Organization for Migration, "Key statistics: National toll-free migrant advice and counter trafficking hotline since the start of the war, 24 February–27 April 2022", 2022.

[i] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Rapid assessment: Impact of the war in Ukraine on women's civil society organizations", 2022.

[j] Care International, "Rapid gender analysis: Ukrainian refugees in Poland", 16 March 2022.

[k] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Recommendations on enhancing efforts to identify and mitigate risks of trafficking in human beings online as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine", 22 April 2022.

[l] Ibid.

23.   The connection between conflict and trafficking in women and girls is well established. Increased poverty and restricted economic opportunities are factors that contribute to trafficking in women and girls and that are exacerbated in conflict contexts. In particular, the sharp rise in displaced and stateless persons increases the economic vulnerability of women and girls and their risk of trafficking and exploitation. Economic and physical insecurity places women and girls in desperate situations where they are more likely to pursue risky opportunities or be deceived by traffickers. Conflict also increases the demand for goods and services provided by exploited persons and creates new demands for exploitative combat and support roles. Further, the breakdown of State capacity and the rule of law increases existing vulnerabilities and creates an enabling environment for traffickers to operate with impunity.

24.   There are also specific gendered vulnerabilities in conflict contexts that increase the risk of trafficking for women and girls, particularly increased conflict-related sexual violence. Conflict-related sexual violence has also been linked with abductions for the purpose of trafficking as well as trafficking for sexual exploitation in displaced persons camps. In the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, women's and girls' experiences of sexual violence have been connected with trafficking for sexual exploitation. [33] Further, in Colombia, sexual violence by armed groups forced ethnic minority women and girls in remote rural areas away from their communities and placed them at greater risk of trafficking within the country as well as overseas (A/73/171, para. 22). Conflict-related sexual violence can also overlap with other forms of gender-based violence in the context of trafficking. For example, forced marriage can be both the means and end purpose of sexual exploitation.

25.   Trafficking in women and girls is also increasingly used by some violent extremist groups in the context of conflict as a terrorism tactic, particularly where the rule of law and State presence are weak (S/2022/272, para. 12). In this context, sexual exploitation, driven by male entitlement and control, is used to increase finances for extremist groups and consolidate their power through recruitment and the destruction of communities. Trafficking for the purpose of forced marriage, for example, can be used to control and coerce local populations and as a tool of reprisal or as part of the ideological goals of extremist organizations. For example, the systematic targeting of Yazidi women by Da'esh in Iraq because they viewed them as "devil worshippers" justified the trafficking of Yazidi women for sexual slavery. [34] Furthermore, reports of women and girls being abducted by fighters from non-State armed groups have emerged in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, including cases of forced marriage and rape (S/2022/272, para. 12). Other examples include Boko Haram's abduction of secondary school girls in 2014 and 2018, with the intent of forcing them into marriage and sexual slavery (S/2019/280, para. 119).

26.   Refugee or migration policies may also play a role in increasing vulnerability to trafficking for women and girls. Policies that seek to deter migrants by reducing or eliminating safe and legitimate options for refugees and asylum seekers increase vulnerability to (and perpetrators' incentives to engage in) exploitation. Unable to safely access asylum, asylum seekers and refugees are driven to take desperate measures, frequently placing themselves at risk of trafficking.

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[33] Amnesty International, "'I don't know if they realized I was a person': Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia", 2021.

[34] Nora Coyne, "The sexual slavery of Yazidis by ISIS", *Human Trafficking Search*, 18 July 2017.

### 4. Lessons for eliminating trafficking in crisis contexts

27.    There are several lessons that emerge from understanding how COVID-19, climate change and conflict are increasing the risk of trafficking in women and girls. First, responses to trafficking must explicitly focus on the gendered social, economic and political factors that underlie the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking, given that it is the exacerbation of existing gender inequalities which significantly increases risk in crisis contexts. Responses to trafficking are too heavily focused on prosecution and criminalization rather than a comprehensive approach, including the protection of survivors and prevention, which seeks to change the underlying gendered vulnerabilities and inequalities that provide the conditions for exploitation of women and girls.[35] Given the risk of trafficking created by the level of displacement associated with conflicts and climate change, safe and orderly migration options are critical.

28.    Second, in crisis contexts trafficking is often linked to other forms of violence against women, including intimate partner violence and sexual violence. While addressing violence against women and girls is increasingly addressed in humanitarian responses, and in conflict and crisis prevention and responses, it is not yet systemically integrated across the board and not at all well integrated in the context of climate change responses. There is also an opportunity to integrate trafficking prevention and response into national action plans on women and peace and security. Further, trafficking in women and girls is not always recognized in crisis responses as a form of violence against women, and thus the connections between different forms of gender-based violence and trafficking are neglected. Integrating trafficking as a form of gender-based violence in crisis responses also provides the opportunity to address the common drivers of male entitlement and control in violence prevention strategies.

29.    Finally, crisis prevention and response – whether to a pandemic, natural disaster or conflict – can only be effective in addressing the increased risk of women and girls being trafficked, with the full and equal participation of women in decision-making and leadership. Women's organizations, particularly those with expertise in gender-based violence and trafficking, have a critical role to play in providing specialist expertise to inform crisis prevention and response. As such, supporting women's organizations, through investments in capacity-building and ensuring their voice in decision-making, is an essential component of a gender-responsive crisis response.

## III.    Actions taken by Member States and the United Nations system to eliminate trafficking in women and girls, including in crisis contexts

### A.    Laws, policies and accountability frameworks

30.    Effective criminal justice responses are crucial to ending impunity for human trafficking. Several States have strengthened legislation to tackle trafficking in persons. The Republic of Korea has consolidated its anti-trafficking laws into a single piece of legislation which establishes a unified prevention and response system. Some states have also increased fines and imprisonment terms for the crime of trafficking (Jordan, Romania, Slovakia). Zimbabwe is commencing a review of its trafficking legislation to align it with international standards and respond to emerging issues. New legislative interventions have also been made to ensure support for trafficking victims and survivors, for example through financing healthcare for certain victims

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[35] Molinari, "Intensifying insecurities" (see footnote 27).

(Slovakia), strengthening cooperation between government and the judiciary (Armenia), establishing a donations-based victims compensation fund (Jordan), and offering customized support to victims (the Republic of Korea). UN-Women has supported law reform to strengthen anti-trafficking legislation in several countries.

31. Improving the detection of human trafficking remains a focus for many States. Some States continued a "following the money" approach, bolstering money laundering laws which facilitate the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking in supply chains (Germany). In the German police force, an analysis and search tool has been deployed to anti-trafficking units which facilitates the tracking of criminal organizations, links relevant online data and provides insights into online advertisements of potential victims of exploitation. Togo has created a national commission to address trafficking. Under the Transforming Alerts into Criminal Justice Responses to Combat Trafficking in Persons within migration flows (TRACK4TIP) initiative, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has been supporting countries to strengthen their identification and referrals for identified human trafficking cases. The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) has coordinated the efforts of authorities in various countries to detect and assist victims of trafficking.

32. National action plans remain a critical component of prevention and response to establish priority areas of focus, responsibilities and accountability frameworks. In the past two years, several States have introduced or strengthened national action plans, programmes and strategies to address human trafficking (Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Czechia, Latvia, Nigeria, Romania), and many have continued to enhance implementation efforts (Bulgaria, Czechia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Mali, Slovakia). Several of these plans feature a focus on the unique needs of women and children, who are disproportionately affected by human trafficking, as well as on strengthening the investigation and prosecution of the crime of trafficking (see box 3). United Nations agencies, and cross-agency initiatives, have provided technical support in the development of national action plans to end trafficking in persons (International Organization for Migration, Spotlight Initiative, United Nations Children's Fund and UN-Women).

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Box 3
**Increased efforts to detect trafficking in crisis contexts**

Several countries have intensified trafficking detection efforts in response to the increased risk of people fleeing Ukraine being trafficked (Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia). Targeted efforts include directives for law enforcement officials to monitor activities at borders, modify patrol routes and carry out inspections of vehicles to identify potential trafficking situations. Latvian State Police are cooperating with local authorities and non-governmental organizations to facilitate the exchange of information and coordinate actions to prevent trafficking of people from Ukraine. The United Nations Children's Fund has trained border guards in Slovakia on identifying women and children at risk of trafficking.

In the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, States have also shifted detection and investigation efforts in the context of the pandemic, with a focus on the use of technology for trafficking. In the context of its national support programme for children during the pandemic, Romania has resolved to implement an integrated information technology system for analysing child abuse material to help identify perpetrators, and an Amber Alert mechanism for missing children.

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33. States have continued to build the capacity of key actors to identify, intercept, investigate and prosecute human trafficking, often with an emphasis on the gendered aspects of trafficking (Bulgaria, Ghana, Latvia, Mauritius, Senegal, Slovakia, Uruguay). In Guatemala, the Organization of American States has undertaken capacity-building with government and civil society staff to better assist and protect victims and has assisted in the development of a protocol to assist lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and intersex victims of human trafficking. Other United Nations agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), are also engaged in capacity-building activities. States have also adapted approaches to evidence in legal processes, for example by creating specific hearing rooms for child victims of violence (Romania) and developing protocols on the treatment of victims and witnesses to sex trafficking and on the issue of receiving depositions from witnesses under threat (Uruguay).

## B. Prevention of trafficking, including addressing the demand

34. Preventing trafficking also requires action to address the intersecting factors that create vulnerability for women and girls, particularly women's economic insecurity and violence against women and girls, as well as strategies to address the demand for trafficking (see box 4). Awareness-raising campaigns continue to be the primary focus of efforts to prevent trafficking, with very few States addressing the gendered drivers of trafficking or the demand for sexual exploitation. Several countries have introduced anti-trafficking campaigns, including specific initiatives targeted to families (Azerbaijan), schools and young people (Bulgaria, Cameroon, Slovenia), media (Argentina), online and digital contexts (Czechia) and community and religious leaders (Ghana).

35. Some States have introduced new comprehensive policy frameworks to address violence against women and girls, as part of their effort to prevent trafficking (Colombia, Mexico). States have also introduced targeted employment programs, social protection, education or financial assistance to at-risk women as a trafficking prevention measure. Azerbaijan, for example, has introduced professional skills courses and employment support for women from at-risk groups. In Ghana, several mechanisms were deployed to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic and climate change, including cash transfers and programmes to provide women with capital, knowledge and tools to enhance their economic security.

36. Strengthened labour standards, ensuring compliance with standards and awareness-raising play a key role in reducing demand for forced labour. Germany has introduced due diligence obligations for companies to identify, prevent or minimize the risks of human rights violations, including trafficking, throughout the entire supply chain. In Mali, the exploitation of minors is being tackled through efforts to identify children subject to child labour and to verify children's residence permits. In Colombia, the "Zero Complicity Seal" was launched to ensure that commercial establishments, bars, restaurants and hotels are trafficking-free spaces. The United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women has supported civil society in Nepal to improve decent working conditions and social protection for women workers in the informal entertainment sector.

Box 4
**Efforts to prevent trafficking in women and girls in crisis contexts**

There are some efforts to prevent trafficking in women and girls in conflict and emergency contexts. For example, in the context of the conflict in Tigray in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Government joined the "Blue Heart Campaign" of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to end trafficking and established a national multi-stakeholder task force to drive the prevention and response to trafficking in women and girls.

Several European States have organized awareness campaigns in response to the heightened trafficking risk for people currently fleeing war in Ukraine, often working with non-governmental organizations. These campaigns involve disseminating information via websites, leaflets and posters in multiple languages which identify and warn against the risks of trafficking and provide contact points for assistance to victims of trafficking (Germany, Greece, Slovakia, Slovenia). The United Nations Children's Fund and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are partnering with governments and civil society to intensify risk mitigation measures, including through "Blue Dot" facilities where women and children can receive information, counselling and protection services.

The European Commission has also introduced operational guidelines for a temporary protection directive in response to the crisis in Ukraine. This allows Ukrainian nationals to move freely within the European Union using a 15-day visa obtained at the border. While this measure alone does not eliminate the risk of trafficking, it does remove the option for traffickers to lure potential victims with the promise of migration.

In the context of climate change, Germany is focusing on improving social inclusion for homeless and vulnerable people, especially women and girls, often disproportionally affected by natural disasters, conflict-related crises and climate change.

## C. Services for survivors of trafficking

37. Comprehensive, multi-sectoral survivor-centred services are key components of an effective response to trafficking in women and girls. In the short-term, survivors require medical, psychological, legal, immigration, social protection and financial assistance, as well as witness protection and shelters. In the longer term, survivors require support with education and training, income generation, accommodation, health care, social support and reunification with family and community, where it is safe to do so (see box 5).

38. Some States have strengthened services for trafficking survivors since 2020, including through the establishment of new trauma-informed care services (Ghana); one-stop centres to provide legal, medical and psychosocial support (Iran (Islamic Republic of)); crisis support and accommodation (Bulgaria); specific support for children and adolescents (Uruguay); and the integration of counselling into efforts to address forced labour (Germany). Uruguay has implemented economic support measures for migrants during the pandemic, including through relieving visa requirements. Very few States reported on measures to increase access to support for trafficking survivors in the context of COVID-19, for example by adapting services online or using specific strategies to reach survivors during the pandemic. This

suggests that support for trafficking survivors has not been prioritized during the pandemic.

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Box 5
**United Nations system support for survivors in crisis contexts**

The United Nations system has also continued to support access to services for survivors, particularly in crisis contexts. In collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, Spotlight Initiative's Safe and Fair Programme in Thailand, for example, provided direct support for shelter to survivors of trafficking during the pandemic and, in Myanmar, worked to support access to shelter, counselling and personal protective equipment for trafficked women and girls.

As part of the implementation of the Framework of Cooperation between the Government of Ukraine and the United Nations on the Prevention and Response to Conflict-related Sexual Violence[a] coordination is being strengthened to ensure risk mitigation measures against conflict-related trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

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[a] See www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20220503-FoC_Ukraine_SIGNED.pdf.

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## D. Data, monitoring and evaluation

39. States are also increasingly funding and facilitating research and evaluation activities, recognizing the need for robust data and monitoring to build effective evidence-based policy responses to trafficking in women and girls. For instance, the Government of Australia has funded civil society, business and academia to deliver research projects that combat modern slavery. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has deployed data collection strategies to address trafficking, including mapping the shelters and orphanages in Kinshasa to refer victims and survivors to recovery services. Colombia has designed a new data collection instrument for the measurement of trafficking. The Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings of Portugal monitored the impact of the pandemic on human trafficking to inform policy responses. Despite these efforts, significant gaps in data and knowledge on trafficking in women and girls remain, signalling the need for greater investment.

40. The United Nations system has also contributed to global data, monitoring and evaluation efforts. Programmes under the Spotlight Initiative, a partnership with the European Union, have contributed to the availability of regularly reported public data on trafficking through the publication of eight multidimensional studies on violence against women and girls, including human trafficking in Latin America. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe produced research on gender-sensitive approaches and discouraging the demand that fosters trafficking. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict issued a detailed overview of the risks and impacts faced by children in conflict-affected situations in its report entitled "The gender dimensions of grave violations against children in armed conflict". UNODC undertook a global study on the effects of the pandemic on trafficking in persons and associated challenges and responses. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has mapped protection services for trafficking victims in the Sahel and Eastern Africa. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict has established the monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence.

# IV. Conclusions and recommendations

## A. Conclusions

41. **Trafficking in women and girls remains a pervasive problem, with escalating crises around the world creating greater vulnerabilities. While there are growing efforts to strengthen laws, policies and services to address trafficking in women and girls, prevention efforts remain limited. Prevention is too often focused on limited awareness-raising efforts rather than reducing the demand for sexual exploitation or addressing the gendered drivers of trafficking in women and girls and shifting social norms. Addressing vulnerabilities that put women and girls at risk of trafficking and exploitation in all contexts, should be at the core of prevention efforts.**

42. **The impacts of the pandemic, the climate emergency, and ongoing, new, and escalating conflicts have intensified women's poverty and economic insecurity, their displacement, and violence against them, which places women and girls at greater risk of trafficking. The deterioration of the rule of law, forced displacement, socioeconomic upheaval, separation of families and breakdown of services create further risk of trafficking. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, such disruptions also provide traffickers with the opportunity to engage in new means of exploitation and violence such as online or technology-facilitated trafficking.**

43. **Despite the deeply gendered impacts of crises, the needs of women and girls are not often considered and prioritized in crisis prevention and response, including their risks to violence and trafficking. Given the intensity and breadth of inter-related crises facing the world, trafficking in women and girls must be integrated into crisis prevention and response frameworks. Women's organizations have an important role to play in providing specialist expertise to inform crisis prevention and response. Accelerating progress to eliminate trafficking in women and girls requires a renewed focus on crisis contexts and prevention.**

## B. Recommendations

### 1. Addressing vulnerabilities in crisis contexts

44. **In crisis responses that address the connections between trafficking and different forms of gender-based violence, trafficking in women and girls should be recognized as a form of gender-based violence.**

45. **States could ensure that responses to crises address the risk of trafficking for women and girls. Such responses should include a specific focus on the gendered factors that underlie the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking in crisis contexts. In this regard, would be important for:**

(a) **Anti-trafficking considerations be integrated in humanitarian responses and national action plans on women and peace and security;**

(b) **Interventions that address the vulnerability of women and girls be prioritized in crisis situations and humanitarian responses, such as safe livelihood opportunities, social protection and financial support;**

(c) **Women and girls to have access to essential services in crisis situations, especially for survivors of gender-based violence.**

46.     States could support women's rights and survivors' organizations to inform gender-responsive crisis action plans, by ensuring meaningful participation and access to influence in decision-making, as well as implementation and monitoring of such action plans.

47.     In the context of climate change, as recognized in the agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women at its sixty-sixth session, addressing the specific risks for groups of women and girls, including rural, migrant and indigenous women, and ensuring their full participation in decision-making in relation to climate-related disaster preparedness, response and recovery becomes a priority for State action.

## 2.     Prevention

48.     Efforts by States to eliminate trafficking in women and girls in the long-term could include measures to ensure that action plans and prevention strategies against trafficking incorporate the gendered dimensions of vulnerability, such as:

        (a)     Addressing the demand that fosters sexual and other forms of exploitation by investing in education and community-based programmes that challenge harmful social norms, male domination and sexual entitlement;

        (b)     Addressing the economic drivers and other vulnerability factors that may push women and girls to seek risky opportunities for income generation that could lead to their exploitation;

        (c)     Strengthening the capacities of response teams in settings for internally displaced persons, refugees or large migration movements in order to better identify potential victims and ensure the safety and security of women and girls.

## 3.     Response

49.     It is essential to ensure that survivors of trafficking are given long-term, comprehensive reintegration support, including economic empowerment and psychological support that is not conditioned by the pursuit of criminal justice. Such support should be extended to any children born to trafficking victims.

50.     In preparation for crises, States can build mechanisms for front-line actors (such as border officials, police, health-care workers, etc.) to identify trafficking victims and strengthen referral pathways so they operate effectively during times of crisis.

51.     Actors that are providing humanitarian assistance in the context of crises must have in place zero tolerance policies for cases of personnel who commit trafficking in women and girls. Organizations must commit to ensuring adequate vetting and training of personnel on this policy and setting up referral mechanisms to identify cases and ensure that those who commit these acts face justice.

## 4.     Safe and orderly migration options in situations of crisis

52.     It is essential to facilitate safe and orderly migration during crises, especially through the provision of temporary, humanitarian and family reunification visas. Such efforts should not be limited only to nationals of the affected countries but to all those who are living in a crisis situation.

53.     Ensuring that women and girls have access to formal identification such as social security numbers and identity cards so they can access all the support and

entitlements to facilitate legal migration, access to services and humanitarian assistance is an effective measure to be adopted by States.

### 5. Addressing the role of technology in trafficking

54. Given the increasing role of technology in facilitating trafficking in women and girls, States could strengthen efforts to detect and monitor activities associated with trafficking online. In particular, understanding how online platforms where recruitment occurs can help States to monitor, flag and refer potential cases. States could partner with technology companies, social media and online platform service providers to strengthen efforts to prevent trafficking and increase service provision.

### 6. Data

55. Data collection efforts through humanitarian responses should include tools and methodologies to collect disaggregated data on trafficking. Data should be disaggregated by age and gender, and include children, but also provide information on other factors such as disabilities, race and sexual orientation in line with do-no-harm principles.

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