



Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This guidance is part of ODIHR's and UN Women's ongoing efforts to respond to human rights challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the OSCE. The joint publication seeks to provide strategic guidance to address the consequences of the pandemic on trafficking in human beings.

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS



- Between 2017-2018 a total of **74,514** victims of trafficking were detected in 110 countries – the number of undetected cases is estimated to be in the millions
- Women and girls represent **72%** of all trafficking victims globally
- Girls represent almost **77%** of children trafficked globally
- In 2016, **59%** of detected victims were trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, 34% for forced labor and 7% for other purposes
- **94%** of detected victims trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation are women and girls¹

1. UNODC (2019), Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018.



“There is a person being exploited. Someone who did not want to be used, bought or sold. Someone who just needed food, rent, someone who just didn’t have anyone else to turn to or another choice. Until we see that person as our friend, neighbor, sister, daughter, etc., it will never stop.”

— Female survivor from the United States

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND COVID-19

In times of emergency or disaster, rates of exploitation increase. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different, and it is creating new risks and challenges for victims and survivors of trafficking, while amplifying the vulnerabilities of those most at-risk, especially women and girls.

The [OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) (ODIHR), and the [United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women](#) (UN Women) conducted a global survey with 94 survivors of trafficking from 40 countries, and 385 frontline workers from 102 countries from 27 April to 18 of May 2020 to understand the impact of the pandemic on trafficking in persons and how the global community can better respond to these emerging trafficking trends.



	SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING	FRONTLINE ORGANIZATIONS
Changes due to COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 70% of female respondents and 60% of male respondents say their mental health has worsened due to the uncertainty and isolation as a result of the pandemic, and some reported a retriggering of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). 68% of female respondents and 67% of male respondents say COVID-19 has negatively impacted their financial well-being due to a lack of job opportunities and the economic downturn. 44% of female survivors and 34% of male survivors say their health has worsened. 43% of both male and female respondents believe that the pandemic has had a more significant impact on women survivors than men. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respondents reported that combatting human trafficking has been negatively impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the areas of victim identification procedures and social services, including sheltered accommodation. The proper functioning of National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs), or equivalent systems, have also been affected, with respondents in half of countries reporting that they have only a partially operational system. According to respondents, countries with existing NRMs have been better able to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic.



“You stay in these hostels for years without any answers to your application for asylum. By the time you are granted permission to stay you have already given up on life, you don’t have a will to live anymore, you’re just tired.”

— Female survivor from Iceland



“The men that get a lot of money to traffic people must be locked up forever.”

— Female survivor from South Africa

“Respect victims, provide legal assistance, as well as, training and safe placement of workers.”

— Female survivor from Indonesia

“...we are not anyone's priority.” — Female survivor from Argentina

	SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING	FRONTLINE ORGANIZATIONS
Exploiting Vulnerabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to respondents, the economic downturn is putting survivors at risk of re-victimization and exacerbating the vulnerability of those most at-risk, such as women and girls. • Since the pandemic began, 34% of female respondents reported being targeted with offers of employment in another country that was directly, or potentially related to possible exploitation and 21% of females were targeted with offers from the sex industry. In addition, 14% of female survivors were targeted to engage in illicit activities. • In most cases, these offers were made online as traffickers adapt to restrictions under the pandemic. • More than half of respondents believe the pandemic will increase rates of trafficking in the future, and 43% of both male and female survivors believe women and girls are most at risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents reported an increased vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and an increase in trafficking of men for forced labor and boys for forced begging. • Respondents reported that online sexual exploitation and trafficking of children is increasing, especially among girls.

	SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING	FRONTLINE ORGANIZATIONS
Access to Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents reported that survivors have been poorly informed about changes in service provision during the pandemic. • Compared to before the pandemic, respondents reported difficulties in accessing basic and essential services, including medical services, employment opportunities, access to psychological services and legal assistance. They also reported difficulties in obtaining testing for COVID-19. • Female respondents reported that access to psychological services was their number one priority (62%), followed by access to medical services (61%) and good conditions of employment (61%). • Nearly 50% of respondents had experienced delays in receiving ‘Victim of Trafficking’ status, affecting their ability to access shelter, financial support and reunification with their children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents reported that it has become more difficult for survivors to access employment (85%), medical services (73%), social services (70%), repatriation services (66%), safe accommodation (66%), legal assistance (66%), and access to food and water (66%). • 9 out of 10 respondents reported still being able to provide access to services to victims and survivors, mostly by phone. • 18% of respondents said their shelters were not able to cope with the increase in demand, and 5% have already had to close since the pandemic began. • 77% of respondents say their organization currently requires additional funding for additional resources as a result of the pandemic. • Respondents reported that if their organizations do not receive the required funding in 2020-2021, only about 25% of them will remain fully operational, 50% partially operational and 3.6% (1 in 28) will close.



“What stood out most in the pandemic was the isolation of victims of prostitution and their inability to get help.”

— Frontline stakeholder from France

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND COVID-19

- **Discrimination and trafficking in human beings:** Data show that racial and ethnic minorities are being most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which may exacerbate their vulnerability to trafficking.
- **Gender and the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls:** According to the survey results, emerging trafficking dynamics are highly gendered and exacerbated by pre-existing gender inequality issues.
- **Children and their specific vulnerabilities:** The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating vulnerabilities of children to trafficking due to school closures, increases in domestic violence and household economic insecurity, as well as children’s increased time spent online.
- **Growth of crime in cyberspace:** Survivors reported being targeted during the COVID-19 pandemic by traffickers, mostly online. Remote working gives abusers new ways to target people online, to both generate demand and to groom vulnerable persons, especially women and children.
- **Cross-linkages between migration and trafficking in human beings:** Migrants have been identified as one of the main at-risk groups to trafficking during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with migrant women already the majority of identified victims of trafficking before the pandemic.



“As we have continued our work during the COVID-19 pandemic, traffickers have continued as well. Traffickers did not shut down. They continue to harm people, finding ways to innovate and even capitalize on the chaos. The ratio between risk and reward is expanding in their favor. And so, we press on all the more. As the vulnerable become more vulnerable, we remain resolved in our pursuit of freedom for every victim of human trafficking and accountability for every trafficker.”

— John Cotton Richmond, United States Ambassador-at-Large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS HUMAN TRAFFICKING

To address the human trafficking trends and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic the ODIHR and UN Women developed these policy recommendations for Member States:

- 1. Strengthen implementation of international legal frameworks, regional instruments and national legislation** as this is essential for criminalization and prosecution of human trafficking crimes, ensuring assistance and support to victims, prevention efforts and fostering co-operation. States should also ensure they have legislation to combat trafficking in cyberspace that reflects gender- and age-specificity of online crimes.
- 2. Develop and/or implement effective National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) or equivalent systems** that are grounded in human rights, non-discriminatory, gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and victim- and survivor-centered approaches that include, at a minimum, an independent national rapporteur and a national co-ordinator, interagency councils, multi-disciplinary co-operation across government institutions and with civil society, survivor advisory councils and specialized NRMs for children.
- 3. Develop and/or update National Strategies and National Action Plans for combatting trafficking in human beings** that address the emerging COVID-19 dynamics, including trafficking in cyberspace, especially of women and children; address root causes of trafficking in human beings, especially of women and children; engage local communities to combat trafficking; include healthcare and educational protocols on identification and referral of victims of trafficking; and address identification and prevention for at-risk groups after the pandemic.
- 4. Strengthen the proactive identification of victims of trafficking.** Prioritize the detection and identification of victims by law enforcement and the investigations of criminal networks; strengthen identification among at-risk groups such as ethnic and racial minorities and migrant workers; and establish identification and referral protocols in health institutions, as healthcare workers are most likely to come into contact with victims during the pandemic.
- 5. Make services accessible to victims and survivors of trafficking during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.** Declare accommodation, healthcare, psychological, rehabilitation and informational services for victims and survivors essential; ensure services are also provided online, over the phone and are free; and inform victims and survivors of any changes to access to services.
- 6. Provide access to remedies, including justice and information,** by facilitating and prioritizing justice services through online means, wherever possible, and informing victims and survivors in a timely manner, in a language they understand, of any changes in processes or delays or postponements in their civil, administrative or criminal justice procedures, especially during the pandemic.
- 7. Address the specific needs of women and girls** by ensuring all aspects of NRMs are gender-specific and tailored. Prioritize the prosecution of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, both online and offline; implement effective and impact-oriented gender mainstreaming in all migration policies post pandemic; and develop and implement gender-sensitive monitoring systems to mitigate the long-term consequences of the pandemic.
- 8. Address the specific needs of children** by mitigating the exacerbated vulnerabilities of children to trafficking resulting from the pandemic, including potential decreases in access to child protection systems, public healthcare, and educational opportunities. Address vulnerability of children to trafficking for the purpose of organ removal and respond to the increase in online grooming and exploitation by developing age-appropriate online prevention tools.
- 9. Support and build the capacity of both governmental and non-governmental frontline stakeholders** by providing adequate and sustained funding and support for anti-trafficking frontline organizations and provide additional resourcing for shelters to ensure their continued operationality and availability.
- 10. Strengthen human trafficking prevention efforts related to the pandemic** through continued awareness raising and prevention campaigns, with a particular focus on increased risks for trafficking with the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation, and supporting employers through training on recruitment and selection processes that prevent trafficking.
- 11. Implement measures to reduce trafficking in human beings after the pandemic,** such as ensuring safe and effective pathways to legal labor migration, strengthening and resourcing labor inspectorates, implementing penalties for unethical recruitment and labor exploitation, and ensuring transparency in supply chains. Invest in measures to address prevention in particular harmful social norms that perpetuate trafficking in women and girls.



The full report and recommendations in English, Russian, Spanish and French is available at: [ODIHR](#) and [UN Women](#).