**Input for report of the Special Rapporteur on Slavery to the**

**78th session of the UN General Assembly**

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**ABOUT GAATW**

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women is an alliance of non-governmental organisations from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. We see the phenomenon of human trafficking intrinsically embedded in the context of migration for the purpose of labour. We therefore promote and defend the rights of all migrant women against the threat of an increasingly globalised labour market. We work to ensure respect for the rights of all migrant women and the rights of women in the formal and informal work sectors, including garment and food processing, agriculture and farming, domestic work, and sex work.

**INTRODUCTION**

The first part of this submission outlines a recent and ongoing situation of trafficking and exploitation for the purpose of forced labour in online criminal activity, in the Southeast Asian region.

Whilst we recognise that technology is a phenomenon of everyday life, and as exemplified by this case study, is an inevitable feature of trafficking and exploitation today, we are increasingly concerned by the overemphasis on technology as the “solution” to trafficking and labour exploitation, in a way that distracts from the social context and underlying socioeconomic causes of these phenomena. This point is addressed in the second part of our submission.

The third part of our submission addresses the value that access to online technology can have for women workers, and the fourth part addresses our concerns about the (mis)use of technology to control and curtail workers’ rights and freedom.

**SUBMISSIONS**

1. **Trafficking of people for the purpose of forced labour in online criminal activity**

Since 2019, thousands of workers have been trafficked by organised criminal groups to countries in Southeast Asia for the purpose of their forced labour in online criminal activity. Responding to advertisements offering jobs working online, a vast number of people have been tricked into travelling to Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and the Philippines. There have also been reports of at least one victim being tricked into travelling[[1]](#footnote-1) to Singapore, before being transported onwards to Thailand and Myanmar.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Victims are forced to work in empty hotels and casinos, known as “fraud factories,” on online scams. The victims are forced to conduct online criminal activity, ranging from “love scams” and crypto fraud, to money laundering and illegal gambling. Recruited as “scammers”, the victims are directed to cold-contact people on SMS texting or other social media, dating, and communication platforms.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Victims in these cases are of all genders but tend to be relatively young – many are teenagers[[[4]](#footnote-4)](#_page_237_0) and we are aware of at least three child victims.[[[5]](#footnote-5)](#_page_237_0) Traffickers appear to have taken advantage of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and are targeting young university graduates who now have more limited job opportunities.[[[6]](#footnote-6)](#_page_237_0) Victims are targeted through sophisticated fake profiles and illegal websites, and post job opportunities overseas via social media. The victims also tend to be well-educated, computer-literate and usually speak at least one regional language, as well as English or Mandarin. Victims from Indonesia and India have reported that they were required to undergo an English language test and a typing test as part of the “recruitment” process.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To date victims have been identified from Indonesia[,[[8]](#footnote-8)](#_page_164_0) Malaysia,[[[9]](#footnote-9)](#_page_164_0) Myanmar,[[10]](#footnote-10) Philippines[,[[11]](#footnote-11)](#_page_164_0) Thailand,[[12]](#footnote-12) Viet Na[m,[[13]](#footnote-13)](#_page_237_0)  China,[[14]](#footnote-14) Hong Kong[,[[15]](#footnote-15)](#_page_237_0) Taiwan[,[[16]](#footnote-16)](#_page_237_0) Bangladesh[,[[17]](#footnote-17)](#_page_237_0) India[,[[18]](#footnote-18)](#_page_237_0) Pakistan,[[[19]](#footnote-19)](#_page_237_0) Ethiopia,[[20]](#footnote-20)Kenya[,[[21]](#footnote-21)](#_page_237_0) and Brazil[[22]](#footnote-22).

The victims are not permitted to leave the building’s compound under any circumstances and their passports are taken away from them. In general, the victims are paid far less than what they were promised (if they are paid at all). According to survivors, the victims are watched by security guards throughout the fenced-off compounds, some of them carry guns. Some victims have also been forced to sign a contract which would require them to pay a ransom to terminate the contract. In Malaysia it has been reported that this ransom can be up to RM80,000.00 per person (about 19,000 USD).

Victims have reported serious physical abuse at the hands of their traffickers, including mental and physical torture. This includes being beaten, electrocuted and starved.[[23]](#footnote-23)Victims also report being forced into rooms too small to stand in and being deprived of natural light and water for hours.[[[24]](#footnote-24)](#_page_164_0) There have also been reports of sexual assault[[[25]](#footnote-25)](#_page_164_0) and some women originally recruited to work in online scam centres have reported being subsequently forced into situations of sexual exploitation.[[26]](#footnote-26)

People who try to leave are told they must first pay off the “debts” they owe to the scam centres if they want to leave. Families of victims have been sent photographs of their loved ones tied up and physically abused along with demands for ransoms from the traffickers.[[[27]](#footnote-27)](#_page_164_0) Two Indonesian victims in Myanmar were told to pay RP150,000,000 (about 10,000 USD) or face being sold elsewhere[.[[28]](#footnote-28)](#_page_164_0)

Many victims were also re-trafficked several times upon arrival in the original country of destination.[[[29]](#footnote-29)](#_page_164_0) There have been reports of victims being trafficked between different ASEAN member countries. For example, after initially arriving in Cambodia, victims are sold on to other groups in Laos, Thailand and Myanmar, as well as within Cambodia[.[[30]](#footnote-30)](#_page_164_0) Survivors have reported that each time they were sold, they were sold for a higher price, meaning that the amount the victim had to pay to be allowed to leave becomes higher after each instance of re-trafficking.

1. **Technological solutions alone cannot combat trafficking and exploitation**

While we illustrate how technology is part of the problem in context of trafficking, we cannot overplay the ‘threats’ of technology without raising the issue of labour opportunities and employment. Victims would not so readily fall into these traps if they had better opportunities of employment within their home countries.

Similarly, stronger surveillance or individual reporting mechanisms for rescuing workers is not the antidote to this. The technological innovations in this sector wrongly suggest that trafficking is a problem of individual victims and perpetrators that should be fought on a micro level. All too often technology proposes “simple solutions,” focused on identifying and “rescuing” victims. In doing so, they ignore the social context in which trafficking and exploitative practices occur, which in this case was the spike in demand for employment and jobs after COVID-19.

We have witnessed a similar obscuring effect in the gig economy where rather than addressing the underlying causes of labour exploitation, technological advances have merely given women workers the false impression of more control over their working conditions. On-demand online platforms have made it easier for some low-wage workers to find employment but have done nothing to tackle the undervaluation of low-wage work. For example, the domestic work sector has seen a rise in on-demand platforms, yet there has often been no resulting improvement in working conditions or respect for workers’ rights.

1. **Access to online digital technology can reduce the risk of exploitation and abuse for women workers.**

Globally, trade unions continue to be dominated by men, and restrictions on women’s freedom of movement and socialisation have historically acted as a barrier to their efforts to meet with other workers and organise. During the pandemic, the ability of women workers to organise and campaign for change became further restricted, with many women migrants and workers in the informal sectors being confined to their homes and/or places of work. In some informal sectors, the home and the place of work is one and the same, further reducing the opportunity for women to meet with other workers away from their employers.

Over time, access to digital technology has presented many women workers with the opportunity to overcome these barriers. During the pandemic, migrant women workers forced to stay indoors turned to social media platforms to tell their stories to fellow workers, and in doing so were able to reach a far wider audience than ever before. As workers turned to technology for innovative ways to stay in touch and communicate during the pandemic, women were able to introduce more secure ways of reporting workplace abuse through chat apps and other online reporting systems. For domestic workers forced to stay at their place of work with no time off, what began as regular online meetings to check in on each other’s wellbeing, turned into opportunities to collectivise and organise.

Access to digital technologies over the years has also enabled women to improve their conditions of work and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation. The sex industry has been at the forefront of technological change and online technologies have afforded workers more flexibility and choice in the way they work. During the pandemic more than ever online technologies enhanced the safety of working conditions in the sex industry by providing opportunities for workers to meet clients virtually from their own home.

Technological advances in recent years, and not just during the pandemic, have also given low-wage women workers greater opportunity to communicate directly with businesses at the top of the supply chain, who are increasingly using technology to communicate with hard-to-reach workers in the supply chain so that these workers can provide feedback on their working conditions directly.

1. **Technology must not be used to curtail the rights and freedoms of women workers**

Whilst online technology offers opportunities for women workers, it is also being misused by employers and Governments to curtail the rights and freedoms of women workers.

This has been particularly true for women selling sexual services. Whilst technological advancement has furthered sex workers’ inclusion and their control over their working conditions, state surveillance of online platforms in the name of anti-trafficking has simultaneously increased, and more and more online platforms have been shut down, leading to a reduction in income, and the opportunity to screen clients and engage with supporting communities.

Technology has also enabled state surveillance to extend beyond national borders and has therefore accelerated transnational efforts by countries to interfere with the rights and freedoms of women who sell sexual services. A law that prohibits users of online platforms from selling sexual services in one country can harm sex workers who are providing legal and regulated sexual services in another. These restrictions put sex workers at a greater risk of abuse and exploitation as they are forced to work informally, with less regulation and are less likely to seek the support of public services or emergency assistance.

**RECCOMENDATIONS**

1. **Member states must increase public spending for social protection**: Member states need to approach growth and development by integrating employability and social protection to prevent people from opting for vulnerable conditions of work.
2. **Member states should carry out an effective investigation:** The international legal obligation to take positive steps to identify victims of trafficking has been affirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children.[[31]](#footnote-31) In cases of credible suspicion, Member states must identify the majority of victims in these cases of trafficking.
3. **Protect victims of trafficking from further stigma:** This must be initiated by both host and destination countries such that principle of non-punishment of victims of trafficking is upheld. Victims must not be stigmatised, arrested, detained and in some cases, prosecuted for immigration offences and their involvement in the online scams. The home countries should investigate and follow up on media reporting about their nationals trapped in such situations and ensure their safe repatriation.
4. **Member States must enable equal access to digital and online technologies for all:** This will require considering the needs of women in rural areas, with low socioeconomic status, and/or who have attained less formal education. This includes not interfering with the rights and freedoms of adult women who consensually sell sexual services, and permit women to use online platforms and communication technology to conduct their business.
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3. “*Hacker Lexicon: What Is a Pig Butchering Scam?”* 2 January, 2023. Available at <https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-pig-butchering-scam/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BBC News, “Cambodia Scams: Lured and Trapped into Slavery in South EastAsia,” 21 Sept 2022, available at: [https://](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875) [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875)*;* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. GAATW is aware of at least one child victim in Cambodia – this information was received confidentially and is held on file at GAATW. See also reports of a 15-year-old Vietnamese girl and a 16-year-old Vietnamese boy in *BBC News, “Cambodia Scams: Lured and Trapped into Slavery in South East Asia,” 21 Sept 2022, available at:* [https://www.bbc.com/](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875) [news/world-asia-62792875](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Information held on file with Migrant Care/ For India, “*Cyber criminals hold Asian tech workers captive in scam factorie”* 22 November 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/article/southeast-asia-tech-trafficking-idUKL8N31M1UZ> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jakarta Globe, “Thirty Four Indonesians Rescued from Trafficking Ring in Cambodia,”12 Dec 2022, available at: [https://](https://jakartaglobe.id/news/thirty-four-indonesians-rescued-from-trafficking-ring-in-cambodia) [jakartaglobe.id/news/thirty-four-indonesians-rescued-from-trafficking-ring-in-cambodia](https://jakartaglobe.id/news/thirty-four-indonesians-rescued-from-trafficking-ring-in-cambodia) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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12. 17 For Thailand see Coconuts, “Chinese Scammers hold Thousands of Thais Captive in Cambodia: Police,” 11 Oct 2022, available at: <https://coconuts.co/bangkok/features/chinese-scammers-hold-thousands-of-thais-captive-in-cambodia-police/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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20. idid [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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