

Arise Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery

The use of technology in facilitating and preventing contemporary forms of slavery

About

[Arise](#) is an anti-slavery organisation working globally to protect communities from exploitation, with a focus on long-term prevention work in source communities. Headquartered in London, we work with frontline organisations and their networks, through strategic, accompanied grant giving, direct partnership, training and capacity building, whilst amplifying their voices within the human rights and policy communities.

Our submission is built upon the experiences of our frontline network. We hope that by amplifying the insight of those fighting slavery in at-risk regions, the sector will be better-prepared to confront the causes and means of exploitation.

Introduction

This submission, on the use of technology in relation to trafficking, has been produced with a focus on Albania. Arise supports a network of anti-trafficking organisations across Albania, and has investigated the way technology is utilised to facilitate slavery using insight, intelligence, and case studies from these frontline groups.

Marginalised communities in Albania are severely vulnerable to human trafficking, predominantly organised by '[sophisticated](#)' organised crime syndicates. Albanian organised crime groups are also engaged in drug trafficking across Europe, and have grown and expanded operation in recent years. Simultaneously, a '[mass exodus](#)' of young people has taken place across Albania, which continues to the present day. Waves of young Albanians are leaving the country, for a number of reasons - including a lack of job opportunities, low incomes for those in work, dissatisfaction with Albanian institutions and corruption, and the attraction of better prospects elsewhere. These young people are being targeted by human traffickers, both before and during their journey. Albanians now make up a [significant proportion](#) of conclusively-identified victims of slavery in the UK's victim referral system.

The majority of Albanians leaving the country are not trafficked, but for legitimate victims, better prospects overseas are obviously illusory. Young people are trafficked into a variety of dangerous, exploitative circumstances, including forced criminality. Many cases include elements of smuggling - where the eventual victim will pay for illicit transport only to be subjected to exploitation.

Arise supports a number of anti-trafficking organisations across Albania - some engaged in survivor support, others in active prevention and safeguarding. It became clear, during consultations on the issue, that technology plays an important role in the facilitation of exploitation. This submission will summarise this facilitation - in terms of means, strategies, vulnerable parties, and potential mitigation efforts - from the perspective of Albanian frontline anti-trafficking practitioners.

Which technologies are being used by traffickers?

Our Albanian partners described the centrality of technology for trafficking operations. An overwhelming focus was placed upon internet devices, and the utilisation of social media, fake online adverts, and fake employment agencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic was identified as a catalyst for younger Albanians gaining increased access to the internet and online devices. This was, generally, a consequence to the temporary shift towards online learning through lockdowns. It was noted that, necessarily, the greatest shifts in terms of internet exposure occurred in the communities that had previously been subject to the lowest levels of internet access.

These young people, aged 10-16 at the time of the pandemic, were identified as the group most vulnerable to growing forms of online targeting. After gaining internet access, or even just increased internet access, higher numbers of young people have been introduced to social media. The anti-slavery organisations noted the distinct popularity of TikTok and Instagram. It was also noted that most online engagement, including social media activity, occurs without parental supervision.

Organisations have noted a dramatic increase in online trafficking over the last three years, driven by the harnessing of online forums, social media spaces, and fraudulent advertising.

What particular strategies are used to facilitate trafficking with internet technologies?

Social media platforms are used differently, as platforms provide various features useful to criminal groups. Snapchat, for instance, is used to take advantage for disappearing messages:

‘Snapchat is used mostly for sex trafficking, for example by enabling the feature for disappearing messages when the traffickers engage in conversations with the victim, these messages disappear after the chat and cannot be kept or used to testify against the trafficker or catch the traffickers.’ (*Albanian anti-trafficking worker, April 2023*)

TikTok, a video and broadcasting app, also gives traffickers opportunities to lure young potential victims:

‘The use of TikTok to promote luxurious lives is used as a pull factor to groom children and youth into debt bondage and human trafficking. TikTok has been particularly dangerous, because it doesn’t put any limits and people go live and interact or do live shows by receiving money.’ (*Albanian anti-trafficking worker, April 2023*)

A common strategy for luring young girls is the ‘lover-boy’ method, whereby traffickers maliciously pose as love interests, before deceiving the girl about a life abroad and trafficking her into exploitation. The use of social media in these cases has been widely observed across the network.

Traffickers also use online gaming forums, including Discord and Fortnite lobbies, to exchange personal details with young men. Once relationships were established, gang members would engage the young men in criminal activities, often with some level of coercion. Organisations shared case studies of this type of online targeting:

‘...children met “friends” on Fortnite and then exchanged numbers and personal information with each other. After a certain period, the victims received gifts and favours from the traffickers, and at a later stage were asked to return the favour by engaging in illegal activities such as theft, drugs smuggling and blackmailing.’ (*Albanian anti-trafficking worker, April 2023*)

Have you seen successful mitigation strategies that prevent modern technologies being used to organise exploitation?

The [Tech Against Trafficking](#) initiative was raised as an example of the potential of content monitoring and early prevention. Local organisations in Albania are informing more children and their parents on online safety, and on practical tools they can use to stay safe - such as the time limit function and setting up age restriction functions.

Beyond this, frontline workers warned of several barriers to mitigation. IP addresses in Albania are often spread out, and there is a lack of accuracy in tracking capabilities. Albania has weak IT infrastructure more generally, and a number of recent cyberattacks have apparently increased vulnerability. Beyond this, older generations are simply unaware of the danger of online platforms, and the manipulation of such platforms by criminal forces. The network consultations concluded by restating the importance of awareness-raising and the close supervision of young people online.