



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNODC targeted submission to the Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, on *“the use of technology in facilitating and preventing contemporary forms of slavery”*, April 2023

A large range of information, work, and analysis exist on the misuse of technology to commit trafficking in persons. UNODC would like in this submission to present to the UN Special Rapporteur key points that may be indicative and applicable to similar issues such as contemporary forms of slavery.

### **1. Technology as an enabler of trafficking in persons at every step of the crime**

Traffickers have been using information and communication technologies (ICTs) since the early days of the web. The first case of online human trafficking recorded by UNODC took place in 2004 and used a free-standing webpage to promote sexual services and connect interested buyers in a tourist destination.<sup>1</sup> ICTs are increasingly used to commit human trafficking, with some criminal activities now happening almost completely online, which reduces risks for the perpetrators to be caught.

ICTs are misused for different types of exploitation and at every step of the process: to profile, recruit, control, and exploit victims as well as to hide illegal materials stemming from trafficking, and their identities from investigators. Regarding trafficking for sexual exploitation, including online child sexual exploitation, ICTs are often used to store and conceal materials, including on darknets, as they provide perpetrators with more anonymity and opportunity to hide illegal material from investigators.<sup>2</sup> Technology acts as a force multiplier in cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation as it enables the exploitation of victims repeatedly through live streaming on multiple websites, their videos watched limitlessly, and their services sold to many clients through the same advertisement on numerous platforms. In that regard, ICTs enables traffickers to maximize outreach and profits.

Although there is growing awareness, the fact that material used for online sexual exploitation is not always removed in a timely and accurate manner from online platforms contributes to revictimization of the trafficked persons and creates great harm, even after they have been rescued.

---

<sup>1</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons \(GLOTIP\) 2020](#), pg. 119.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, [background paper on Successful strategies for addressing the use of technology to facilitate trafficking in persons and to prevent and investigate trafficking in persons](#), 2021.

Moreover, advancement toward communication encryption, increasing use of virtual assets, increasing number of users and a lack of adequate legislation are likely to provide further incentives to traffickers to invest in misusing technology.<sup>3</sup>

Knowingly or not, online platforms and tech companies also play a role in the facilitation of human trafficking through their infrastructure and services. When their services are misused, and in the absence of (self-) regulations, several challenges emerge, such as limited or non-existent industry standards; slow responses to documented abuse, failure to report abuse, and/or active complicity in facilitating exploitation from certain segments of the industry, like pornography, sexual services, and short-term job seeking.<sup>4</sup> Public-private partnerships as well as stronger regulations have yet to be developed and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) has recommended legally requiring online platforms to put in place effective content moderation measures to curb human trafficking activities.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the misuse of ICTs by traffickers makes it more difficult to tackle human trafficking. When a crime is planned in one country, with victims in another country, and a customer in a third one, law enforcement authorities face practical challenges concerning jurisdiction and the finding and securing of evidence. Such investigations require cooperation across borders and a certain level of digital expertise of investigators and other criminal justice practitioners, which is often lacking, thus hampering international cooperation.

As law enforcement will globally increasingly work on cyber-enabled cases of human trafficking, a major challenge is to ensure adequate human rights and privacy rights safeguards in the application of technology throughout all investigative processes. It is essential to ensure that infiltration and prevention activities by law enforcement authorities are proportionate, legal, accountable, and necessary. This requires solid legislative and human rights oversight frameworks.

In particular, data privacy is a primary concern as the mishandling of trafficking victims' data can exacerbate the trauma they have experienced or can compromise their safety.<sup>6</sup> As such, it is essential that sensitive and personal data is stored securely and that access to it is restricted only to authorized personnel.<sup>7</sup> Further, the digital privacy of suspects and accused persons and the adequate existence of safeguards and standards for law enforcement in the obtaining of smartphones or computer passwords and in the decryption of private sector messaging applications should also be ensured and monitored.<sup>8</sup>

## **Analysis of court cases**

---

<sup>3</sup> GLOTIP (2022), UNODC, p. 70 to 72.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., GLOTIP (2022), p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> ICAT, Joint Statement on the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, 30 July 2022: "[Use and abuse of technology](#)", 2022.

<sup>6</sup> UNODC, [Compendium of Promising Practices on Public-Private Partnerships to Prevent and Counter Trafficking in Persons](#), 2021, pg. 110.

<sup>7</sup> [CTOC/COP/WG.4/2021/2](#) pg. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

An analysis of cases from UNODC’s Collection of Case Summaries for the 2020 and 2022 GLOTIP<sup>9</sup> and the larger SHERLOC Case Law Database<sup>10</sup> sheds light on the growing issue of the misuse of ICTs to commit human trafficking.

Among 79 court cases containing an element of Internet technology, UNODC found 21 cases in which traffickers proactively looked for a specific type of victim or potential buyer to recruit (‘hunting’), and 45 cases in which traffickers attracted potential victims or buyers (‘fishing’).<sup>11</sup> Social media was found to be used in almost all the hunting cases as it provides traffickers with a large number of potential targets and gives them the ability to collect personal information on individuals they might not otherwise meet. When using the fishing strategy, traffickers will post advertisements accessible to everyone, typically offering well paid jobs to prompt victims to make the initial contact or post advertisements for escort services or prostitution. To advertise potential victims to clients, traffickers will often use online classified advertisements, social media platforms or specialized websites dedicated to sexual services.<sup>12</sup>

Upon analysis of 24 cases<sup>13</sup>, ten demonstrate traffickers using social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, VKontakte and Instagram to recruit victims<sup>14</sup> and three demonstrated using general Internet advertisements.<sup>15</sup> In terms of exploiting victims and recruiting clients, ten reported the use of online advertisements<sup>16</sup> on sites such as backpage.com<sup>17</sup> and five reported using social media platforms, and Internet chat rooms.<sup>18</sup> Four cases noted the use of ICTs as a means of coercion through either threatening to upload a recording of the victim being raped or nude photos<sup>19</sup> or through using video surveillance to ensure the victims do not try to escape.<sup>20</sup> Finally, one case noted a victim using social media to get in contact with a friend who was able to help her escape the trafficking situation.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020](#), pg. 119.

UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022: Collection of court case summaries](#), 2023.

<sup>10</sup> UNODC, [SHERLOC Case Law Database](#).

<sup>11</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020](#), pg. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Cases analyzed include: UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022: Collection of court case summaries](#), 2023, Cases 1, 46, 94, 99, 100, 204, 218, 219, 230, 241, 318, 336, 357, 365, 367, 390, 392, 463, 475, 476, 640, and 684 and UNODC, [SHERLOC Case Law Database](#) USAx219 and GEO004.

<sup>14</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022: Collection of court case summaries](#), 2023, Cases 94, 99, 204, 219, 230, 241, 318, 392, 475.

[SHERLOC Case Law Database](#) USAx219.

<sup>15</sup> Op.Cit., Cases 1, 46, 365.

<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., Cases 99, 100, 204, 218, 230, 336, 365, 367, 640.

[SHERLOC Case Law Database](#) Case USAx219.

<sup>17</sup> The classified listing site, www.backpage.com, was seized by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2018. URL: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-leads-effort-seize-backpagecom-internet-s-leading-forum-prostitution-ads>

<sup>18</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022: Collection of court case summaries](#), 2023, Cases 230, 357, 390, 463; [SHERLOC Case Law Database](#) Case USAx219.

<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit., Cases 230, 241, 684.

<sup>20</sup> [SHERLOC Case Law Database](#) Case GEO004.

<sup>21</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022: Collection of court case summaries](#), 2023, Case 476.

18 of the 24 cases were trafficking in persons for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation, three for the purpose of illegal adoption<sup>22</sup>, two for the purpose of theft and/or begging<sup>23</sup>, and one was for the purpose of trafficking in persons for organ transplant.<sup>24</sup>

One case that is particularly helpful in understanding how traffickers use ICTs to facilitate all stages of the crime occurred in Belarus in 2017.<sup>25</sup> A criminal group recruited 100 females from Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Federation of Russia, and Ukraine through employment advertisements they posed on VKontakte. The advertisements promised high earnings and holidays in Türkiye in the form of work in the modelling business and the provision of escort services to wealthy clients, without prostitution. The victims were selected based on intimate photographs they were instructed to send in of themselves and that were then used to blackmail them and force them to engage in sexual services. The recruiter received money through Western Union and MoneyGram. The Belarusian traffickers controlled the victims from Minsk through the Internet without ever travelling to Türkiye. Several websites were created and administered under the guise of agency escort services. The clients communicated through Viber, WhatsApp and Telegram with the traffickers and, finally, at a specified time, the victims transferred their “earnings” to the traffickers through Western Bank transfers.

In addition, ICTs can also be used to exploit victims in the commission of crime. One court case describes how a group of traffickers successfully recruited people with the purpose of coercing them to commit identity theft and data fraud. They were given fake identities to procure and lease products from companies by abusing credit card information on websites, fraudulently using digital signatures to file tax returns.

## **2. The positive use of technology against trafficking in persons**

While it is misused by traffickers, ICTs can also be leveraged by criminal justice practitioners to detect, investigate, and prosecute perpetrators of human trafficking. Hundreds of tools and applications have been developed to this end, either by governments, or by the private sector and non-governmental organizations. For example, ICTs can be utilized by law enforcement authorities to identify traffickers by means of existing artificial intelligence (AI) and data mining applications to identify suspicious transactions. Furthermore, technology can facilitate the recording, storage, analysis, and exchange of information. Database analytics can therefore serve a wide spectrum of applications. AI has also become a promising tool for preventing and tracing illicit financial activity associated with human trafficking. However, in using this technology there have been multiple instances of racial or gender bias and inaccurate identification of targets. Therefore, AI must be approached with caution and used within a framework of strict safeguards and oversight that include human input and supervision to help avoid erroneous identification.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Op. Cit., Cases 367, 390, 463.

<sup>23</sup> Op. Cit., Cases 219, 475.

<sup>24</sup> Op. Cit., Case 1.

<sup>25</sup> Op. Cit, Case 230.

<sup>26</sup> [CTOC/COP/WG.4/2021/2](#), pg. 12.

UNODC has developed a specialised teaching module for academic professors on [Links between Cybercrime, Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants](#), providing suggestions for in-class exercises, student assessments, slides, and other teaching tools that lecturers can adapt to their contexts, and integrate into existing university courses and programmes. The module is accompanied by a short education [video](#) available in many languages. A podcast is also available on [Double victimization of trafficked persons: Technology , justice for the victims and ways forward](#).

UNODC's partnerships and initiatives with the private sector to respond to trafficking, include tech companies. For example, through a partnership with IBM and the Colombian non-governmental organization Pasos Libres, UNODC has organized six "*datajams against exploitation*", in which students compete online to develop technology-based solutions to identify and protect victims of trafficking in persons and support prosecution of the crime.

In 2022, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), UNODC launched a *Toolkit on the Investigation and Prosecution of Trafficking in Persons for Organ Removal*, which comprises a virtual reality tool that recreates a hospital surgery room and enables trainees from law enforcement to understand how to collect evidence and investigate this form of exploitation.

UNODC also published a *Compendium of Promising Practices on Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to Prevent and Counter Trafficking in Persons* which highlighted promising practices in inter alia the technology sector.<sup>27</sup> An example is Diginex, a global blockchain company, and the Mekong Club, a membership-based business association focused on combatting human trafficking, partnered together to create a blockchain-based system that aims to protect workers from exploitation through the creation of a mobile application. The application allows workers to upload their information onto the system for secure storage and access of their employment contract. Businesses are then able to use the blockchain system to more efficiently audit their supply chains.<sup>28</sup>

Love Justice International, a Kenyan organization and former grantee of the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking,<sup>29</sup> works to identify migrant victims before they are exploited, but after they are recruited. To do this, they combine data on previous potential victims with road network graphs from OpenStreetMap to create a route heatmap that shows the segments of road that are most likely to be used for human trafficking. These maps give Love Justice insight into where they should implement "Transit Monitoring Stations".<sup>30</sup> During this process, Love Justice also uses machine learning to assign relative weights to a set of red flags which may be uncovered during questions to help generate the most accurate prediction of whether a person is in the process of being trafficked. Once staff identify a potential victim, they

---

<sup>27</sup> UNODC, [Compendium of Promising Practices on Public-Private Partnerships to Prevent and Counter Trafficking in Persons](#), 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pg. 114.

<sup>29</sup> [United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking](#) (UNVTF).

<sup>30</sup> Transit Monitoring Stations are stations where Love Justice staff are placed to ask questions to profile potential victims.

either attempt to convince them to return to safety or involve law enforcement in cases with more serious evidence.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Recommendations

UNODC proposes the Special Rapporteur consider recommending the following related actions be taken by States:

1. Ensure that national legislation can address technology-facilitated human trafficking, including its evolving nature, and similar practices.
2. Enhance international cooperation in trafficking matters through the use of technology and innovative tools by practitioners and central authorities.
3. Ensure that any use of technology by law enforcement authorities is consistent with human rights standards and is necessary, proportionate, legal, accountable and fair.
4. Improve the digital expertise and the capacity of law enforcement agencies in conducting investigations and operations online, including in the collection of e-evidence.
5. Expand the data collection and research on the scope, scale, and nature of the misuse of technology to facilitate human trafficking and related practices.<sup>32</sup>
6. Promote education and awareness-raising on human trafficking, including on technology-facilitated trafficking to the public and those at risk of victimization.<sup>33</sup>
7. Work to promote government- and/or self- regulation of online platforms, including robust obligations for online service providers to maintain the core responsibility to prevent and stop trafficking in persons and similar practices. Strengthen collaboration between governments, the technology industry, international organizations and anti-trafficking stakeholders.
8. Reflecting on their expertise, involve trafficking victims/survivors in developing responses and solutions to technology-facilitated human trafficking and actively involve them and those at risk in the development of technology solutions to address human trafficking.

---

<sup>31</sup> UNVTF, [“Using the Power of Technology to Help Victims of Human Trafficking.”](#)

<sup>32</sup> ICAT, [Human Trafficking and Technology: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities](#), 2019, pg. 5.

<sup>33</sup> UNODC, [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022](#) pg. VII.