



Where We Stand Position Paper: Human Trafficking

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Position Summary:

- Broadly defined, human trafficking is the forceful exploitation of a person.
- It was estimated that as of 2024, there were nearly 27 million victims of human trafficking globally.
- It is the second most lucrative illicit crime in the world with estimated profits of USD 236 billion annually.
- As human trafficking occurs everywhere and is widespread there is an urgent need to create awareness about the real definition of human trafficking.
- Human trafficking remains a crime with a significant gender dimension, as many victims are women and girls, particularly exposed to physical and sexual violence, including but not limited to homicide and torture, psychological abuse, poor working and living conditions, often amounting to a form of modern-day slavery.

Human Trafficking may involve many other crimes such as:

- Labour Trafficking/Slavery Exploitation
- Trafficking specifically for sexual exploitation/pornography
- Trafficking of children for any of the above as well as forced marriage
- Organ Trafficking

Where Things Stand...

[The Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery](#) was signed in 1926, yet the recognition of human trafficking as a crime is relatively new. It was not until 2000 that the United Nations (UN) officially recognised that a comprehensive international approach to trafficking in persons was necessary and issued the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (known herein as the Palermo Protocol). The Palermo Protocol entered into force on 29 September 2003.

The Palermo Protocol defined trafficking in persons as: "...the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or



other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud or deception for the purposes of exploitation". Its goals, stated in Article 2 of the Protocol, are:

- To prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying special attention to women and children;
- To protect and assist the victims of such trafficking, with full respect for their human rights; and
- To promote cooperation among State Parties in order to meet those objectives.

Human trafficking is widely considered a form of modern-day slavery. Current estimates cite 50 million victims worldwide at any given time trapped in slavery today – more than at any other time in history. Recent studies show increases in the number of enslaved people have been driven by several compounding factors, including:

- COVID-19 pandemic;
- Armed conflict;
- Poverty and economic need;
- Environmental and natural disasters which are having a profound impact on every aspect of global society, including income generation and political stability, which affect vulnerability to human trafficking and modern slavery; and
- Climate change.

However, due to underreporting, it is estimated that this figure is far from accurate. In addition, while the United Nations (UN) has noted a decline in a reported number of cases, this does not mean that the practice is not happening; rather it is becoming more difficult to detect. During the COVID-19 pandemic, human traffickers took advantage of the crisis to expand their criminal structures undetected.

According to the 2022 *Trafficking in Women and Girls: Crises as a Risk Multiplier* report by the UN Secretary-General, women and girls are often disproportionately impacted by human trafficking. In 2020, for every 10 victims detected globally, four were women, and two were girls. Women and girls are directly targeted due to their increased vulnerabilities, including living in extreme poverty (one in every 10 women and girls) and having to flee conflict or climate disasters. All women and girls of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities are exploited intentionally by traffickers for profit. Other underserved populations and marginalised groups are also among those recognised as at a high risk to trafficking. In 2024, the ILO estimated that illicit profiteering earns at least USD 236 billion annually. This figure has soared since just 2021, when it was estimated to gain USD 150 billion per year.

Some Forms of Trafficking

1. Sex Trafficking including Child, Early and Forced Marriage



Migrants and asylum seekers of all ages are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labour, including by large and small organised criminal groups. Traffickers also exploit many victims in forced criminality by organised crime groups, including gangs and illegal armed groups who exploit girls in child sex trafficking. An increasing form of sex trafficking of children for pornography is emerging online.

A 2020 report published by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) highlighted that girls as young as 12 years of age are forced or tricked into marrying men who exploit them for sex and domestic work. This has been recognised by UNODC as a form of human trafficking in and of itself.

Currently, one in four victims of human trafficking are children. In addition to being trafficked for sexual purposes, children are particularly vulnerable to forced begging, pornography and recruitment as child soldiers. Additionally, 22 million children are estimated to be in early or forced marriages.

2. Labour Trafficking including Supply Chains

Trafficking in persons and their exploitation has emerged as a key challenge and risk in a wide range of industries and sectors including agriculture, information and communication technology, garments and textiles. Trafficking in persons for labour exploitation is a grave violation of human rights, can be viewed as a form of modern-day slavery, and represents a serious risk for businesses. However, many businesses do not treat human trafficking as a priority and lack any specific policies or programmes to prevent it.

3. Organ Trafficking

Organ trafficking is trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal and is one of the least reported and least understood forms of trafficking – but one that experts believe may be growing. Like sex trafficking and labour trafficking, it is a crime that exploits human beings for economic profit.

4. Role of Technology in Trafficking

In addition to long-standing forms of trafficking, the UN is now also recognising the growing role of technology and artificial intelligence in facilitating human trafficking and exploitation of all women and girls – recognising that it has already had a profound impact on trafficking methods and trends in recent years.

Digital tools have amplified the reach, scale and speed of trafficking with traffickers taking advantage of the ever-shifting nature of the internet to exploit others.

Traffickers are using online platforms to recruit, groom, defraud, coerce, and exploit victims and taking advantage of the potential for anonymity offered by online space. It



is also easier for traffickers to operate across geographies and jurisdictions while using dating apps and online advertisements to recruit victims and online platforms for remote sexual abuse and to sell illicit sexual content. They leverage encrypted messaging and digital currencies to evade detection. There is believed to be a huge increase in the 'black' net for areas such as child pornography.

Support to Victims and Survivors of Human Trafficking

Since 1995, gaps have widened that hinder assistance to victims of crimes and violence due to trafficking. Challenges include:

- Developing national strategies to uphold victim's rights and strengthen assistance, especially to cease punishment and expunge records for victims coerced into criminality;
- Processes for effective victim identification that incorporate gender-sensitive, disability-aware, and displacement approaches have yet to be normalised with law enforcement and healthcare professionals;
- Governments' lack of information sharing standards prohibit effective partnerships between public, private and civil sectors focused on victim data and effective policies;
- Limited number of countries have robust and measurable National Action Plans;
- Ineffective survivor inclusion models; and
- Overlapping forms of exploitation with multiple crimes being committed.

Where things need to go...

Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 states that, to end modern slavery, trafficking and child labour, States and other stakeholders must "take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of all forms of child labour by 2025".

It is essential that all stakeholders, including UN Member States, local authorities, businesses, and more, address the specific vulnerabilities of all women and girls living in crisis contexts. Trafficking of all women and girls of any form must be recognised as a form of violence. The gendered dimensions of vulnerability must be addressed through various means. This can include by:

- Investing in education and community-based programmes that challenge social norms and male domination;
- 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;



- Strengthening capacities of response teams in internally displaced person (IDP), refugee or large migration movement settings to better identify potential victims and ensure the safety and security all women and girls; and
- Women's rights and survivors' organisations should inform gender-responsive crisis action plans and ensure their meaningful participation and access to influence in decision-making.

Dealing with Technology

Given the disturbing and increasing role that technology now plays in trafficking, it is vital that efforts to detect and monitor activities associated with trafficking are strengthened. This includes understanding how online platforms where recruitment occurs can monitor, flag and refer potential cases. In addition, technology companies have a responsibility to strengthen efforts to prevent trafficking and increase service provision to support potential victims of trafficking; as well as to combat such occurrences. All other businesses must take urgent steps to eliminate trafficking in persons from their supply chains, for example by strengthening their standards and codes of conduct and implementing due diligence measures that specifically address trafficking in persons' risk indicators.

Bankrupting the Business of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the second most lucrative illicit crime in the world. While efforts to support victims and survivors are essential, they do not address the root problem. It is therefore critical that the business of human trafficking is directly targeted, to break the cycle of this criminal black market, by cutting the lifeline of exploitation itself - money. Governments, UN Agencies, businesses, and civil society all have a role to play in stopping this illicit industry. Financial institutions must also engage in investigations into human trafficking cases to bring perpetrators to justice.

Fundamental Action:

United Nations efforts to address human trafficking are legally binding for signatory countries to integrate provisions into national laws and policies. These include:

- UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime (192 signatory countries);
- The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (180 signatory countries); and
- ILO Conventions and recommendations on Forced Labour including:
 - ILO Conventions No. 29 and No. 105 on Forced Labour
 - ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age
 - ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour



Soroptimist International calls upon all UN Member States and all stakeholders to:

- Immediately recognise trafficking of all women and girls as a form of violence;
- Ensure an integrated approach to addressing human trafficking that considers the complex interplay between drivers and specific vulnerabilities, by placing greater emphasis on rights-based, survivor-centred, participatory, and gender and age-responsive interventions that address these drivers;
- Support women's rights and survivors' organisations to inform gender crisis action plans, and ensure their meaningful participation and access to decision-making;
- Identify sectors at high risk of exploitation and work with businesses in those sectors, as well as with civil society to develop initiatives to mitigate risks of trafficking, forced labour and other forms of exploitation;
- Address the gendered dimensions of vulnerability via education and community-based programmes, addressing the economic drivers that make all women and girls more vulnerable to exploitation;
- Data collection efforts should include tools and methodologies to collect disaggregated trafficking data by gender, age, marital status, and include information on other factors such as but not limited to disability, race, sexual orientation, in line with do-no-harm principles;
- Facilitate safe and orderly migration during crisis of all women and girls, especially through the provision of temporary, humanitarian and family reunification visas and access to necessary services;
- Strengthen efforts to detect and monitor activities associated with trafficking online by exerting pressure on technology companies to improve the safety and security measures for all online users, to prevent instances of trafficking from occurring, and to support potential victims of trafficking; and
- Work to ensure that all perpetrators of human trafficking – both direct and indirect – are held accountable and face the full force of the law.

Additional Action:

- Ensure long-term assistance to victims and survivors of traffic assistance tailored to specific needs;
- Understand criminal activity models by collaborating with survivors to understand *modus operandi* and establish effective anti-trafficking strategies and policies;
- Take all appropriate measures to suppress all forms of trafficking in all women and girls, within and across borders, and prevent exploitation in accordance with SDG Targets 5.2 (Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in



the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation) and 8.7 (Eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms);

- Involve civil society, businesses and survivors of trafficking in the development of National Action Plans;
- Encourage the establishment of a platform to share best practices in prevention, laws, and successful cases between Member States; and
- Actively combat corruption as a facilitator of trafficking in persons by implementing and strengthening accountability mechanisms, including the establishment of dedicated anti-corruption units.

Please read the [NGO Committee to Stop Trafficking in Persons recommendations](#) for a more comprehensive list of how, collectively, we can bankrupt the business of human trafficking.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International works to educate, empower and enable all women and girls. As such, Soroptimist International is committed to **educate** communities, including persons of all identities and backgrounds, about the prevalence and dangers of human trafficking. Soroptimist International firmly believes in the power of education as a catalyst for **enablement** and **empowerment**.

Soroptimist International members can play an important role by raising awareness and advocating to end the crimes of human trafficking (and forced labour) human rights violations which affect more than 40 million people worldwide each year.

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