

COMBATING TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LOCKDOWNS, ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE, & SUPPORTING SURVIVORS REMOTELY

What is trafficking for sexual exploitation?

The United Nations defines trafficking as being made up of three constituent parts:

- ≈ *The Act (What is done)* - Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons
- ≈ *The Means (How it is done)* - Threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim
- ≈ *The Purpose (Why it is done)* - For the purpose of exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation, also referred to as sex trafficking, is the trafficking of human beings

for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation is when someone abuses or attempts to abuse another person's vulnerability or their own position of power or trust for sexual purposes. They may benefit from the exploitation of the other person through making money, political or social gains, or in other ways.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is worth nearly \$99 billion each year, and women and girls are disproportionately affected. According to UNODC, 94% of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are women and girls.

International human rights law protects a person's right to be free from exploitation. International law and the laws of 158 countries criminalize sex trafficking.



Where, when, and who is trafficked?

Human trafficking happens across the globe, both within countries and across borders. Trafficking does not require crossing borders or even any actual movement: with the internet, including webcams and livestreaming services, it is possible for traffickers to coerce, control and exploit victims in their own homes. With better online access available to more people than ever before, the internet has become a valuable tool for traffickers. The US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children directly correlated a five-year 846% increase in child sex trafficking reports to the growing use of the internet to sell children for sex.

Ever-increasing connectivity and online anonymity are making it easier to groom, recruit, and sexually exploit with impunity. Anonymity, as well as very limited regulation, and the increasing use of social media has allowed for more opportunities for people to come into contact with offenders and has enabled offenders to anonymously interact with an increasing number of potential victims. Not only has the pool of potential victims expanded exponentially, so too has the pool of potential opportunistic offenders.

In many countries, legislation, law enforcement, and awareness have failed to keep up with the negative impacts of the internet and the challenges it brings. In others, the threat has not yet been prioritized or

there are limited resources to invest in infrastructure or safeguards to protect children and vulnerable adults online.

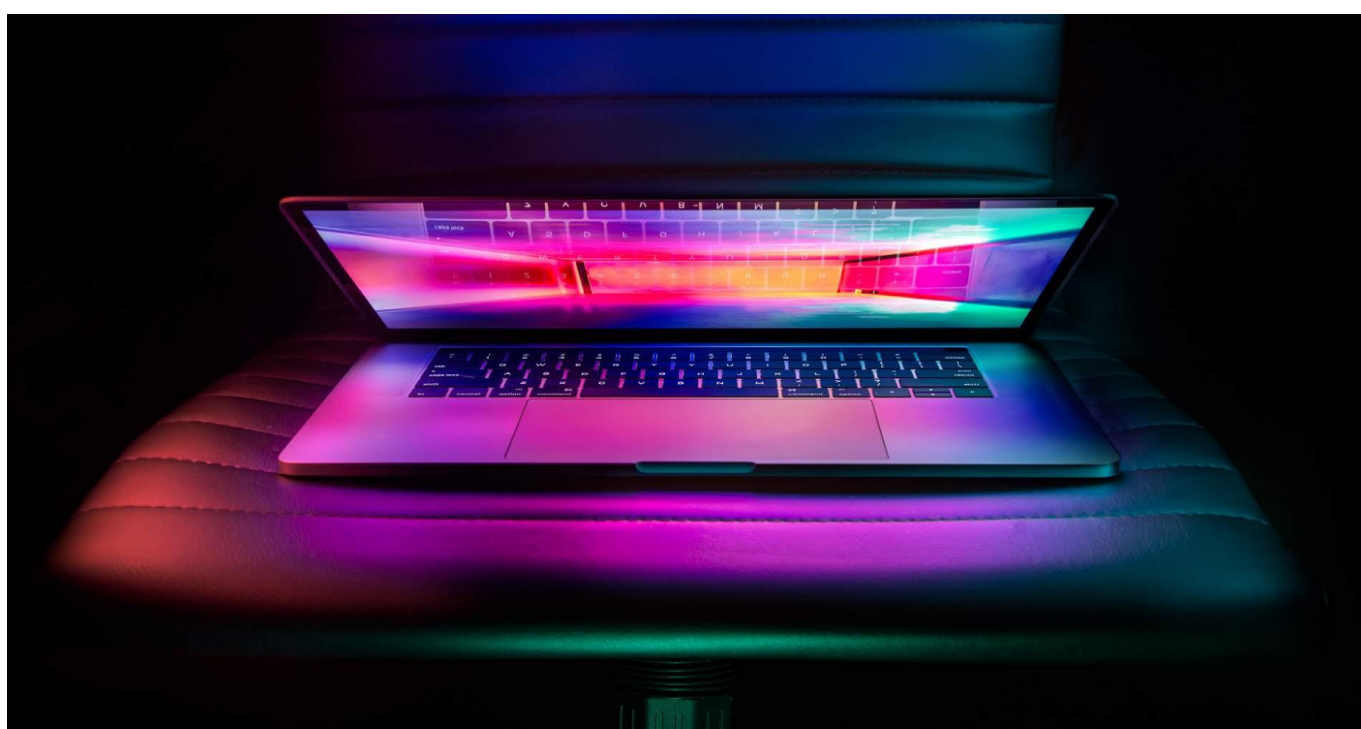
Anyone can be trafficked for sexual exploitation, but certain people are particularly vulnerable. 94% of the victims are women and girls. Young girls are particularly valuable to human traffickers because:

- ~ There is an increased demand for younger and younger girls
- ~ Children are easier for traffickers to coerce and control
- ~ An exploited child grows into an easily exploited woman who can be sold over and over again for profit

Women who lack access to resources, such as housing, land, property, and inheritance, are also at increased risk. Due to the additional levels of discrimination they face in their intersectional identities, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ people, migrants, and marginalized racial, ethnic, and socially excluded communities, are more likely to lack access to such resources and therefore be at greater risk of being trafficked.

Why is ending trafficking for sexual exploitation a key issue in achieving gender equality?

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals lays out the path to gender equality by 2030. Under SDG



5.2 States committed to eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and other types of exploitation.

In 2020, the world we live in is far from equal. Within our patriarchal society, women and girls are especially vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation through intersecting inequalities such as: age; caste; ethnicity; gender; interactions with the criminal justice system; mental, intellectual and/or physical capacity; nationality/citizenship status; poverty; race; religion; sexuality; social class; and socio-economic status

Those who exploit or attempt to exploit others are directly or indirectly taking advantage of the gender and structural discrimination inherent in our patriarchal society, and the consequential economic inequality faced by women, girls and other vulnerable people, for the sake of their own personal sexual gratification, entitlement, and often profit.

Our efforts are focused on women and girls, and we are also committed to building solidarity with a diversity of other actors, as we each seek to end the sexual exploitation of all people. Together we must work to identify and address the ecosystem of laws and legal practices that impact trafficking for sexual exploitation, as well as, the gaps and loopholes that enable the crime to continue with impunity.

The impact of COVID-19 on work to combat trafficking for sexual exploitation

The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing and exacerbating gender inequalities around the world, and this is particularly the case when it comes to trafficking for sexual exploitation. In a preliminary assessment report published in May, the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) concluded that measures around the world such as lockdowns and travel restrictions would likely drive human trafficking further underground and cause traffickers to adjust their business models especially through the use of the internet and modern communication technologies to recruit and control vulnerable women and girls. At the same time, the loss of household livelihoods during the pandemic has increased poverty among women and girls, making them more vulnerable to sex trafficking. School closures have excluded many girls from accessing

education which can be their main source of shelter and nourishment, leaving them at heightened risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Many children and young people are increasingly spending unsupervised time online for learning and socializing, and traffickers and sexual predators are taking advantage. Civil society organizations, law enforcement officials, and international organizations are reporting a greater demand for online sexual abuse material and risks of online grooming.

Meanwhile, organizations that deliver on the ground, frontline services to survivors of sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, have found their work hindered by a lack of funding and an inability to provide services in person. In very limited circumstances, remote service delivery, for example, through mobile phone counseling, has had to replace some support efforts that would normally be delivered face to face. Organizations' limited capacity to access communities has also severely impacted the identification of sex trafficking cases with many falling through the cracks and not being reported.

For victims who have managed to escape their traffickers during the pandemic, or who were accessing support services before lockdowns were initiated, it has been a struggle to hold their traffickers accountable. Prosecution of many types of criminal cases, including trafficking cases, has been halted in many jurisdictions, leading to a backlog of cases, and no assurance for survivors as to when they might see justice.

"In our frontline work, we see gender inequality characterized by high levels of violence against women and girls, increased cases of child marriage, and harmful cultural and traditional practices which disadvantage girls and women. Coupled with limited awareness on what trafficking in persons really is, the problem is booming, and girls and women are bearing the brunt of it."

"The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this already dire situation. PSGR is calling on the government of Malawi and cooperating partners to walk the talk by delivering on their commitments and obligations to protect girls and women from this form of modern slavery."

Caleb C. Ng'ombo, Executive Director of People Serving Girls at Risk (PSGR), Malawi

RECOMMENDATIONS

Equality Now's work to end sexual exploitation is based on the principle that it is critical to implement legal safeguards for those who are exploited, ensuring they are protected from harm and are never criminalized. We recommend that States and international organizations implement measures to address trafficking for sexual exploitation including those that:

- Encourage and support efforts towards building a nuanced understanding of trafficking for sexual exploitation in specific contexts, working with civil society organizations and survivors to jointly identify the range of interventions that are necessary to address the problem.
- Ensure State accountability to protect people from all forms of sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, by enacting and implementing laws and policies that take into account the ecosystem of related and relevant laws and policies within each context, and international laws and standards. Specifically, that those laws:
 - ~ Uphold international laws and standards which have clear provisions on addressing sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, structural and sex inequality, and impunity of exploiters while protecting the exploited.
 - ~ Recognize the role of traffickers, enablers, and exploiters, and the impunity they enjoy while often making huge profits, and therefore penalize their actions taking into account the extent of their culpability in the cycle of sexual exploitation chain.
 - ~ Address the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by women and girls and other marginalized genders, particularly those that leave them more likely to live in poverty.
- Build a coordinated and cooperative global response to the growing challenge of online sexual exploitation, including developing effective legal, policy, and technological solutions.
- Assess and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on victims and survivors of sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, and those at risk and ensure that appropriate measures are put in place for their identification, protection, and access to justice. This would include:
 - ~ Responsive reporting portals and hotlines where suspected abuse can be reported;
 - ~ Well trained police who respond quickly, effectively, and sensitively;
 - ~ Well equipped and adapted criminal justice systems to prosecute and hold offenders to account;
 - ~ Adequately resourced organizations to provide long term support for survivors and those at risk;
 - ~ Awareness-raising campaigns in partnership with tech companies and other relevant organizations to educate about online harms and avenues for reporting.

