



General Assembly

Distr.: General
7 August 2020

Original: English

Seventy-fifth session

Item 27 of the provisional agenda*

Advancement of women

Trafficking in women and girls

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/146](#), contains information on measures taken by Member States and activities carried out within the United Nations system to eliminate trafficking in women and girls. The report focuses on efforts to address the gender dimensions of trafficking, with a special focus on the economic drivers and consequences of trafficking, and the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on trafficking in women and girls.

* [A/75/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. The year 2020 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In 1995, Governments called for the removal of systematic and structural barriers that prevent women and girls from enjoying their human rights. As part of a comprehensive agenda for the achievement of gender equality, the Platform for Action specifically called upon Governments to take appropriate measures to address the root causes, including external factors, that encourage trafficking in women and girls. In 2015, Governments built on those commitments in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, which include targets for the elimination of trafficking as a form of violence against women (target 5.2), in the context of decent work (target 8.7) and in the context of creating peaceful and inclusive societies (target 16.2).

2. Despite those commitments, progress in the elimination of trafficking in women and girls remains unacceptably slow. Between 2017 and 2018, a total of 74,514 victims of trafficking were detected in over 110 countries.¹ About 70 per cent of detected trafficking victims are female: mainly adult women, but increasingly girls.² Some 77 per cent of detected female victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation, 14 per cent for forced labour and the remainder for other forms of exploitation.³ Women also continue to be trafficked for the purposes of sham, forced and servile marriage, child marriage, domestic servitude and forced pregnancy. The International Labour Organization estimates that 28.7 million women and girls (71 per cent of the total number of victims) worldwide, were subjected to forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices, and trafficking in 2016.⁴ The majority of traffickers continue to be men.

3. Human trafficking is one of the world's most profitable criminal activities.⁵ The trafficking of women and girls is rooted in systemic and structural gender inequality and discrimination, as reflected in many of the Goals: high levels of poverty (Goal 1), lack of access to education (Goal 4), gender inequality and different forms of violence against women (Goal 5) and women's concentration in precarious and informal work (Goal 8). At a broader level, inequality within and between countries (Goal 10), as well as situations of conflict and humanitarian crises (Goal 16) also make women and girls more vulnerable to deception, coercion and exploitation. Trafficking persists because it is a high-reward and low-risk crime owing to the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators. While traffickers stand to make substantive financial gains, it is trafficking survivors who pay the price through lifelong devastating and irreparable consequences, including violations of their basic human rights, being robbed of their dignity and having to endure long-term detrimental health and economic impacts.

4. The current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and its deep and widespread social and economic effects is increasing the vulnerability of women and girls to exploitation, abuse and trafficking.⁶ Increasing inequalities, vulnerability and poverty may increase the risk of trafficking for women and girls. Further, as the world moves online as a response to COVID-19, traffickers are using online technology and other means to recruit and exploit victims. Women and girls who experience multiple

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (forthcoming).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva, 2017).

⁵ ILO, *Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour*, (Geneva, 2014).

⁶ UNODC, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons: preliminary findings and messaging based on rapid stocktaking", 2020.

and intersecting forms of discrimination are at the greatest risk. Deepening inequalities and the rise of all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking, in the context of COVID-19, has the potential to significantly slow down progress on achieving the Goals, while also jeopardizing the limited progress made so far.

5. Against that background, and in accordance with resolution 73/146, the present report is focused on the economic drivers and consequences of trafficking in women and girls and the impacts of COVID-19. In the report, innovative practices are highlighted and concrete recommendations are made for accelerating progress in that area, including the prosecution of traffickers and the protection of victims. The report is based on, inter alia, information received from Member States and entities of the United Nations system.⁷

II. Economic drivers and consequences of trafficking: who gains and who pays the price?

6. Trafficking is commonly addressed as a criminal offence within a criminal justice framework. Human rights can also be affected by trafficking violations, and certain factors make an individual, a social group or a community, and in particular women and girls, more vulnerable to trafficking and related exploitation.

A. Women's economic inequality increases vulnerability to trafficking

7. Economic disparities between countries are a contributing factor in trafficking in women and girls, as people seek risky opportunities to migrate to wealthier countries. However, research has shown that income inequality within countries also plays a role as a push factor for trafficking. In particular, where there are significant disparities and a perception of relative deprivation among poorer populations, people are pushed to take risky routes to improve their economic status.⁸

8. Women's economic inequality and poverty is one of the key drivers of trafficking in women and girls. The analysis of data from 91 developing countries shows that gender gaps among those living in extreme poverty are widest for the 25–34 age group, with women in that age group being 25 per cent more likely than men to live in extreme poverty (E/CN.6/2020/3). Further, women were more likely to have work characterized by low pay and poor conditions. Women are more likely than men to be in informal employment in over 90 per cent of sub-Saharan African countries, 89 per cent of countries in Southern Asia and almost 75 per cent of Latin American countries.⁹ In addition, women are also often found in occupations that are the most vulnerable to decent work deficits, such as in domestic, home-based or contributing family work. Migration, refugee status, ethnicity, disability and HIV status are some of the characteristics that, when intersecting with gender, further

⁷ Submissions were received from 44 Member States: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Czechia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Mexico, Morocco, Myanmar, North Macedonia, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Zimbabwe. Submissions are available at www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/a-75-289-sg-report-trafficking#view.

⁸ Cassandra DiRienzo and Jayoti Das, "Income distribution and human trafficking outflows", *Review of European Studies*, vol. 10, No. 2, (2018)

⁹ ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All* (Geneva, 2019).

exacerbate the likelihood of women experiencing vulnerability at work, which increases the chances of exploitation.

9. Rooted in social and economic structures that limit the equal access to education, decent work, resources and decision-making of women and girls, women's unequal economic and social status often forces them to seek risky economic opportunities where traffickers can exploit their vulnerability through deception, coercion and abuse. As a result, women at risk of being trafficked are more likely to be living in poverty, lack access to education, be unemployed or be disempowered by societal and family structures. Evidence suggests that it is the poorest families that are most likely to sell women to traffickers.¹⁰ Further, in contexts where there are limited decent work opportunities for women, women's labour may be generally socially devalued and therefore drive the "sale" of women to traffickers.¹¹

B. High reward, low risk: widespread impunity and a perceived lack of risk create incentives for traffickers to exploit women and girls

10. The trafficking of women and girls generates significant financial reward for traffickers. According to the latest available data, it is estimated that human trafficking globally generates \$150 billion in illegal profits annually – \$99 billion from sex trafficking and \$51 billion from labour trafficking – making trafficking one of the most significant generators of criminal proceeds in the world.¹² With a global average profit of \$21,800 per year per victim, sexual exploitation, which primarily affects women and girls, is more profitable than all other forms of forced labour, and five times more profitable than forced labour exploitation outside domestic work.¹³ Updated data on the economic implications of trafficking will be critical going forward.

11. Trafficking networks continue to operate with a high degree of impunity across the world, with very few convictions, making trafficking a low-risk criminal enterprise. Data show that trafficking convictions have very gradually increased over the past seven years, however in many countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, rates of conviction remain very low.¹⁴ Low convictions do not necessarily reflect limited trafficking activity in a country, but rather a limited response to trafficking, with generalized impunity, owing to a lack of institutional capacity to address the crime. As a result, impunity serves as an incentive for traffickers to continue the exploitation of women and girls.

12. While most aspects of trafficking in women and girls are underground activities, traffickers utilize many institutions and services as part of their criminal actions, whereby businesses may knowingly or unknowingly facilitate the crime. That includes the use of banking facilities to deposit and exchange earnings and payments, the use of travel, transport, accommodation and hospitality services to transport and house victims, and the use of social media and other online platforms to recruit and advertise the services of victims. Such services play a role in the economy of

¹⁰ Francesca Bettio and Tushar Nandi, "Evidence on women trafficked for sexual exploitation: a rights-based analysis", *European Journal of Law and Economics*, vol. 29, No. 1 (February 2010); Sweden, Department for Global Development, *Poverty and Trafficking in Human Beings: A Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings through Swedish International Development Cooperation* (2013).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² ILO, *Profits and Poverty*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.IV.2).

trafficking, but also provide an opportunity to better detect and disrupt the criminal networks and activity of traffickers.

13. Consumers also play a key role in the economy of trafficking and exploitation. While some consumers of services may not be aware that the labour or service is provided by a trafficked person, consumers benefit from the cheap labour or exploitation of trafficking victims. In some cases, consumers knowingly exploit trafficked labour. While not all forms of forced labour constitute trafficking, women who are trafficked for the purposes of forced labour are often trafficked for domestic work. For example, private households employing domestic workers under conditions of forced labour save around \$8 billion annually by not paying or underpaying their workers.¹⁵ With regard to sexual exploitation, the specific demand for the bodies of younger girls is leading to women and girls of younger ages being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

C. Trafficking has significant costs that are particularly borne by trafficked women and girls

14. Victims of trafficking primarily pay the price of the crime in lifelong human and financial costs, including wage theft, long-term economic insecurity and poor physical and mental health outcomes. Women and girls who are victims of trafficking may experience abuse throughout multiple stages of the trafficking process, including during travel and transit, during their exploitation and potentially in reintegrating back into communities. As a result, women and girls who have been trafficked suffer from an array of physical and psychological health issues stemming from inhumane living conditions, poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition, poor personal hygiene, sexual, physical and emotional abuse, dangerous workplace conditions, occupational hazards and a general lack of quality health care. One study carried out in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland found that trafficking victims required an average of four years of psychiatric support.¹⁶

15. The underpayment or removal of wages and the exorbitant costs of the recruitment process are also incurred by women and girls who are trafficked. For sexual exploitation, recent data are unavailable, but a 2009 study found the total costs of coercion of victims were approximately \$21 billion, including profits kept by traffickers from exploiting their victims, estimated to be \$19.6 billion, with the remaining \$1.4 billion attributed to illegal recruitment fees.¹⁷ Many trafficking survivors struggle to achieve long-term economic security as a result of the crimes or illegal activities they were forced to commit during their exploitation, insecure immigration status and the inability to maintain stable employment because of the health impacts of being trafficked.¹⁸ Survivors of trafficking also have limited abilities to complete their education to find long-term employment.

16. Apart from incurring “costs and debts”, survivors of trafficking very rarely receive the compensation from the illicit financial gains made by the perpetrators. A lack of access to information and communications technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, also impedes access to justice and compensation mechanisms for victims, where they are available. When assets are seized from traffickers, the proceeds usually do not automatically go to the victims. Judicial proceedings are

¹⁵ ILO, *Profits and Poverty*.

¹⁶ Maria Cary and others, “Human trafficking and severe mental illness: an economic analysis of survivors’ use of psychiatric services”, *BMC Health Services Research*, vol.16 (2016).

¹⁷ ILO, *The Cost of Coercion: Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* (International Labour Conference, 98th session, Report I(B), 2009).

¹⁸ Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “The economic drivers and consequences of sex trafficking in the United States”, 2017.

usually long and complex, and the lack of understanding of the justice system and of complex systems of compensation, creates barriers for victims (A/74/189). The fear of reprisals from traffickers or the fear of deportation may also prevent victims from initiating judicial proceedings and pursuing compensation, where it is available.

17. In addition to paying the financial and personal costs of trafficking, victims are sometimes forced to engage in illegal activity, and are prosecuted and sentenced for it. Trafficking victims are routinely detained, fined or prosecuted for crimes related to their trafficking, including immigration offences, petty crime, labour law violations or the use of false documents.¹⁹ The criminalization of trafficking victims for related offences entails further harm, in particular through prolonged trauma. Despite the non-punishment principle being recommended as core to a human rights-based approach to trafficking, implementation has been weak, adversely affecting trafficking victims and undermining their rights (see box 1).

Box 1

Punishing traffickers, not victims: implementing the non-punishment principle

Victims who commit crimes in connection with their situation as trafficked persons should not be arrested, charged, detained, prosecuted or punished. However, there are insufficient measures in place to protect victims and guide police and justice systems on how to address such cases.

In 2002, the Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking (E/2002/68/Add.1) were issued by Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. According to principle 7: “Trafficked persons shall not be detained, charged or prosecuted for the illegality of their entry into or residence in countries of transit and destination, or for their involvement in unlawful activities to the extent that such involvement is a direct consequence of their situation as trafficked persons.”

Implementation of the principle remains inadequate, and even where the principle has been specifically implemented, there are challenges, such as insufficient awareness of the realities faced by victims of trafficking; failure to inquire about the circumstances surrounding the commission of a crime; ineffective training or capacity-building for those implementing the non-punishment principle; or inadequate victim identification.

To implement the non-punishment principle, States should prioritize a gender- and age-sensitive approach, including:²⁰

- Training to support early victim identification and referral to comprehensive support services
- Integrating the non-punishment principle into anti-trafficking law and policy
- Developing clear laws, policies and practices to support the effective implementation of the non-punishment principle at all stages in the criminal justice system, as well as in non-criminal processes
- Enabling criminal records to be vacated or expunged for trafficking victims who were convicted of crimes committed as a result of trafficking

¹⁹ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office of the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, *Policy and Legislative Recommendations towards the Effective Implementation of the Non-Punishment Provision with Regard to Victims of Trafficking* (Vienna, 2013).

²⁰ Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons, “Non-punishment of victims of trafficking”, Issue Brief, No. 8 (2020).

III. COVID-19 and its impact on the trafficking of women and girls

18. Trafficked women and girls are often victims of human rights violations, including of their right to freedom of movement and of the prohibition of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. With the closure of borders and the implementation of shelter-in-place orders in many countries as a result of COVID-19, there is a risk of increased trafficking of women and girls.²¹ At the same time, survey data from trafficking survivors and anti-trafficking organizations suggest that trafficked women and girls are experiencing greater barriers in accessing support services and that public attention is diverted from prosecuting offenders and protecting survivors.²²

A. Deepening vulnerability and economic insecurity as a result of the pandemic are increasing risks of exploitation of women and girls

19. Factors that drive trafficking – economic inequality and vulnerability – have historically been exacerbated in the context of health crises. The breakdown of the rule of law, the increase in criminal activity and the competition for resources, as well as diminished economic opportunity, create fertile ground for trafficking. For example, within 2.5 years of the first diagnosis of Ebola in 2014, more than 11,000 people in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone had died after contracting the virus, and over 16,000 children had lost one or both of their parents. Child sexual exploitation increased, with research finding that 10 per cent of young people knew of girls who were being forced into prostitution following the loss of a family member.²³ The analysis of different crises, more broadly – including conflict, natural disasters and other complex crises – indicates that crises exacerbate the usual risk factors for trafficking in women and girls, including gender and economic inequality, yet trafficking is often overlooked as part of the response to a humanitarian crisis.²⁴

20. The experience of previous health crises has demonstrated that women and girls, including migrant and refugee women and girls, were at heightened risk of gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking, and the same is expected to remain true for COVID-19.²⁵ The loss of employment and economic insecurity as a result of COVID-19 will increase the number of vulnerable people desperately searching for work and economic opportunities. It is estimated that global hours worked could drop by 10.5 per cent in the second quarter of 2020, equivalent to 305 million full-time workers.²⁶ Estimates suggest that COVID-19 will push 49 million people into extreme poverty in 2020.²⁷ Past experience and emerging data show that the impacts of the COVID-19 global recession will result in a prolonged dip in women's incomes and labour force

²¹ UNODC, “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons”; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “The impacts of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons”, forthcoming.

²² UN-Women and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “The impacts of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons”.

²³ Save the Children and others, “Children’s Ebola Recovery Assessment: Sierra Leone”, 2015.

²⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Time of Crisis: Evidence and Recommendations for Further Action to Protect Vulnerable and Mobile Populations* (December 2015).

²⁵ UN-Women, “Addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers”, (2020).

²⁶ Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, *How COVID-19 is Changing the World: A Statistical Perspective*, 2020.

²⁷ Ibid.

participation, with compounded impacts for women already living in poverty.²⁸ A rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on women's work in the Asia-Pacific region found that, in many countries, women are seeing large reductions in their working hours.²⁹ With 740 million women globally in informal employment,³⁰ women's vulnerability is exacerbated by a lack access to basic entitlements, social protection and economic support. In the Asia-Pacific region, job losses among informal workers range from 25 to 56 per cent in all countries.³¹

21. The global economic downturn and the sharp increase in unemployment in many parts of the world will likely increase cross-border trafficking in persons from countries experiencing the fastest and longest-lasting drops in employment.³² That trend was observed during the global financial crisis during the period 2007–2008, when trafficking victims from some countries that were particularly affected by prolonged high unemployment rates were increasingly detected in certain destination countries. Evidence from several countries based on the analysis of unemployment rates and trafficking victims detected shows parallel trends between rising unemployment rates in the country of origin and the increase in trafficking victims detected.³³

22. Restrictions on movement and physical distancing as a result of COVID-19 will change the forms of exploitation associated with trafficking. While the demand for women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation may be affected by physical distancing, new forms of sexual exploitation and abuse are taking place online.³⁴ The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation has documented increased online activity by those seeking child abuse material, as a result of COVID-19.³⁵ The Philippine Internet Crimes Against Children Center also detected several cases of sexual exploitation of minors online during the lockdown. A survey of front-line trafficking services during COVID-19 found that close to two thirds of respondents reported that they are seeing an increase in online recruitment by traffickers for the purposes of sexual exploitation online, including through webcam and forced online pornography.³⁶ Families experiencing poverty may see child marriage as a way to alleviate financial hardship, in particular in the context of children being out of school, leading to an increase in trafficking for child, early and forced marriage.³⁷ Furthermore, the rapid creation of labour and services that are in high demand, such as the production of medical supplies, will also create a context

²⁸ United Nations, "The Impact of COVID-19 on women", 9 April 2020.

²⁹ UN-Women, "Surveys show that COVID-19 has gendered effects in Asia and the Pacific", 29 April 2020.

³⁰ ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, 3rd ed., (Geneva 2018).

³¹ UN-Women, "Surveys show that COVID-19 has gendered effects in Asia and the Pacific".

³² UNODC, "How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America", research brief, 2020.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ UNODC, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons"; Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, "Human trafficking and technology: trends, challenges, and opportunities", issue brief, 2019; Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, "COVID-19 position paper: the impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficked and exploited persons", 8 June 2020.

³⁵ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, "Catching the virus: cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic", 3 April 2020.

³⁶ UN-Women and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "The impacts of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons".

³⁷ Girls Not Brides, "COVID-19 and child, early and forced marriage: an agenda for action", April 2020.

that is conducive to the trafficking of vulnerable women, owing to the motivation to maximize profits, creating a demand for cheap and exploitative labour.³⁸

23. Migrant workers may also be at greater risk of trafficking and exploitation as countries or cities that are reliant on migrant labour introduce restrictions.³⁹ The economic vulnerability and desperation of migrant workers, including through the loss of employment, added to the lack of protection from labour laws and social protection systems, put them at high risk of becoming undocumented or having irregular status, which may further push them to resort to migrant smugglers to return to their countries of origin or move to another country, a situation that also creates the risk of falling into the hands of traffickers.⁴⁰

24. In addition to new vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the risk of contracting the virus, women and girls who are already in trafficked situations are likely to be subject to greater abuse and violence. For instance, women and girls who are unable to “earn” an income for their traffickers may be subject to increased abuse and threats. In the context of movement restrictions, traffickers may increasingly abuse, extort and use violence against trafficked women and girls between their origin and destination.

B. Trafficked women and girls will increasingly lack access to health care, information, protection and support

25. Physical distancing and restrictions on movement will create additional barriers for trafficking victims seeking support services, putting their safety, protection and recovery at risk.⁴¹ As a result of COVID-19, many services, helplines, clinics and shelters have already closed or become restricted. Data on the experiences of trafficking survivors and victims in accessing services are limited. To fill the gap, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights conducted a specific survey to capture the experiences of survivors and trafficking services during COVID-19. In the survey of 397 organizations working on anti-trafficking initiatives across 102 countries, only 14 per cent of respondents reported that national referral mechanisms for trafficking victims were fully operational.⁴² Trafficking survivors face significant negative impacts with regard to access to services, health and well-being, with approximately 70 per cent reporting negative impacts on psychological and financial well-being.⁴³ Survivors reported that the pandemic had created new difficulties in accessing services. Of 94 survivors who responded to the survey, over two thirds reported difficulties in accessing medical services, 60 per cent reported challenges in accessing employment services, 55 per cent reported challenges in accessing psychological health services and 53 per cent reported challenges in accessing legal support.⁴⁴ COVID-19 has also had a negative impact on the capacity of survivors to meet basic needs, such as safe and comfortable

³⁸ Verité, “COVID-19 and vulnerability to human trafficking for forced labor”, 24 April 2020.

³⁹ IOM, “COVID-19 and stranded migrants”, issue brief, 2 June 2020; UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific “Rapid assessment: impact of COVID-19 on CSOs”, forthcoming.

⁴⁰ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, “Policy brief: COVID-19 and people on the move”, June 2020.

⁴¹ UN-Women and others, “COVID-19 and essential services provision for survivors of violence against women and girls”, 2020.

⁴² UN-Women and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “The impacts of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons”.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

accommodation, food and water. The lack of access to services for trafficking victims may increase abuse or make survivors vulnerable to being trafficked again.

26. The diversion of service capacity to address the immediate health crisis will also limit the capacity of essential services to respond to trafficking victims. Many trafficking survivors have immediate and long-term health concerns as a result of violence, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, mistreatment, starvation and the deprivation of liberty. As such, the lack of access to health care may impede the long-term recovery of trafficking survivors. It is critical that services for trafficking victims and survivors be deemed essential services in the context of COVID-19 and remain open and offer remote services that are accessible to trafficking victims.

27. In response to those challenges, strategies to adapt services to ensure that they are appropriate for trafficking survivors in the context of COVID-19 are being implemented. For example, Australia has increased funding for supporting and protecting trafficking victims in the context of COVID-19 and increased access to mental health support, extended short-term accommodation for trafficking survivors and provided alternatives to face-to-face contact for trafficking services, where possible. Similarly, the United Kingdom has provided additional funding to provide online support to trafficking victims and ensure that trafficking survivors living in government-funded accommodation will not be required to move for three months. Czechia has increased the capacity of helplines to respond to requests for support around trafficking. Austria and Portugal have implemented appropriate hygiene and safety measures to ensure that shelters for trafficking survivors can remain open. Kazakhstan is working alongside non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to continue providing legal assistance, counselling, psychosocial and medical assistance to survivors of trafficking in persons and ensuring that shelters and other social facilities remain open while complying with social distancing and strict sanitary standards.

28. Entities of the United Nations system are also supporting States to ensure that trafficking victims and survivors receive appropriate care, services and protection. For example, in Colombia, the World Food Programme is ensuring access to basic food and supplies for vulnerable women. In Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the International Organization for Migration has been providing protective equipment to government and NGO-run shelters to ensure that shelter beneficiaries, staff and premises are duly equipped and protected against the pandemic and that victims can continue benefiting from the services offered by the shelters.

C. Public attention and resources to detect traffickers and hold them to account are being diverted from criminal justice processes

29. Even before the pandemic, the lack of resources devoted to the prevention of trafficking, the protection of victims and the prosecution of traffickers was a major obstacle to progress. In 2020, so far, there have only been 2 convictions for trafficking crimes, compared with 12 in 2019.⁴⁵ As public resources are being shifted towards addressing urgent health needs and the economic impacts of COVID-19, including enforcing and monitoring physical distancing restrictions, there is a risk that the efforts of governments and the resources allocated to address trafficking will decrease, including those directed towards services and law enforcement. Where resources are being shifted and where cases continue to be delayed due to lockdowns (for example, where courthouses are closed), there will also be practical impediments

⁴⁵ UNODC, Human Trafficking Knowledge Portal, available at <https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/en/v3/htms/index.html> (accessed on 8 June 2020).

to effective justice system operations owing to backlogs. Services that are considered to be non-essential, including on-site police and labour inspections, are also affected. In a survey of 94 trafficking survivors, almost a third reported experiencing delays in legal procedures, including in their administrative, criminal or civil cases. The respondents reported that the delays negatively affected their ability to access shelter, reunite with their children and obtain financial compensation.⁴⁶

30. As a result, there will likely be a decline in the capacity of law enforcement authorities and courts to respond to reported trafficking cases, as well as significant delays in support and access to justice for survivors who are currently within the criminal justice process. States have provided very limited information on the adaptation of justice services for trafficking victims and survivors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addressing other forms of violence against women, such as domestic violence, several innovative approaches to ensure women's access to justice have emerged that can be applied to the trafficking of women and girls, including using video- or teleconferencing to access court services.⁴⁷ However, it is critical to ensure that victims have access to information and communications technologies to enable their access to justice and other services that are provided by phone or online.

IV. Innovative approaches to increase the prosecution of traffickers and strengthen the protection of victims, with a focus on addressing economic drivers and consequences

31. In recent years, there have been increasing efforts by States to introduce and strengthen laws and services to address trafficking. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime has been advancing towards universal ratification, with 176 States parties, at present. Although no new ratifications have taken place since 2017, in the past two years, several States have introduced or strengthened national action plans to address trafficking using an integrated approach, including preventing trafficking, protecting and supporting victims, prosecuting perpetrators and promoting the establishment of partnerships with a view to strengthening cooperation and coordination (Cuba, Ecuador, France, Greece, Philippines, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Sweden). Despite such efforts, low conviction rates indicate that more remains to be done to change the culture of impunity enjoyed by traffickers.

A. Increasing the risk and cost to traffickers

32. Increasing the detection of victims and traffickers and driving up conviction rates, with the imposition of appropriate penalties, is critical, both for fighting impunity and for ensuring access to justice for victims. It could also have a deterrent effect. As part of the effort to strengthen the enforcement of laws, States have continued to focus on creating task forces, training law enforcement officials and members of the judicial system, in some cases in partnership with specialized women's services for trafficking victims to ensure a gender-responsive approach (Belarus, Cambodia, Czechia, Lithuania, Philippines, Turkey, United Kingdom, Zimbabwe).

⁴⁶ UN-Women and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "The impacts of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons."

⁴⁷ UN-Women and others, "COVID-19 and essential services provision for survivors of violence against women and girls".

33. Some countries have also sought to increase fines and imprisonment terms. The Lao People’s Democratic Republic increased penalties from 5 to 15 years of imprisonment and increased fines for traffickers. In Kuwait, amendments to the laws increase penalties for the non-payment of wages, make documentation of all paid wages mandatory and require prison time and fines for employers and government officials who fail to adhere to the laws. Criminal procedure laws were also recently amended in Kazakhstan to increase the punishment for criminal offences related to trafficking in persons.

34. In recent years, governments and private sector partners have increasingly focused on “following the money” – detecting the financial activity of traffickers – as a way to increase detection and convictions. To effectively detect the financial activity of traffickers, law enforcement agencies need to have the mandate, capability and resources to conduct financial investigations. Australia has established a specialist police team to investigate trafficking crimes, with a focus on tracking financial transactions and other forms of data analysis. Leveraging anti-money-laundering practices to identify and prosecute instances of human trafficking through financial techniques, such as tracing, freezing and confiscating proceeds, increases the risk for traffickers, as can the recognition of financial activity associated with trafficking, including by monitoring specific industries. A number of alliances and partnerships have emerged in an effort to mobilize diverse sectors in anti-trafficking efforts (see box 2).

Box 2

New partnerships to detect financial and other activities of traffickers

Rapid technological change and the increased collection and sharing of data have enabled new partnerships to strengthen efforts to detect financial and other activities associated with trafficking and increase convictions. In recent years, such collaborations have enhanced the capacity of law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute traffickers, thereby also disrupting illicit financial flows associated with trafficking.

- The Liechtenstein Initiative is a public-private partnership between the Governments of Liechtenstein, Australia and the Netherlands and the private sector. It focuses on mobilizing the financial sector to end human trafficking. Multiple banks and financial institutions are involved in monitoring financial transactions for suspicious activity. When a company is connected to human trafficking through its business relationships, it is expected to use its leverage to prevent or mitigate harm.⁴⁸
- The Traffik Analysis Hub is a partnership across industries and sectors that includes financial institutions, non-governmental organizations and law enforcement and government agencies, with a focus on sharing data to stop human trafficking. Using advanced cognitive technologies, the Hub gathers information and shares highly accessible analysis of human trafficking, drawing on over 300,000 records.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Liechtenstein Initiative, *A Blueprint for Mobilizing Finance against Slavery and Trafficking: Final Report of the Liechtenstein Initiative’s Financial Sector Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking* (United Nations University, 2019), available at: www.fastinitiative.org/.

⁴⁹ Traffik Analysis Hub, available at: www.traffikanalysis.org/ (accessed on 9 July 2020).

- An alliance of hotels and other providers of accommodation has stepped up to detect traffickers. Several companies have delivered training for staff to equip them with the tools and skills to recognize and respond to sex or labour trafficking occurring on hotel properties.⁵⁰
- The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has been working with the International Civil Aviation Organization to develop tools and materials to assist the aviation industry and build its capacity to contribute to victim identification on board flights and at airports. Joint guidelines and training materials targeting cabin crew and ground staff have been developed and implemented by several aviation authorities around the world.

B. Ensuring women’s economic security, in particular in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

35. Chief among the push factors for trafficking is a lack of access to quality economic opportunities within countries of origin. When women are able to avail themselves of their economic and social rights, access to quality education, access to decent work, access to productive resources, credit and other financial services, their economic security can reduce their vulnerability to being lured by traffickers. In that respect, universal social protection also serves as an important preventative measure. Social protection as a means of buffering against trafficking holds a particular resonance in the context of COVID-19, where economic opportunities are declining overall.

36. Generally, trafficking prevention initiatives are focused on raising awareness of trafficking, rather than the gendered root causes, including gender inequality in the labour market and women’s poverty. A joint programme of UN-Women and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in the Greater Mekong subregion brought together awareness-raising around the rights and safe migration of women with vocational skills training, financial management and cash support.⁵¹ Another example is the Safe and Fair programme implemented in the Asia-Pacific region as part of the United Nations-European Union Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls.⁵² The programme addresses the vulnerabilities of women migrant workers to violence and trafficking and seeks to strengthen rights-based and gender-responsive approaches to violence against women and labour migration governance.

37. In the context of COVID-19, Paraguay is implementing campaigns that target women to draw attention to the risks of accepting job offers that could lead to trafficking. In Colombia, the Government is implementing specific programmes to raise awareness about the rights and entitlements of domestic workers during the pandemic to reduce the risk of women being trafficked for forced labour. In Brazil, migrant and refugee women have been supported in adapting their entrepreneurial activities in the context of COVID-19 and in accessing government financial support to reduce the risk of trafficking. The International Organization for Migration has expanded its Global Assistance Fund to assist migrants who have been left vulnerable as a result of the pandemic, in order to mitigate their increased risks of exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking. Beyond programmatic approaches, addressing the structural causes of women’s inequality in the labour market and

⁵⁰ Polaris, “Hotel companies step up to fight human trafficking”, 16 January 2019.

⁵¹ UN-Women and others, *The Gendered Dynamics of Trafficking in Persons Across Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand* (2020).

⁵² European Union and United Nations, *2019 Consolidated Annual Narrative and Financial Report for the Spotlight Initiative Fund*, available at <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/SIF00>.

improving the quality and conditions of women's work is critical for preventing trafficking in the long term.

38. Economic security, the economic reintegration of trafficking survivors and changes in social norms that perpetuate inequality, violence and discrimination are critical for the long-term recovery of survivors and to ensure that they are not re-trafficked. In addition to the challenge of finding work, trafficking survivors encounter a range of challenges, including stigma from employers and the fear of being "found out", as well as practical barriers around care and transport. Specific job placement programmes for survivors of trafficking can support them in finding work and building economic security. Successful programmes combine job placement with skills development and vocational training support, job preparation, long-term support and counselling, and awareness-raising among potential employers of the impacts of trafficking.⁵³ In addition to job placement, some Governments (Turkey and Zimbabwe) are offering support for income-generating projects, skills development and education for survivors of trafficking.

39. Partnerships between governments, the private sector and NGOs are also emerging to support the economic reintegration of trafficking victims. The Survivor Inclusion Initiative (part of the Liechtenstein Initiative) supports survivors across a range of countries in reintegrating into the formal financial system by providing access to basic financial services.⁵⁴

C. Addressing the demand that fosters exploitation of women and girls

40. At the core of preventing trafficking in women and girls is addressing the demand that fosters the exploitation of women and girls. For trafficking for sexual exploitation – the most common form of trafficking for women and girls – reducing demand ultimately requires challenging harmful masculinities and male entitlement, and changing deep-rooted cultural norms and practices that objectify, devalue and control the bodies of women and girls. While there are limited programmes specifically targeting men and boys regarding sexual exploitation, lessons can be drawn from broader strategies to prevent violence against women and address harmful masculinities.

41. There are a range of approaches for engaging men and boys to prevent violence against women, including awareness-raising, face-to-face workshops, media campaigns and community mobilization programmes. The evidence base on what works to engage men and boys is limited but growing. However, what has emerged as critical is an explicit focus on addressing masculinity – the norms, behaviours and relations associated with the ideals of manhood.⁵⁵ Given the common drivers between all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking, such an approach also holds true for preventing trafficking in women and girls. UN-Women in Ecuador has developed a programme on non-violent masculinities targeting young men, as part of its efforts to prevent trafficking. Greece has recognized education as an entry point for the prevention of trafficking in women and girls and has delivered training for teachers and students, both boys and girls, and focused on the provision of human

⁵³ King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GmbH and NEXUS Institute, "Re/integration of trafficked persons: supporting economic empowerment", Issue Paper, No. 4, 2012.

⁵⁴ Liechtenstein Initiative, Survivor Initiative, available at: www.fastinitiative.org/implementation/survivor-inclusion/ (accessed on 9 July 2020).

⁵⁵ Michael Flood, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2019).

rights and comprehensive sexuality education as a measure to prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation.

42. For trafficking for forced labour, there are a number of approaches to reducing the demand across different sectors, including strengthening labour standards and ensuring compliance with standards, specific actions to address exploitation in supply chains and consumer-based action through awareness-raising campaigns.⁵⁶ Labour regulation plays a critical role in addressing the demand for cheap domestic labour, which is typically carried out by women in private homes, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Ensuring the rights and entitlements of domestic workers through regulation and labour laws and monitoring compliance by conducting labour inspections have emerged as effective in reducing exploitation.⁵⁷ To reduce women's vulnerability to exploitation in supply chains, such countries as Australia and the United Kingdom have recently adopted legislation that requires private sector organizations of a certain size to report on the steps they are taking to eradicate human trafficking in their business and supply chains. In Brunei Darussalam, to address the vulnerability of women migrant workers, recruitment agencies are monitored to ensure that they comply with standards and guidelines.

D. Ensuring access to compensation for survivors and victims

43. Measures to provide victims of trafficking with avenues for redress are at the core of a rights-based approach to trafficking and are critical for shifting the status quo, in which traffickers profit and victims pay the price. Compensation is an important element of justice for victims of trafficking. In addition to recognizing the harm, financial assistance can compensate for financial losses incurred during the trafficking process and can also support a survivor in recovering from physical, emotional and psychological harm. Data of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime from 10 Member States in Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and Central and South America indicated that annual amounts of confiscated assets can range from a few thousand dollars to \$6 million, and that when the confiscated funds are compared with the number of victims detected, they amount to less than \$9,000 per victim.⁵⁸ It is widely accepted that compensation can also empower survivors by providing economic security in the medium to long term.⁵⁹

44. Compensation schemes vary greatly in eligibility requirements, time limits and their relationship to criminal and civil proceedings. In some countries, access to compensation requires cooperating with law enforcement and the authorities and exhausting remedies through civil and criminal proceedings. The way in which injuries are recognized and compensated for also varies across countries. The source of funding for compensation schemes also makes a difference in how survivors can access compensation. State-funded or subsidized schemes have the advantage of providing a guaranteed payment to survivors without needing to identify the perpetrators. Best practice for compensation schemes identifies human trafficking as a specific crime in relation to which individuals can apply for compensation without engaging in judicial processes or identifying their perpetrator.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, "Preventing trafficking in persons by addressing demand", September 2014.

⁵⁷ European Commission, "The demand-side in anti-trafficking: Current measures and ways forward", European Policy Brief, October 2017.

⁵⁸ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.14.V.10).

⁵⁹ Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, "Providing effective remedies for victims of trafficking in persons", Issue Paper, 2016.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

45. For the first time, in 2019, Israel allocated funds directly for survivors of trafficking in persons as a form of monetary compensation and support for their rehabilitation and empowerment. The funds were granted to survivors that did not manage to receive compensation through justice proceedings. Similarly, the State of California in the United States of America signed a bill in 2019 that allowed survivors of trafficking to receive lost income from the California Crime Victim Compensation Fund.⁶¹ In May 2020, the Philippines convicted the first suspect of trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation online through videoconferencing. The suspect was ordered to pay each of his victims 500,000 pesos for moral damages and 100,000 pesos as exemplary damages. The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children has observed that compensation is one of the least implemented provisions of the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, signalling the need to step up efforts in that area ([A/HRC/44/45](#)).

V. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

46. Trafficking entails human rights violations, which disproportionately affect women and girls.

47. Women's unequal economic and social status, lack of access to decent work and poverty, as a result of structural and systemic discrimination, increase their vulnerability to trafficking. At the same time, trafficking perpetuates and exacerbates women's economic inequality and poverty.

48. The drivers of trafficking, in particular women's unequal economic status, poverty and economic inequality, are expected to intensify and deepen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, placing women and girls at increased risk. Research on survivors of trafficking shows that they are losing access to key services that are essential for well-being and recovery, and significant delays in judicial proceedings have had an impact on their access to justice and compensation, where they are available.

49. Trafficking is a highly profitable crime for its perpetrators, yet trafficking networks continue to operate with a high degree of impunity across the world, with very few convictions. Impunity serves as an incentive for traffickers to continue the exploitation of women and girls. In the context of the economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 and travel restrictions, traffickers may seek to maintain their revenue through new means of exploitation and violence against women and girls.

50. It is victims of trafficking who primarily pay the price in lifelong human and financial costs, including wage theft, long-term economic insecurity and poor physical and mental health outcomes. Survivors of trafficking very rarely receive compensation from the illicit financial gains made by perpetrators and often struggle to find decent work in the long term. The lifelong economic insecurity experienced by survivors of trafficking increases their vulnerability to poverty and being re trafficked.

51. Despite increased efforts to strengthen national action plans to address trafficking in women and girls, efforts to prosecute traffickers and protect victims remain inconsistent. Impunity for the crime of trafficking is already rife,

⁶¹ Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, "New law gives human trafficking survivors access to income loss for commercial exploitation", 16 November 2019.

and with COVID-19 lockdowns in place in many countries, justice for victims and survivors risks being further delayed.

52. The non-punishment principle for victims of trafficking remains inadequately applied, which continues to put victims at risk of being charged, detained, prosecuted or punished for related offences.

B. Recommendations

53. Against the backdrop of the present report, it is recommended that Member States:

(a) Ensure, within their capabilities, in the context of COVID-19 and to help reduce vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, universal access to social protection and income protection, including for all migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, keep open as essential services specific services for victims and survivors of trafficking, including hotlines, accommodation, health, psychological support and employment services, and adapt services through technology when face-to-face support cannot be provided;

(b) Ensure that law enforcement agencies retain the capacity to detect and investigate trafficking in women and girls, in particular as forms of trafficking and exploitation shift in the context of COVID-19 and post-COVID-19, ensure the continuity of the justice system to investigate and prosecute traffickers through videoconferencing or teleconferencing to ensure timely access to justice for victims, ensure that victims have access to information and communications technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, to enable their access to justice and other services, ensure that victims and survivors of trafficking have continued access to comprehensive health-care services, related both to COVID-19 and to other physical and mental health needs, including sexual and reproductive health care, and put in place stronger measures to ensure that victims of trafficking are not punished for the crimes they were forced to commit during their exploitation;

(c) Ensure that migrant workers, including those with precarious livelihoods, domestic workers or those working in the informal economy, have access to rights and entitlements under labour laws, and continue with labour inspections and compliance monitoring, as ensuring adherence to international labour standards will become more pressing as the impacts of COVID-19 unfold;

(d) Create partnerships with financial institutions and other private sector organizations to regularly monitor, detect and report suspicious activities associated with trafficking, as, given the significant flow of financial resources, financial investigations hold great potential to detect trafficking and identify perpetrators, in particular as traffickers turn to new forms of exploitation in the context of COVID-19. Law enforcement agencies require the mandate, capability and resources to conduct financial investigations and prosecute perpetrators. Partnerships across sectors and data sharing are critical to detecting traffickers;

(e) Increase investments in evidence-based women's economic empowerment programmes that pay specific attention to trafficking, in particular in countries of origin, in order to reduce women's vulnerability to trafficking, introduce a comprehensive set of measures, in addition to specific economic empowerment programmes, to realize women's economic and social rights, including access to education, decent work, equal pay and equal rights over assets and productive resources, and eliminate gender-discriminatory laws and policies;

(f) Invest in long-term prevention measures to address the root causes of sexual exploitation, including harmful masculinities and male sexual entitlement, in order to eradicate trafficking in women and girls in the long term. Programmes to engage men and boys to shift norms and attitudes that accept violence against women are critical;

(g) Compensate survivors of trafficking through State-based schemes with specific provisions for victims of trafficking. Compensation should not be reliant on the seizure of assets from traffickers, cooperation with law enforcement or the exhaustion of remedies through judicial processes.
