

Global Report on
TRAFFICKING
IN PERSONS
2024

Boxes and contributions



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Office on Drugs and Crime



Trafficking of migrants and refugees on African routes: Evidence from the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants

Trafficking in persons is committed against people who travel on migration routes by land and sea through, from and to Africa. UNODC, through its Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants,^a has been conducting research on smuggling along migration routes in North and West Africa since 2019, which provides indications of how trafficking in persons is committed in this context.

It is important to keep in mind that smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons are distinct crimes.^b The UNODC research presented below indicates that migrants and refugees who are smuggled along African migration routes are at high risk of trafficking.

Trafficking in the context of mixed migration can manifest in a number of possible scenarios that involve different combinations of criminal offences and violations of individual rights. In some of these cases, the perpetrator of smuggling offences also victimizes the smuggled migrant. In other cases, actors other than smugglers may take advantage of the vulnerable situation of the migrant being smuggled in order to exploit them, which could constitute trafficking in persons in many instances.

Extent

Data and analysis indicate that the extent of smuggling of migrants from North Africa to Europe has increased in recent years. On all sea routes from Africa to Europe, UNODC estimates that at least 230,000 people were subject to smuggling or attempted smuggling during 2023, an increase of around 80% compared to 2022. This increase was

mostly recorded on the Central Mediterranean route (175,000–228,000),^c as well as on the Northwest African (Atlantic) route. Some 39,800 people arrived on the latter route during 2023, most of whom were smuggled.^d

Most people smuggled to Europe from Africa in 2023 were West and North African.^e On the other hand, smuggling of Nigerians by sea to Europe significantly decreased in recent years.^f As of the beginning of 2024, transregional smuggling through North Africa of people from Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan to Europe continues to increase. During the first eight months of 2024, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis comprised 25 per cent and Syrians 17 per cent of all those arriving irregularly by sea from North Africa to Italy, while during the same period in 2023 these three citizenships comprised together less than 20 per cent.^g This is indicative of a gradual increase in the use of North Africa as a hub for migrant smuggling from Asia into Europe.

People on mixed migration routes are vulnerable to trafficking in persons

Research by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants indicates that in the context of migrant smuggling, serious crimes are committed against migrants, from trafficking in persons for forced labour and sexual exploitation to sale of a person, and deprivation of liberty for extortion. For example, one in five of the 746 Nigerians surveyed in 2021 for the Observatory's research experienced deprivation of liberty for the purposes of extortion. Almost half (48%) of Nigerian adults surveyed considered trafficking and exploitation a significant risk for Nigerian children on mixed migration routes.^h Research by the Observatory on the Western Mediterranean route

a UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/observatory_som.html.

b The smuggling offence is defined in the relevant Protocol supplementing the United Nations Transnational Organized Crime Convention as “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident consisting of facilitating the irregular entry of another person into a country for a profit”. The Protocol also requires the criminalization of producing, procuring, providing or possessing fraudulent travel or identity documents for the purpose of enabling smuggling of migrants, and of enabling a person to remain in a country without complying with the necessary requirements for legal stay, in both cases when committed intentionally and in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. Smuggling offences include document fraud committed to enable smuggling of migrants, for a profit; and enabling another person to irregularly stay in a country, for a profit. The smuggling offence involves a material, usually financial, voluntary transaction between a person who seeks to enter or stay in a country irregularly, and a smuggler. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000): www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

c UNODC (2024). “The Migrant Smuggling Market on the Central Mediterranean.” UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants Update #2 - October 2024: www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/Observatory/2024/CMRUpdate_Oct2024.pdf.

d UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Northwest African (Atlantic) route: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/adc4bbd2969849d1b6be9792e9b7bf4f>.

e Calculations based on figures provided in: Italian Ministry of Interior “Cruscotto Statistico al 3 Maggio 2024”: www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2024-05/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_03-05-2024.pdf.

f See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

g UNHCR Italy, Weekly Snapshot, 23 September – 29 September 2024.

h See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

from North Africa to Spain also identified instances of trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labour and sale of a person.ⁱ

Trafficking in persons may also take place in the context of armed conflicts and related cross-border displacement. The deteriorating security situation in Sudan and in the Horn of Africa, for example, have led to significant cross-border displacement, in some cases involving smuggling of migrants offences, and increased risks of trafficking in persons.

In 2022, 100 interviews were conducted for UNODC in Sudan with people from countries in the Horn of Africa, as well as from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The research suggests that, in the absence of legal channels for movement, some people fleeing conflicts and violence use smugglers to facilitate their movement to place of safety, making them more vulnerable to trafficking in persons. Many interviewees stated that they had been intentionally misled by their smuggler in terms of travel routes, modes of transportation and fees.

Some non-state armed groups in the Central Sahel benefit from migrant smuggling by recruiting migrants and refugees into their ranks.^j UNODC conducted 154 interviews with actors involved at various levels in the migrant smuggling industry in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2021. Interviewees indicated that actors involved in smuggling of migrants were in some cases also involved in committing drug trafficking, sexual exploitation and labour exploitation.

Trafficking in persons offences in the Central Sahel are perpetrated by various actors, including private citizens, state officials, smugglers and non-state armed groups.^k UN entities have also reported a number of cases of migrants recruited for forced labour in mines or by armed groups along routes from West to North Africa.^l

The same offenders committing multiple offences: smuggling and trafficking

Trafficking in persons can be committed by the same offender who perpetrates smuggling of migrants, and in respect of the same person. The most common manifestations of this phenomenon on mixed migration routes through African countries are deprivation of liberty for extortion, forced labour, sexual exploitation and forced criminality (whereby smuggled migrants are coerced or deceived into committing migrant smuggling offences).

According to UNODC research on migrant smuggling in the Central Sahel, smugglers perpetrate trafficking offences directly or connect people on the move with traffickers. A higher percentage of smuggled people among the 2,005 surveyed in the region experienced trafficking in persons (10 per cent) compared to those who did not use a smuggler (4 per cent).^m UNODC's research on smuggling from Nigeria also revealed indications of abuses perpetrated by smugglers, ranging from deception and preventing access to means of communication, to violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons.ⁿ

Deprivation of liberty for extortion

One of the most prevalent crimes perpetrated by smugglers is deprivation of liberty and extortion of their clients. From a number of in-depth interviews (82) with migrants for UNODC's research in North and West Africa, there are indications that migrants are isolated in warehouses or private houses by smugglers or other actors affiliated with the smugglers. The smugglers either demanded a ransom or detained them at 'credit houses' until they paid the full smuggling fee.^o

Sexual exploitation

Some women smuggled in the Central Sahel are also trafficked for sexual exploitation in the course of their journeys. This may be linked to goldmining sites where women are trafficked for sexual exploitation by smugglers or other actors.^p

i See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

j UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

k UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

l UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

m UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

n See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

o UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

p IOM, Etude sur la Traite des Êtres Humains - Etat des Lieux (2021), pp. 34–39.

According to UNODC's research on the Western Mediterranean route, sexual exploitation of women who have arrived irregularly in North Africa may start when the smuggler introduces women – or 'sells' them – to a local community leader ('chairman'). In some cases, the chairman then hands them over to a pimp, for a fee. Examples were cited by interviewees of victims of sexual exploitation who are reportedly forced to repay the equivalent of up to US\$2,250 for the smuggling fee, suggesting that smuggling fees are inflated as a means of controlling trafficking victims through debt bondage.^q

Key informants for UNODC's research on smuggling along the Northwest African route to the Canary Islands, Spain, highlighted the risk that the route may be used for trafficking of women and girls from West Africa for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Europe.^r

Finally, though not necessarily indicative of trafficking in persons, some smugglers interviewed for UNODC research in the Central Sahel reported that sex can be a form of payment for smuggling services in some instances.^s

Forced labour

In North Africa in particular, there is evidence that some migrant smugglers collaborate with traffickers who subject migrants to forced labour in agriculture and other sectors. Some situations emerged from interviewing 49 people for the Observatory research, where exploitative labour was used as an advance payment for subsequent sea smuggling to Europe; this can take the form of working without being paid for a smuggler, or for an employer intermediated by the smuggler.^t

Trafficking by other actors

Trafficking in persons is also committed against people on the move by perpetrators other than those who facilitated their irregular entry. The victims of trafficking may have been smuggled, but the perpetrator of the trafficking offence is not the same as

the perpetrator of the smuggling offence. Migrants are vulnerable to trafficking by other actors because of factors linked to their being the object of smuggling.

UNODC's research indicates that abduction, deprivation of liberty for extortion and trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation are committed against migrants and refugees by various actors other than smugglers. The perpetrators take advantage of the irregular status of smuggled migrants in countries of transit and destination and their consequent fear of coming into contact with the authorities, as well as dependency on smugglers in dangerous territories crossed along the routes.^u

Deprivation of liberty for extortion

Deprivation of liberty and extortion are perpetrated by actors other than smugglers on migration routes by land through West and North Africa. Almost all of the 49 migrants and refugees interviewed for UNODC's research in West and North Africa reported being kidnapped by non-state actors along the routes from West Africa to North Africa, particularly in border areas in the Central Sahel, and while working in agricultural fields in Libya or living in Tripoli.^v

Abductions and kidnapping for ransom have been linked with the presence of militias and armed groups in Northern Mali.^w Migrants abducted manage to continue their journey when a ransom is paid on their behalf by family members or when they are able to escape. In another scenario they are 'sold' by a prison guard to third parties who exploit men for forced labour in agriculture or construction and women in domestic work or prostitution.^x

q UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

r UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Northwest African (Atlantic) route: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ad44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

s UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

t UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

u UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

v UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

w UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>; UN Panel of Experts Established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019). (2020). Final Report of the Panel of Experts: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3876820?v=pdf>.

x UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria:

Forced labour

There is often a connection between deprivation of liberty on migration routes and forced labour, particularly in North Africa. UNODC research indicates that some people who travelled on migration routes and were then detained were subjected to forced labour in exchange for being released from detention. There is also intermediation of forced labour from detention centres to private businesses and private citizens who may pay a ransom for detainees and then force them to work in order to pay off what was paid. Limited accountability and rule of law in certain areas has contributed to the proliferation of this type of forced labour.^y

Sexual exploitation

Among the 20 West African women interviewed for UNODC research on smuggling, the majority reported indications of sexual exploitation after being abducted on migration routes. Cases of women who were sexually exploited in North Africa, and were subsequently 'freed' by a local man were documented.^z

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8ed-d061c6c9460>.

y UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

z UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8ed-d061c6c9460>.



Generation 30 Research on Trafficking in Persons

Generation 30 is an initiative of the UNODC Research and Analysis Branch featuring contributions from young and early-career researchers who want to make a global difference with their research on trafficking in persons. Contributions were collected through an open call and selected on the basis of the quality of the empirical research and relevance of the topic.

Family involvement, juju rituals, physical and sexual violence and stigma and labelling: The convoluted experiences of young Nigerian victims trafficked to Italy

A Generation 30 contribution to the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024

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Rationale and background

Nigeria is one of the African countries that identifies the highest numbers of human trafficking victims, of which about 83 per cent are women and girls (2021).^a In 2019, Nigeria was also one of the top countries of origin of victims of human trafficking identified in the European Union.^b This research was conducted from 2018 to 2020 to document the experiences of female Nigerian victims who were trafficked from Nigeria into Italy between 2016 and 2018. The research involved interviews with Nigerian victims whose travel was organized by smugglers and traffickers, who all travelled to Italy irregularly, and whose journeys began in the South West of the country from where they were taken up North to cross the border into Niger. They travelled through the dangerous Sahara desert, crossed the border into Libya, were put on rubber dinghies and pushed out to the Central Mediterranean Sea where they were rescued by Search and Rescue ships and taken to Italy.

Methodology and limitations

The study adopted a victim-centred approach in which the participants were empowered to tell their own stories with their wellbeing and safety prioritized throughout the research process.^c

The findings of this longitudinal study were gathered from the experiences of 31 female Nigerian victims of

trafficking, interviewed in Italy and exploited in a number of countries along the route in transit or destination, who had escaped the trafficking networks. This does not presume that they are a homogeneous group and fully represent the experiences of all Nigerian victims of trafficking.^d

Key findings

1. The role of family members in trafficking in persons.^e Family involvement in trafficking in persons was one of the key findings of the study;

^d Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 31 recruited participants over three measurement (interview) moments (M1, M2, and M3) with at least six months between each measurement. In M1, there were 31 participants, 22 participants in M2, and 16 participants in M3. The main reason for the drop out was that the participants although keen on seeing the researcher again, did not wish to revisit painful past experiences. Employing a longitudinal approach crystallized the participants' experiences and the changes that they went through over the two years' timeframe allotted for the study. The majority of the participants in this study (28) were recruited by NGOs based in the regions of Sicily, Piemonte and Campania, while three were recruited directly by the researcher based on her previous encounters with them in her work as a practitioner. However, all the participants arrived in Italy between January 2016 and June 2018, and they originated from Edo (65 per cent), Delta (19 per cent) and other (16 per cent) states in Nigeria. During M1, 30 of the 31 participants were in shelters for victims of human trafficking, with 20 participants being adults, and 11 being children. Although the researcher only recruited adult participants, 10 confided in the researcher either after their interview, or a few months later during the longitudinal study, that they were actually under the age of 18. Research also shows that the experiences of children and adult victims of trafficking travelling through this route are very similar with children receiving no preferential treatment, as confirmed by our participants. Moreover, some of the participants who left Nigeria as children arrived in Europe as adults or had become adults by the time the first set of interviews were conducted.

^e Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I. and Derluyn, I., "She said this might be God's way of taking care of us. Family involvement in human trafficking", *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, Vol. 19 No. 3/4, (2023), pp. 157–172. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHS-11-2022-0116>

^a National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Annual Report 2021.

^b European Union Agency for Asylum, Country Guidance Nigeria/ Victims of human trafficking, including forced prostitution (2019). Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria/215-victims-human-trafficking-including-forced-prostitution#:~:text=Nigeria%20is%20the%20top%20nationality,affects%20women%2C%20but%20also%20children.>

^c Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium and the Commissione per L'Etica della Ricerca e la Bioetica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy

Type of family involvement in participants' trafficking experience

Group	Type of involvement	Quote
Group 1	Family members who were aware of their children and wards travelling with a trafficker and were actively involved in their recruitment and/or journey. They encouraged and/or forced it.	<i>When they told him [uncle], we are coming here for prostitute, he said I should be the one to go. So, I have no choice, I have to go, because things get [. . .] Please, I can't say it. [bursts into tears] [her uncle raped her]. (M1)</i> <i>My sister took me to Mali... they [sister and traffickers] forced me to do prostitution work, and I did it for two and a half years. (M1)</i>
Group 2	Family members who were aware of their children and wards traveling with a trafficker and were passively involved in their recruitment and/or journey. Did not initiate the travel but did not discourage it.*	<i>I knew the work was prostitution work and my mum knew, but we believed that it would benefit our family well if I go and do the work. (M1)</i> <i>My mum knew about the journey [before departure] and was happy about it, because she believed that I would be able to send money home to support her. (M1)</i>
Group 3	Family members who were aware of their children and wards traveling but were deceived, and thought it was for other purposes – vocational jobs, education, etc.	<i>My mum was really excited about the journey and encouraged me to go, because she felt that I would be able to make good money as a nanny in Germany for myself and to send home, but my mum did not know it was for prostitution work. (M1)</i> <i>My grandmother said someone is coming to take me to France. She said that it's one of my aunts who travelled out of the country [. . .] and has promised to pay for my education, so I can finish school.</i>

* Group 2 consisted of family members who clearly knew that their children's or ward(s)' travel would result in prostitution because their children or wards would be working for a madam; however, they did not recruit their children for the madams nor actively encourage them to go, but they also did not discourage their children from going or do anything about it.

during analysis, family involvement in the participants' migration journey and trafficking experiences was evident in one way or the other. However, there were different types of family involvement, and family involvement did not always mean family approval of trafficking in persons. Three main groups emerged from the analysis:

In the first group, participants' family members were part of the recruitment, and enforcement of exploitation. Working on or with family members is a tactical strategy used by traffickers who understand the key aspects of respecting and obeying elders in the Nigerian society, and use that to their advantage.

In the second group, although family members were not explicitly pushing the participants to embark on the journey, they did not stop them and/or were supportive of the idea that they were going with a trafficker, as it meant some remittances would come their way.

The common factor in group three was deception: the participants' parent or guardian was deceived about the purpose of the trip.

2. The role of juju rituals as a tool of control and liberation for Nigerian victims of human trafficking^f

A vast body of literature^g refers to how traffickers have used the traditional practice of *Juju* rituals to blackmail victims and force them into exploitative conditions. In 2018, the *Oba* (King) of Benin in

f Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "The Role of Juju Rituals in Human Trafficking of Nigerians: A Tool of Enslavement, But Also Escape", *SAGE Open*, (2023) 13(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210474>

g Achebe, N., "The road to Italy: Nigerian sex workers at home and abroad", *Journal of Women's History*, (2004). 15(4), 178–185, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2004.0002>; Ikeora, M., "The role of African traditional religion and 'juju' in human trafficking: Implications for anti-trafficking", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, (2016) 17(1), 1–18; Nagle, L., & Owasanoye, B., "Fearing the dark: The use of witchcraft to control human trafficking victims and sustain vulnerability", *Southwestern Law Review*, (2016) 45, 561.

Nigeria made a public declaration against traffickers in which he revoked the curses traffickers place on victims through *juju* rituals, and cursed traffickers who refused to stop the illicit trade.^h This was unprecedented, and participants interviewed in this study, confirmed that the *Oba's* declaration was the help that they needed to escape the trafficking networks. Therefore, *juju* which is utilized as a tool of control over victims, was in this case, a tool of liberation.

I asked for help from some of my girlfriends who ran away from their madam, they told me about what Oba said. So, I called my mum to ask if it was true and my mum said yes... my friend then said Oba told us not to pay and that she is a Benin girl [from Edo state] so she herself will not pay again. So, I asked her to help me. (M1)

Since our Oba said we should leave, I have peace of mind, I have not afraid for myself or my [unborn] child and I will give birth in peace. If not for that [declaration], I don't know where I would be now or what would have happened to me. (M2)

I ended up going to court to testify against her [madam]. In court, I looked my madam in the eye, and I said: "You, you are the one who brought me here and forced me to do ashawo [prostitution] work" and she was found guilty and sentenced. I think she is under arrest now. (M1).

The far-reaching effect of the *Oba's* declaration against traffickers was another key finding of this study. This finding highlights the importance of including community-based approach to address international issues and utilizing effective strategies that may be deemed as unconventional while tackling an issue as global, yet local, as human trafficking.

3. The continuous violence experienced by victims of trafficking during their trajectories.ⁱ

The participants' experiences of physical and sexual violence happened during their migration journeys and continued after arrival in the European Union. The actors changed, but the violence remained.

h Ibileke, J., "Human trafficking: Oba places curses on offenders, collaborating sorcerers, cultists", *PM News*, (2018), <https://www.thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2018/03/09/human-trafficking-oba-places-curses%E2%80%8B-on-offenders-collaborating-sorcerers-cultists/>.

i Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "It happened in the desert, in Libya and in Italy: physical and sexual violence experienced by female, Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2023c 20(5): 4309, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054309>.

Niger: *So, one guy tried to save me, but the boga [trafficker] shot him and killed him. So, I had no choice but to give in; the man raped me, and I also saw him killing the person that tried to help me. (M1)*

Libya: *They raped me again, and eventually just dumped me in the desert to die. I really thought I would die this time, but again, I didn't die . . . I got pregnant. (M1)*

Italy: *The new camp is ok; they have adults and minors there and the people working there are nice. One of the staff there tried to have sex with me, but I refused, and I warned him that if he tries again, I will break his head. (M1)*

This third key finding highlights the physical and sexual violence that the participants were forced to experience. The experiences of violence that they had themselves, and witnessed being done to others were so many and so common that no participant was excluded from it. These strongly impacted their physical, mental, and emotional health as described in the excerpts below.

I beat my child [conceived through rape] because sometimes, I see something in her, or one look on her face that I don't know, and I think is from her father, I feel very bad. (M2)

When I think about it [the experiences of sexual violence], I feel chest pains. (M2)

Sometimes I can't even eat when I think about it. I sometimes feel dizzy. Something has changed in my brain since then [the experiences of sexual violence]. I don't reason well. Sometimes I just panic and then try to calm myself down. (M1)

If I close my eyes, I see horrible things that make me fear or I feel as if somebody is in the room, but I cannot see them. Sometimes, I will see a shadow but there is nobody else in the room, so who is the owner of the shadow? (M2)

These excerpts highlight the lasting impact of the participants' experiences of violence, the weight of the trauma that they carry, and one can only anticipate the long road to recovery ahead of them.

4. The continuous experiences of stigma, specifically sexual stigma, and labelling.^j

Similar to the experiences of violence, the actors changed, but the participants' experiences of stigma and labelling continued.

People always say bad things about Nigerians here [Italy], it is mostly about prostitution when you are a girl, and if you are a Nigerian boy here, then you are a criminal. (M1)

j Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "You are merely a Nigerian prostitute": Sexual stigma and labeling of Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy," *Stigma and Health*, (2023) 8(3), 279–288, <https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000441>

*I have been at the bus stop [in Italy] several times and older men stopped to offer me a ride, I asked how much it would cost, and they said *** [sexual act]. I told them ... I had money to pay for the trip, but they told me that was the fare and that I should better get used to it because that was what my people did... (M1).*

*In the NGO, the people sometimes talked about Nigerians as if we are all bad people and troublesome. If something happened, the first person they would blame are the Nigerians. So, when the woman I was living with started behaving funny as if I wanted to steal her old husband, I was happy to leave that house and go to *** [another NGO's housing]. (M1)*

The continuous experience of stigma, specifically sexual stigma and discrimination was so prevalent that one of the participants told the researcher that "it is normal". It happened to them so frequently, that they no longer saw it as something strange, it had become normal. The participants described experiences of stigma and labelling in different spaces including on the bus, in the shelter, on the street, etc. They felt that they were only seen as Nigerians who did prostitution work, nothing else; and they perceived this "prostitution label" as an obstacle to find a job or integrate into the local society, so they isolated themselves and stayed within their own networks. Noteworthy, was the unwavering loyalty that the participants had towards their family members, including those who were part of their exploitation and trafficking. They still regularly sent them money and had a sense of loyalty to them regardless of what they had done.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

In conclusion, the participants' experiences during their migration trajectories while being trafficked from Nigeria to Italy were both complex and violent. They highlight the dangers encountered along the way as well as the role played by different actors including family members. The study shows that:

1. Family involvement in different capacities is prevalent in human trafficking. It highlights the key roles that family members play, and power that they have.
2. There are other strategies to consider when tackling trafficking in persons – such as how the *Oba's* declaration against traffickers was a tool that supported several participants in escaping their traffickers.
3. Physical and sexual violence continues even after arrival in the destination country and is sometimes perpetuated by caregivers. This leaves the participants in a cycle of multiple violent experiences and stigma which can be linked to what Orsini et al^k refer to as "loops of violence".

4. Stigma, especially sexual stigma and labelling are highly prevalent and in turn, cause the participants to ostracize themselves from the society they live in. However, research^l shows that this type of self-isolation has a negative impact on wellness and quality of life.

To support victims of trafficking in persons in a lasting manner, relevant and tailored forms of support are highly recommended, and these include:

- › Involvement of willing and safe family members not involved in their exploitation, in aftercare. Since the advice and decisions of family members are highly respected in this context, possibly linked to the belief that parents/caregivers make decisions that are in their children/wards' best interests,^m then involvement of family members with the participants' wellbeing at heart would allow for lasting rehabilitation and possibly prevent re-trafficking.
- › Involvement of the victims' communities of origin and seemingly unconventional tools may be quite effective in tackling human trafficking. This supports Lederach's three principles necessary for establishing peace constituencies – *indigenous empowerment, cultural sensitivity and a long-term commitment.*ⁿ
- › The need for long-term support structures that factor in the types of violence experienced by victims of trafficking, and understanding that these experiences may negatively impact their other relationships,^o including with caregivers.
- › Recognizing the mental health (and other) effects of (sexual) stigma, labelling, and treatment of the participants as the 'problematic other' and providing relevant long-term care and support.

- k Orsini, G. and others, "Loops of violence within Europe's governance of migration and asylum: Bottom-up perspectives on the experience of everyday bordering for refugees transiting/settling in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. *Politics and Governance*, (2022) 10(2), 256–266, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i2.5183>.
- l Benoit, C. and others, "Stigma and Its Effect on the Working Conditions, Personal Lives, and Health of Sex Workers", *Journal of Sex Research*, (2018), 55(4-5), 457-471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1393652>.
- m Iversen, V. and Ghorpade, Y., "Misfortune, misfits and what the city gave and took: the stories of South-Indian child labour migrants-1935–2005", *Modern Asian Studies*, (2011) Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 1177-1226; Kakar, S. *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, 4th ed., (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2012).
- n Lederach, J. P., "Conflict transformation in protracted internal conflicts: The case for a comprehensive frame- work", in K. Rupasinghe (ed.), *Conflict transformation*, (St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 201–222.
- o Classen, C.C., Palesh, O.G., Aggarwal, R., "Sexual Revictimization: A Review of the Empirical Literature", *Trauma Violence Abus.* (2005), 6, 103–129.

Trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced criminality to commit online scams in Southeast Asia

Contribution from the UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific^a

Trafficking for fraud and online scams

Trafficking in persons for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities is a form of trafficking that has risen in numbers and is gaining increased attention in different parts of the world. The detection of this form of trafficking has increased over the last 10 years, passing from about 1 per cent of the total victims detected in 2016,^b to 6 per cent in 2018,^c to 8 per cent in 2022 (see Chapter 1, page 53). This form of trafficking has been detected in about 25 countries in all regions of the world. A particular form of this trafficking that has emerged in the last few years is trafficking for committing cyber-enabled frauds. The phenomenon has surfaced in Southeast Asia where well-established transnational organized groups have trafficked young professionals and forced them to commit cyber-enabled crimes.

Victims from a range of low- and middle-income countries from the region and beyond have been found trafficked to commit these crimes in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Southeast Asia, mostly located along the borders of Mekong region countries. SEZ are specific areas of industrial development that benefit from simplified regulatory regimes and infrastructure to encourage investment.^d SEZ have also been identified as areas with less stringent regulations and limited oversight of law enforcement authorities.^e High-profile organized crime groups have been increasingly involved in SEZs as owners, developers and investors.^f Human rights abuses such as child trafficking and trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation had already been reported in such areas prior to the pandemic.^g Moreover, these areas have drawn international attention for housing large scale

cyberfraud operations and money laundering schemes, in effect serving as parallel underground banking systems for organized crime in the region and beyond.^h

Since 2021, such groups have started recruiting young professionals from several countries to exploit their skills in the commission of highly sophisticated online scams. Victims have been kept in casinos, resorts, hotels, large office buildings and residential developments established in or around SEZs in the region. Due to the mix of favourable regulatory frameworks and availability of IT technology, setting up an online casino has been relatively easy and profitable.ⁱ

The risk factors

The progressive expansion of this form of trafficking in the Southeast Asian SEZs is linked to the relatively recent growth of the number of casinos and junket operators^j established in the Mekong region.^k Online gambling is banned to varying extents in many countries in Southeast Asia,^l and many operators and players relocated to SEZs, where regulations allow for complicated schemes of transactional activities. For instance, the same group may be physically located in one country, run websites hosted somewhere else, while being licensed in a third country and targeting potential customers in multiple countries around the world.^m

What had previously been designed as hotels and in-person gambling platforms were turned into operation centres managing large numbers of hybrid or online gaming transactions.

Online casinos, and junket operators and virtual asset service providers (e.g. high risk unregulated exchanges, payments services) now serve as integral components of the regional underground and unregulated, or poorly regulated financial/banking

a This box draws upon UNODC, "Casinos, cyber fraud, and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia Policy Report", (Bangkok, September 2023).

b See UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*, p. 31.

c Ibid, p. 34.

d Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia: Recommendations for a Human Rights Response*, (2023).

e Jespersen, S. and others, *Trafficking for Forced Criminality: The Rise of Exploitation in Scam Centres in Southeast Asia*, ODI Thematic brief, (London, 2023).

f UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

g Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on Cambodia under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. CRC/C/OPSC/KHM/CO/1, (26 February 2015).

h UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

i UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat* (Bangkok, January 2024).

j The term 'junket' refers to a short-term gambling program arranged by an operator for one or more high-wealth players at a chosen casino, in conjunction with the relevant casino operator.

k UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

l OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015)*; Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell* (October 2023).

m United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Casinos, cyber fraud, and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia Policy Report*, (Bangkok, September 2023).



infrastructure allowing organized crime syndicates in the Mekong region to launder billions of dollars of illicit profit. The infrastructure originally built to launder money through online gaming platforms is used to commit financial frauds in different currencies including cryptocurrency, trading fraudulent shares in companies or romance-investment scams.ⁿ

In search of a workforce to operate such scams, criminal groups started targeting workers in Southeast Asia and as the business expanded, looked for workers beyond the countries' borders under the pretence of well-paid and interesting jobs.^o

The context where these organized crime groups operate is characterized by large-scale corruption and alliances with non-state armed groups active in the region,^p with collusion between organized crime groups and senior government officials, politicians, local law enforcement and influential businesspersons.^q

The sophisticated organized crime behind it

The limited number of ongoing investigations into and convictions for trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced criminality in Southeast Asia makes it difficult to draw a comprehensive profile of the organized crime groups involved. However, evidence resulting from investigative files suggests that groups involved in this type of trafficking are sophisticated and well organized. Ongoing investigations into money laundering and online fraud indicate that leaders of these groups are typically men from Southeast Asia, often high-profile, presenting themselves as legitimate business owners, while forming alliances with high-ranking government officials and private corporations.^r

These leaders are, or are connected with, the owners and managers of the scam sites and operate shell companies for the money laundering operations. Different types of "personnel" operate in the compound where scam operations are managed and implemented. While some of the people who operate

scams are coerced, others are willing participants as "controllers" and "agents" or as simply part of the scam work force and are either part of criminal operations, or aiding criminal groups running scamming facilities. Directors who manage the scam compounds live in close proximity and oversee the day-to-day running of the online scams, managing the operations and people involved. Controllers, for instance, ensure that "operators" meet their financial objectives through threats and use of physical force. Some of the offenders acting in the system may have formerly been victims, and later agreed to take the role of controller in the scam compound in exchange for their own release, or other privileges.^s

Agents on the other hand are often nationals of the countries in which the scam compound is located, reporting directly to the directors, and are mostly responsible for organizing the transportation of the victims. There have been instances where agents have mediated with national authorities (including immigration services) to ensure the release of those victims who have managed to escape but were not recognized by national authorities as victims of trafficking and were instead held in detention facilities. Once released, these victims were re-trafficked into a similar situation of exploitation in the same region/province or another country. Outside the compound, there are hierarchical networks that connect the compounds to individual recruiters and agencies, transporters and, in some cases, non-state armed groups. Various border areas in the Mekong region remain under the control of a number of non-state armed groups operating numerous casinos and running other illicit business.^t

Available research suggests that the nationalities of the offenders serving at the lowest level of the hierarchy tend to correspond with the nationalities of the victims, while the leading positions are occupied by nationals from the broader East Asian region.^u

Victims from all over the world

Victims from Asia, Africa, Middle East and South America have been identified in Southeast Asia to commit various types of online scams, often controlled and manipulated through debt bondage and threat.^v

Both men and women have been targeted by organized crime groups and forced into conducting cyber-enabled crimes, but the majority are men, aged between 20 and 30, and are not citizens of the

n UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*; UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud, Underground Banking and Technological Innovation in Southeast Asia: A Shifting Threat Landscape* (Bangkok, October 2024).

o OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015); Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

p United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat* (Bangkok, January 2024).

q OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015).

r UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering*.

s Ibid.

t UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

u Ibid; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims in forced scam labour* (2023).

v UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

country of exploitation.^w Victims identified in the region in 2022 were mostly described as having tertiary level education, or higher, being media savvy and multilingual, and originating mostly from countries in Southeast Asia.^x

The modus operandi

Attracting the victims

Available evidence suggests that victims are recruited through deceptive online advertisements managed by individual recruiters or private agencies; in some cases recruitment is initiated from the scam centre. Following investigative operations in the region, a minority of the victims rescued in 2022 reported that they were recruited face-to-face through acquaintances following traditional trafficking dynamics, and to a lesser degree through kidnapping.^y Some trafficking victims are used by the organized crime group to recruit other people they know into situations of forced criminality, including family members and friends, through a payment of, for example, USD300, for each person recruited.^z There are reports of victims forced to stay and work in the compound until a ransom is not paid.

Some victims have been recruited through online advertisements that initially targeted university graduates fluent in multiple languages (especially English and Mandarin), skilled in Information Technology (IT) or having familiarity with social media, and occasionally some working knowledge of cryptocurrency. These young men and women were lured by job advertisements offering high pay and interesting professional work. The pay reportedly offered was the equivalent of around USD 1,000 – 1,500 per month with benefits including free food, housing and travel costs covered. Jobs included working in digital marketing, customer services, construction, translation,^{aa} hotel, and online gaming companies.^{ab}

Through the use of scam manuals, artificial intelligence tools and other IT solutions that have defined the modus operandi for the online scams, scam scripts and methods can eventually be easily replicated across compounds and even be used by less skilled cohorts of victims.^{ac}

Automatized tools have also been used to create deceptive job advertisements mostly promoted through messaging apps and social media. Some advertisements have fraudulently used the names, logos and other branding of existing and legitimate companies to lure victims.^{ad}

Some recruitment is also conducted face-to-face or through established recruitment agencies used for legitimate employment in the past. Cases of recruitment agencies based in the Middle East had been reportedly paid approximately USD 2,500 by the organized crime group for each recruitment.^{ae}

Some victims that were exploited in scam centres in Southeast Asia reported transiting the Middle East after recruitment for an IT training.^{af} While these victims finally reached the scam compounds in Southeast Asia, they reported that some of their fellow trainees were destined to scam compounds based in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.^{ag}

While most criminal groups in the Golden Triangle focus on the manufacturing of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine, other types of illicit activities include online financial scams, wildlife trafficking, illegal resource extraction, trafficking in persons and money-laundering.^{ah} Within the same compounds for instance, there is evidence of people being trafficked for the purpose of forced labour, in order to provide cleaning or cooking services, or for the purpose of sexual exploitation.^{ai}

Confined and in fear

While in trafficking in persons deception is mostly used at the recruitment stage, other means of control are typically employed during the exploitation phase.

Victims of trafficking for forced criminality into scam centres in Southeast Asia are confined in armed compounds, which typically include both dormitories and office space. Victims' movements are limited by metal bars on windows and balconies, high fences, and

w UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

x Ibid.

y Ibid; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

z UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

aa Jespersen, S. and others, *Trafficking for Forced Criminality*.

ab Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

ac UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

ad UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

ae UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, "Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds", HRC briefing (2022). Available at: https://humanity-consultancy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/HRC-Briefing_Cyber-Slavery-in-the-Scamming-Compounds.pdf

af UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

ag Ibid.

ah UNODC, *World Drug Report 2024*.

ai Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

security staff positioned at the building entrance/exit. Their screens are linked to a central screen so that their online activities are always monitored.^{aj}

Coercive methods may start upon arrival, or when the victims refuse to commit the scams. Victims are controlled through isolation and restriction of movement, confiscation of personal documents and mobile phone, threats, and debt bonding.^{ak}

The first method to control the victims is the debt bondage scheme, and the victims are asked to pay back the money “invested” by the employer/organized crime group in their travel and training. Victims are also subject to long working hours and unrealistic sales targets. It becomes impossible for the victims to repay the initial debt which increases with time, often compounded by fines for violations. In some cases, such debts become the basis of demands for ransom.^{al} Rescued victims have reported that ransoms may range from USD3,000 to USD30,000 and seem to have increased since the beginning of 2023. In most cases, when the family pays the ransom the victim is released, but victims’ testimonies also included cases in which the victims was then forced to continue working in the compound.^{am}

Threats are also widely used as a means to traffic and exploit victims. Organized crime groups reportedly threatened victims with harming their family and friends or with selling them into sexual exploitation, for organ removal, or to another scam compound in case of underperformance.^{an}

Rescued victims also reported having suffered from physical and sexual violence.^{ao} Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are used as control mechanisms.^{ap} Access to medical care is limited, and living conditions can be cramped and unsanitary.^{aq}

Set-up to fraud globally

Victims that are trapped into forced scams are asked to find and recruit potential new victims through interaction with social media users and make a certain number of ‘friends’ each day. These potential victims are targeted by using data bought and sold on various web platforms.^{ar} Established online friends are then enticed into various activities that will result in their financial loss through illegal online gambling or fraudulent investments and other things. Victims’ testimonies report that scam victims are generally approached with offers of small profit opportunities, such as buying and selling of cryptocurrency, perspective of online gaming, or romantic encounters. Fake websites are built to showcase fraudulent data showing the profit opportunities for the scam victims, who may even receive small amounts of money at the beginning to strengthen their trust. Several weeks or months are often needed to build a trusted relationship with the victim.^{as} Recent reports also highlighted the rising use and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in scamming operations. Generative AI has been used to create phishing messages in multiple languages, chatbots are used to engage and manipulate victims, and deepfakes are used to bypass KYC (know your clients) security checks. Further, it has been reported that polymorphic malware capable of evading security software to identify ideal targets has been used by scammers and organized crime.^{at}

aj UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds.”

ak UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims in forced scam labour* (2023). Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds”.

al Ibid.

am OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015); Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

an UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds”.

ao Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

ap Ibid.

aq Ibid.

ar UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

as OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015).

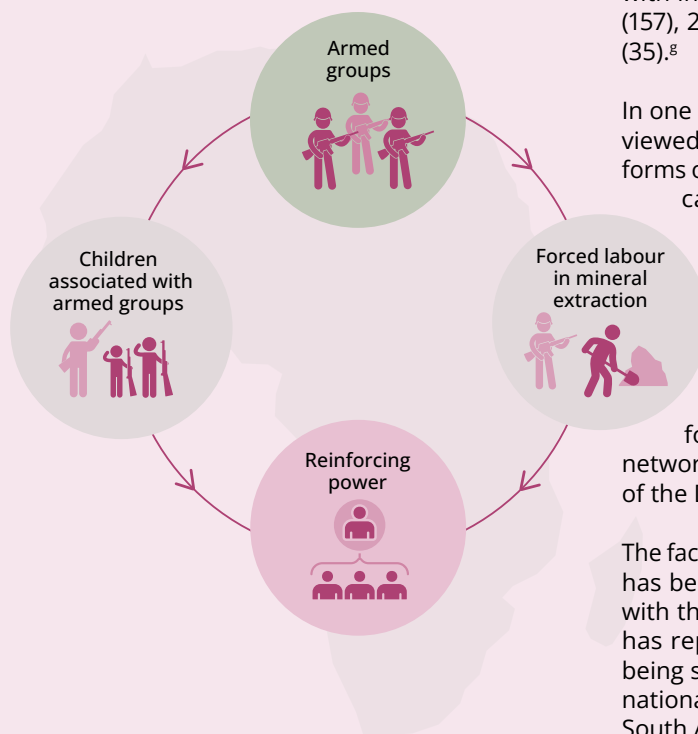
at UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime*.

Trafficking in persons, mineral resources and armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In 2023, the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) reported sustained clashes between *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO)* factions and *Zaire militias* for the control over illegal mining sites in the Ituri province of the DRC. Following these hostilities, increased cases of children recruited from villages and exploitation in gold mining sites were reported.^a

From the research carried out, there appears to be a link between the military operations of the many armed groups operating in the Eastern part of the DRC, the natural resources available and the trafficking for forced labour reported in these territories both to extract those resources and to reinforce the military power of these groups.

CONFLICT, MINERAL RESOURCES AND CHILD TRAFFICKING IN EASTERN DRC



The forced recruitment of children in the armed groups active in the country is mainly concentrated in four provinces where military operations are more intense: Tanganyika, Ituri, South Kivu and especially North Kivu.^b The conflict between various groups in these provinces resulted in more than 5.6 million IDPs at the end of 2023.^c As result of more recent clashes in North Kivu, around 1.4 million additional IDPs were recorded as of January 2024.^d

According to field studies, one in five displaced individuals sampled^e experienced forced labour, forced recruitment or were abducted or disappeared during the reference period. Just over 80 per cent of abductions were carried by armed groups, while criminal groups were implicated in eight per cent of cases. The vast majority of the victims were forced to fight for the armed groups or to act as porters and about a quarter were forced to work in economic activities.^f

These provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are rich with precious gems, metals and minerals, attracting armed groups to set up mining operations to finance their activities. A large number of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) operations of different valuable metals and gems are in operation, where in many cases child labour and the presence or interference of armed groups has been observed: an estimated total of 2,009 gold mines (940 with interference of armed groups), 727 cassiterite (157), 247 coltan (85) and 350 other mineral mines (35).^g

In one study,^h about seven per cent of miners interviewed in these provinces were victims of different forms of trafficking in persons. In 22 per cent of these cases, armed groups recruited victims for mining work including children.ⁱ

Armed groups traffic children to extract minerals that are then sold and smuggled out of the country. In 2023, several militia forces consolidated their control over the *Rubaya* coltan mines in North Kivu and reinforced their relationships with local criminal networks involved in the smuggling of minerals out of the DRC.^j

The facilitation of mineral smuggling by armed groups has been reported as a criminal activity connected with the phenomenon.^k In addition to gold, the UN has reported cases of tin, tantalum and tungsten being sold by armed groups and smuggled to international markets, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia.^l

a United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/252, 21 March 2022; Letter dated 13 June 2023 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2023/431) 13 June 2023.



- b Children and Armed Conflict – Report of the Secretary-General in the Republic of the Congo (S/2022/745), 10 October 2022. IOM Displacement Data Matrix M23 CRISIS ANALYSIS – Report #1 February 2024.
- c IOM, *Displacement Atlas: Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, Round 3, Displacement Tracking Matrix, November 2023.
- d IOM, Displacement Data Matrix M23 CRISIS ANALYSIS – Report #1 February 2024.
- e The sample comprised 2,403 primary respondents who reported on their own experience and the one of 15,235 individuals.
- f IOM, ILO and Walk Free 2022, “No Escape”.
- g International Peace Information Service (IPIS), “Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in DR Congo”, available at https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/open_data_app/, (accessed on 15 July 2024). The Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), “DR Congo”, (n.d.) available at https://www.bgr.bund.de/EN/Themen/Min_rohstoffe/CTC/Mineral-Certification-DRC/CTC_DRC_node_en.html, (accessed 15 July 2024).
- h Jocelyn Kelly and others, “Artisanal Mining Towns in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo”, (United States Agency for International Development (USAID), August 2014). The survey is intended to measure human trafficking in the artisanal mining industry in two Eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sampling was conducted in Kalehe, Walungu, and Mwenga territories in South Kivu Province and in Kalemie and Nyunzu territories in North Katanga. Absent more accurate population figures, we cannot be completely sure of the generalizability of the results; however, the findings presented here are the product of a systematic approach to both random site and random respondent selection. The final sample included 1,522 respondents across 32 sites, which included 1,129 males (74.2%) and 393 females (25.8%). The survey results were also complemented by qualitative data collection activities in five sites.
- i Jocelyn Kelly and others, “Artisanal Mining”; Kara Siddarth, *Cobalt Red, How the blood of the Congo powers our lives*, (St Martin’s Publishing Group, 2023).
- j Letter dated 13 June 2023 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2023/431.
- k Bali Barume and others, “COVID-19 crisis threatens responsible mineral supply chains – a case study based on the DR Congo”, (The Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), June 2020).
- l United Nations Security Council. “Letter dated 6 June 2019 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council.” June 7, 2019; Marcena Hunter, “Pulling at golden webs: Combating criminal consortia in the African artisanal and small-scale gold mining and trade sector”, *Enhancing Africa’s response to transnational organized crime (ENACT)*, Issue 8, (April 2019).

Voices from civil society; protecting the victims, assisting the survivors

The initiative

Non-governmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs) are at the forefront of efforts to protect and assist victims of trafficking in persons around the world. For its 2024 edition, the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons has collected opinions and views of civil society to gain a clearer insight into the needs of trafficking victims.

Between July 2023 and March 2024, members of civil society active within UNODC anti-trafficking networks were invited to respond to an online survey. A total of 87 people working for anti-trafficking organizations in 37 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas completed the survey.^a

NGOs AND CSOs ON THE TOP-FIVE MOST NEEDED SERVICES FOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING



Source: UNODC NGO Survey.

Note: 85 respondents answered the question "In your experience, what are the five services most needed for victims of trafficking, after being trafficked?" by ranking a closed set of categories^b

a Between July 2023 and March 2024, the UNODC Research and Analysis Branch, in cooperation with the UNODC Civil Society Unit, the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking, and the UNODC Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants Section, conducted an online survey to assess the challenges of anti-trafficking responses from the perspective of NGOs working with victims of trafficking. Members of civil society active within UNODC anti-trafficking networks were invited to respond to an online survey. 87 people working for anti-trafficking organizations in 37 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas answered the survey, with a higher concentration of respondents in North America (21 per cent, 18/87). Mitigation measures were taken in the data analysis phase to account for the higher proportion of respondents from North America. Among the survey respondents, 59 were women, 26 men, one preferred not to answer and one reported other identity. Nine persons had lived experience of being trafficked. The survey results were analysed through a mixed-methods approach drawing on qualitative and quantitative techniques. Results are indicative only and despite being generalizable, they are not representative of the experience of the whole population of victims of trafficking. While the survey achieved almost global coverage, it did not receive any responses from East Asia and the Pacific, and nearly 20 percent of the respondents were based in North America. The results have been analysed using relevant literature to triangulate emerging findings and account for the geographical distribution of respondents.

b Respondents were asked to rank the answer options from the most (1) to the least (5) needed, answers were as follows.

- (1) Medical assistance = 33, Reintegration services = 15, Legal support = 12, Child protection = 15, Repatriation services = 3, Other = 6, Language course = 1, Prefer not to say = 0, I do not know = 0;
- (2) Medical assistance = 25, Reintegration services = 17, Legal support = 20, Child protection = 10, Repatriation services = 4, Other = 5, Language course = 2, Prefer not to say = 2, I do not know = 0;
- (3) Medical assistance = 12, Reintegration services = 16, Legal support = 26, Child protection = 17, Repatriation services = 5, Other = 6, Language course = 3, Prefer not to say = 2, I do not know = 0;
- (4) Medical assistance = 9, Reintegration services = 22, Legal support = 13, Child protection = 14, Repatriation services = 8, Other = 6, Language course = 9, Prefer not to say = 3, I do not know = 0;
- (5) Medical assistance = 3, Reintegration services = 13, Legal support = 6, Child protection = 13, Repatriation services = 16, Other = 5, Language course = 24, Prefer not to say = 3, I do not know = 2.

NGOs and CSOs key suggestions on how to improve the ability of victims to report the crime and press charges against the trafficker

NGOs and CSOs suggestions on improving the chances of victims reporting to law enforcement	Application of the non-punishment principle for victims of trafficking
	Recognition of the victims' status not dependent on the willingness to report the crime
	Presence of NGOs/independent actors while reporting to law enforcement
	No risk of forced repatriation for victims of trafficking; voluntary and compensated repatriation pathways
	Safe and anonymous reporting lines for victims of trafficking

Source: UNODC NGO Survey.

Views of civil society organizations on some of the challenges of crime prevention

Misinformation

The organizations surveyed perceive misinformation, particularly through awareness raising campaigns, as one of the key challenges in tackling trafficking in persons. According to the respondents, information campaigns may fail in their crime prevention purposes, while reiterating instead stereotyped images of victims and traffickers.^c One NGO from North America, for instance, points out that child trafficking campaigns have typically failed to inform the public about the fact that children are often trafficked by family members or known acquaintances, shifting public perception of the typical perpetrators towards the ideal image of a stranger. A person with lived experience from the same region observes that boys and men victims are still invisible. He reports how boys and men are often stigmatized for their conduct during exploitation, rarely recognized as victims of trafficking, and prevented from accessing protection services.

Criminalization of the victims

Application of the non-punishment principle,^d access to legal channels for migration and residence permits,^e emerge among the key normative

developments that CSOs believe can help to prevent the crime and protect victims.^f

Despite clear international obligations to protect victims and a commitment to not consider them as criminals, most of the interviewed NGOs observe that victims of trafficking are in practice often criminalized for their illicit conduct. Their assessment corroborates the evidence gathered by academic and UN reports stating that victims are often arrested and criminalized for illicit conduct linked to their trafficking experience.^g The protection and non-criminalization of trafficked victims is particularly relevant for those victims that are exploited for forced criminality where victims are forced to engage in illegal activities. About 8 per cent of the victims detected globally in 2022 were trafficked for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities. Detected cases have increased steadily in recent years, signaling a potential uptick in this form of trafficking in persons.^h

trafficking in persons to remain in its territory, temporarily or permanently, in appropriate cases."

- c Amy Farrell & Rebecca Pfeffer, "Policing Human Trafficking: Cultural Blindness and Organizational Barriers", 653 ANNALS AM.ACAD.POL.&SOC.SCI. 46, 52-53 (2014); E O'Brien and H Berents, "Virtual Saviours: Digital games and anti-trafficking awareness-raising", *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 82-99, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219136>.
- d The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). Non-punishment of Victims of Trafficking. Issue brief No. 8. https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/ICAT/19-10800_ICAT_Issue_Brief_8_Ebook.pdf.
- e Article 7.1 of the United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons reads: "In addition to taking measures pursuant to article 6 of this Protocol, each State Party shall consider adopting legislative or other appropriate measures that permit victims of

- f The United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol particularly urges States Parties to "consider adopting legislative or other appropriate measures that permit victims of trafficking in persons to remain in [their] territor[ies], temporarily or permanently, in appropriate cases." See Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 7(1) (2000).
- g UNODC, "Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants, A Case law Analysis"; Julia Einbond, Kaitlyn Zedalis and Hanni Stoklosa, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Criminalization of Victims of Labor Trafficking by Forced Criminality," *Criminal Law Bulletin*, vol 59, no 1, 2023, pp. 60-77; Amy Farrell and others, "Failing Victims? Challenges of the Police Response to Human Trafficking", *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 18 issue 3, 649 (2019).
- h United Nations, Non-punishment and non-prosecution of victims of trafficking in persons: administrative and judicial

Conversely, access to financial compensation, voluntary and compensated repatriation options and the presence of civil society actors facilitating interactions with law enforcement authorities are, in the views of CSOs and NGOs, factors typically increasing reporting rates.

Inequality and marginalization

Article 9, paragraph 4 of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol requires that “States Parties shall [...] alleviate the factors that make persons, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking, such as poverty, underdevelopment and lack of equal opportunity.” Economic determinants are frequently cited among the most important risk factors affecting victims’ susceptibility to trafficking in persons and “abuse of a position of vulnerability” is one of the means listed in the definition of trafficking. Court cases have shown that the majority of victims were in a condition of economic need at the time of recruitment, often characterized by an inability to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter and healthcare.ⁱ

Similar to the findings from academic research, civil society considers trafficking in persons to be rooted in poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, and the dynamics of marginalization.^j When asked what is needed to better protect people from being trafficked, interviewed civil society stressed the urgency to tackle the root causes of vulnerability and promote more equal societies.^k

approaches to offences committed in the process of such trafficking, Background paper prepared by the Secretariat, Working Group on Trafficking in Persons (Vienna, 27-29 January 2010); Amy Farrell and others, “Failing Victims? Challenges of the Police Response to Human Trafficking”, *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 18 issue 3, 649 (2019).

i UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

j The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). The Role of the Sustainable Development Goals in Combating Trafficking in Persons. Issue brief No. 5.

k Trafficking in persons is specifically mentioned in three targets under three Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) relating to justice and strong institutions, access to decent work and housing and gender equality – all of which are directly related to the prevention and protection of potential and actual victims. SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 16 (Peace Justice and Strong Institutions) specifically mention trafficking in persons. Further, the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol urges States Parties to adopt protection measures for victims of trafficking – including access to appropriate housing, medical, psychosocial and legal support and employment opportunities – and to address underlying factors that create vulnerability. See: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 9(4) (2000).

Civil society organizations’ experience in protecting victims

Awareness of victims’ rights

Greater awareness of victims’ rights and the measures adopted to ensure these rights can protect people from coming under the control of traffickers. Similarly, recent academic studies have argued that such awareness actively prevents the normalization of workers’ exploitation and allows victims to build social connections outside of the trafficking space.^l Slightly more than 60 per cent of interviewed practitioners from civil society organizations agree with the idea that most victims are not aware of the rights granted by their status in certain jurisdictions.

Practical information on how to identify and rescue victims

According to UNODC research, only about 9 per cent of the cases of trafficking come to the attention of authorities as a result of an action by the community.^m

NGOs and CSOs, on the issue of the importance of information campaigns, also add that they are only effective where trustworthy and functioning services are available to victims of trafficking. In their experience, when such services are unavailable, information campaigns have limited impact on the anti-trafficking response and can even negatively affect trust in public authorities. Their concerns echo emerging findings in the anti-trafficking literature, signaling that the most sensitized members of the community may be the most reluctant to report a potential case of trafficking, due to concerns about the adequacy of support for victims and the risk of criminalization.ⁿ

When specifically asked about systems that can support victims to exit exploitation, CSOs mention the valuable role of hotlines. They stressed, however, the need to ensure that such hotlines can provide multilingual services, and guide and refer victims towards trustworthy and accessible services.

Exposure of civil society and NGOs to retaliation

Consistently over the years, the Global Report has shown how organized crime groups involved in trafficking in persons are able to traffic ever greater numbers of people, for longer times, in more violent manners. Many NGO workers and survivors surveyed (39 out of 86) live in fear of retaliation of organized crime groups and other actors with stakes in

l K Sharapov, S Hoff and B Gerasimov, “Editorial: Knowledge is Power, Ignorance is Bliss: Public perceptions and responses to human trafficking”, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219131>.

m UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*.

n J Birks and A Gardner, “Introducing the Slave Next Door”, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 66-81, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219135>.

trafficking. In total, 25 respondents mentioned “security” among their most pressing non-financial needs and 39 said that they need help to keep safe from retaliation of organized criminal groups and other actors. The lack of access to safe and anonymous ways to assist prosecution can be a strong deterrent to reporting the crime.

Experience on victim re/integration

Victims’ needs

The United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol urges States Parties to adopt protection measures for victims of trafficking – including access to appropriate housing, medical, psychosocial and legal support and employment opportunities – and to address the underlying factors that create or exacerbate vulnerability.^o

According to the 85 interviewed practitioners, the top five services most needed by victims of trafficking when exiting exploitation are:

- i. provision of medical assistance, especially counselling, mental health services, drug treatment, and psychosocial support for all victims;
- ii. reintegration services focusing on economic empowerment, compensation and income support, income support, job placement, education and vocational training;
- iii. (free) legal support securing access to rights;
- iv. child protection services;
- v. and voluntary and compensated repatriation services.

When asked to describe the type of services needed, the answers of CSOs concentrate on the need to ensure effective services to all victims. They note that when available, services rarely come free of charge and may not be affordable for victims at the time when they are most needed. Provision of free legal support was especially mentioned as an essential service that is too often lacking.^p

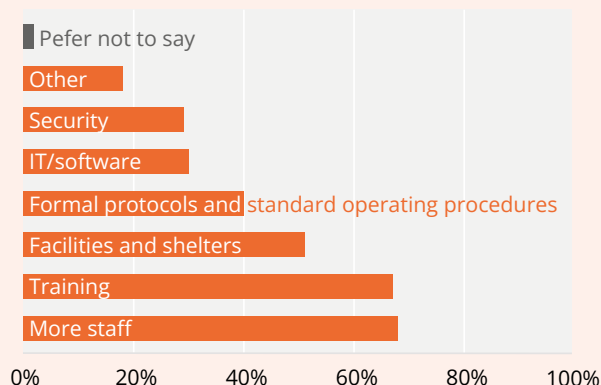
NGOs point to the lack of shelter or affordable housing as being among the main barriers for victims to exit exploitation.

Respondents from different regions emphasize the importance of ensuring access to a safe shelter for rescued victims. Some specify that shelters should accommodate all types of victims regardless of their

^o Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 9(4) (2000).

^p Julia Einbond, Kaitlyn Zedalis and Hanni Stoklosa, “A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Criminalization of Victims of Labor Trafficking by Forced Criminality,” *Criminal Law Bulletin*, vol 59, no 1, 2023, pp 60-77.

What are your organization's most pressing non-financial needs to support victims of trafficking?



Source: UNODC NGO Survey, based on 87 answers.

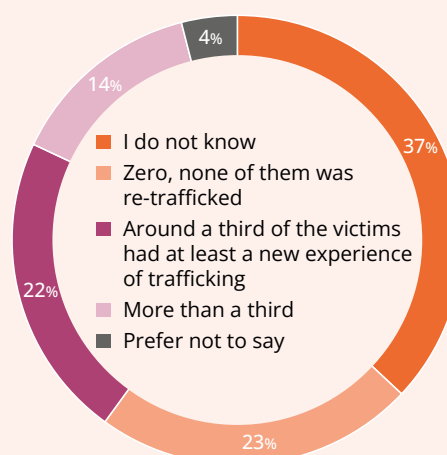
profile, such as age, sex or form of exploitation, while also providing dedicated services for certain categories such as people affected by substance-use disorders or living with dependent children.

The risk of revictimization

For many victims, exiting trafficking situations means the simultaneous loss of accommodation and income, which in most settings represents a life-threatening risk. In order to be successful, respondents add, anti-trafficking initiatives need to provide viable alternatives to exploitation by, and dependence on, traffickers. If sustainable solutions are not provided to victims, there is the risk that they fall victim again.

When asked to report on the revictimization rate, most CSO members did not know how many of the victims they had supported ended up being trafficked or exploited more than once in their life (37 per cent or 32/87).

How many victims supported by you/your organization, were trafficked or exploited more than once in their life?



Source: UNODC NGO Survey, based on 87 answers.

Department of Peace Operations/Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions Police Division and Police Components' Activities to address trafficking in persons in conflict situations

Contribution from the Department of Peace Operations

Trafficking in persons is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors. Armed conflicts disrupt social structures and weaken law enforcement capacities, and traffickers take advantage of this instability to operate, often with impunity.

In response to this, the United Nations Security Council in its resolution 74/176 (2020), titled “Enhancing Coordination in Combating Human Trafficking,” emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts with stakeholders, both public and private, to prevent human trafficking in countries of origin, transit and destination. This includes addressing the demand and supply chains that facilitate all forms of trafficking, as well as the illegal goods and services resulting from this crime. The resolution also stressed the need for joint measures with governments and rule of law institutions to raise awareness about human trafficking and to protect the rights of victims.

In 2016, the Police Division in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) of the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) established the Serious and Organized Crime Focal Point Network (SOC FPN) across field missions. This network has been actively exchanging good practices and lessons learnt in addressing organized crime, including trafficking in persons, for almost eight years. Through the SOC FPN, chaired by the Police Division’s Serious and Organized Crime Team, expert support is available for all police components deployed in field missions. The SOC FPN also includes transnational crime experts from the Police Division’s Standing Police Capacity, partners from other components within OROLSI, as well as UNODC and INTERPOL focal points.

The United Nations Police (UNPOL) deployed in peace operations provide capacity-building support to host-state police services on addressing trafficking in persons, including the key deliverable of building technical investigative capacities to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). To better assist host states in creating efficient police capabilities to address SGBV, the Police Division has facilitated the deployments of specialized police teams (SPTs) in various missions. At present, there are SGBV SPTs in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS).

At the Headquarters level, the Police Division actively participates in all Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) activities

alongside other OROLSI components. Through this participation, the Police Division has advanced and mainstreamed all law enforcement perspectives in ongoing and evolving discourses on addressing trafficking in persons in conflict and post-conflict situations. Through this extended partnership with UNODC – including joint guidance development, strategic communications, resource mobilization and as co-chairs of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Policing - the Police Division has contributed to researching and preparing the present Global Report of Trafficking in Persons.

In alignment with the Secretary-general’s vision for a modern UN 2.0 - Quintet of Change and as a part of the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping, the United Nations Police have prioritized the effective management and analysis of data in peace operations to ensure the successful execution of mandates and the protection of civilians. A notable tool in this endeavor is the specialized database managed by UNPOL within MINUSCA, known as Case Management, which is integrated with Unite Aware SAGE (Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise). Unite Aware is an enterprise platform that supports situational awareness in UN Peace Operations through, and Unite Aware SAGE, a module of Unite Aware, is used to collect information related to incidents, events, and activities of peacekeepers in the peace operations. The Unite Aware platform provides a comprehensive view of the operational environment through data and map visualizations, which are essential for identifying potential threats, tracking armed group movements, and monitoring humanitarian situations on the ground.

The Case Management database, as a subdatabase of SAGE, complementarily focuses on the systematic handling of information related to individual criminal incidents. This database ensures thorough documentation and follow-up for each case, thereby fostering transparency and accountability within the mission. This tool is remarkably effective for profiling and screening perpetrators, and it will automate the collection of data related to arms trafficking and the types of weapons seized. The integration of Unite Aware SAGE and Unite Aware Case Management in MINUSCA underscores the critical importance of advanced data management and analysis tools in contemporary peacekeeping, particularly for UNPOL in fulfilling its mandates. These technologies significantly enhance the mission’s ability to navigate dynamic and complex environments, protect civilians, and uphold human rights, ultimately contributing to stabilization and peacebuilding efforts in conflict settings.

The ECOWAS Commission's initiatives in addressing the lack of data on trafficking in persons

Contribution from the ECOWAS Commission Directorate of Humanitarian and Social Affairs

Within the last two decades, ECOWAS has scaled up efforts to improve the availability of information and data on trafficking in persons in the region. In 2007, the Network of National Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Focal Institutions, and the Annual Review of Implementation of the ECOWAS Plans of Action to Combat Trafficking was instituted by the ECOWAS TIP Unit as an annual flagship report, based on annual reporting by Member States, and as a peer review mechanism. This results from a first legal assessment conducted by the ECOWAS TIP Unit of Member States legislation in 2005/2006.

The first ECOWAS Annual Synthesis Report (ASR) on trafficking in persons was issued in 2008, based on a reporting template aligned with the ECOWAS Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. More recently, further cross referencing and triangulation have become a feature of the ASR. The ASRs are a tool enabling ECOWAS Member States to determine the levels of compliance of their respective legal, policy and institutional frameworks with the ECOWAS Plan of Action. They also serve as a barometer for determining progress achieved and challenges encountered operationally in combatting human trafficking, including levels of arrests, prosecutions and convictions and victims rescued.

The Annual Review Meeting (ARM) is the institutional platform for consideration and validation of the ASR and supports experience sharing, planning and identification of priorities in ECOWAS Member States. The ASR has been compiled continuously since 2008 with the latest report adopted by Member States TIP Focal Institutions in Accra Ghana in 2023 with reports submitted by the 15 Member States. At the Accra meeting, Member States also agreed to extend the current ECOWAS Plan of Action (2019 to 2023) until 2027.

The ASR lies at the centre of the coordination mandate of ECOWAS and intervention programmes devised in ECOWAS countries have been informed by this analysis for close to two decades, with a majority of key intervention initiatives based on the output of this process. The ASR serves also as an important advocacy tool and for the provision of targeted technical support. The reporting template has since been upgraded in 2018 and used by member states to reflect on contemporary and new developments and serves as a programmatic tool to address gaps they have identified in the respective countries.

Currently, the Trafficking in Persons Program of ECOWAS has expanded its approach to human trafficking in recognition of the complex linkage of trafficking in persons with related forms of violence against persons who might be especially vulnerable

to victimization, including women, children, disabled persons, vulnerable migrants and the elderly. The ASR collects information on possible precursor offences and events and results of human trafficking as well as victimization which occurs within the same context. These might be offences constituting sexual and gender-based violence, domestic violence, violence against children, etc.

This is part of ECOWAS' broader approach to TIP: 'Trafficking in Persons Plus', responding to the phenomenon of human trafficking as a part of a larger complex set of vulnerabilities and victimization. Responding to associated or related crimes and victimization is especially important from the West African perspective, where institutions and services remain generally weak.

One of the deliverables of the TIP component of the Project is the development of a Regional Crime Against the Person Prevention Policy (RCAPPP) providing further clarification and concrete implementation measures for the ECOWAS TIP Plus (TIP+) approach. The RCAPPP limits itself to crimes with clear linkages with TIP and also responds to common indicators of vulnerability to TIP and related offences; dealing with gender-based violence, offences that could be connected with irregular migration and related issues. The approach is also focused on risk factors that move vulnerable persons closer to labour and sexual exploitation and employs a proactive, 'joined up' strategy.