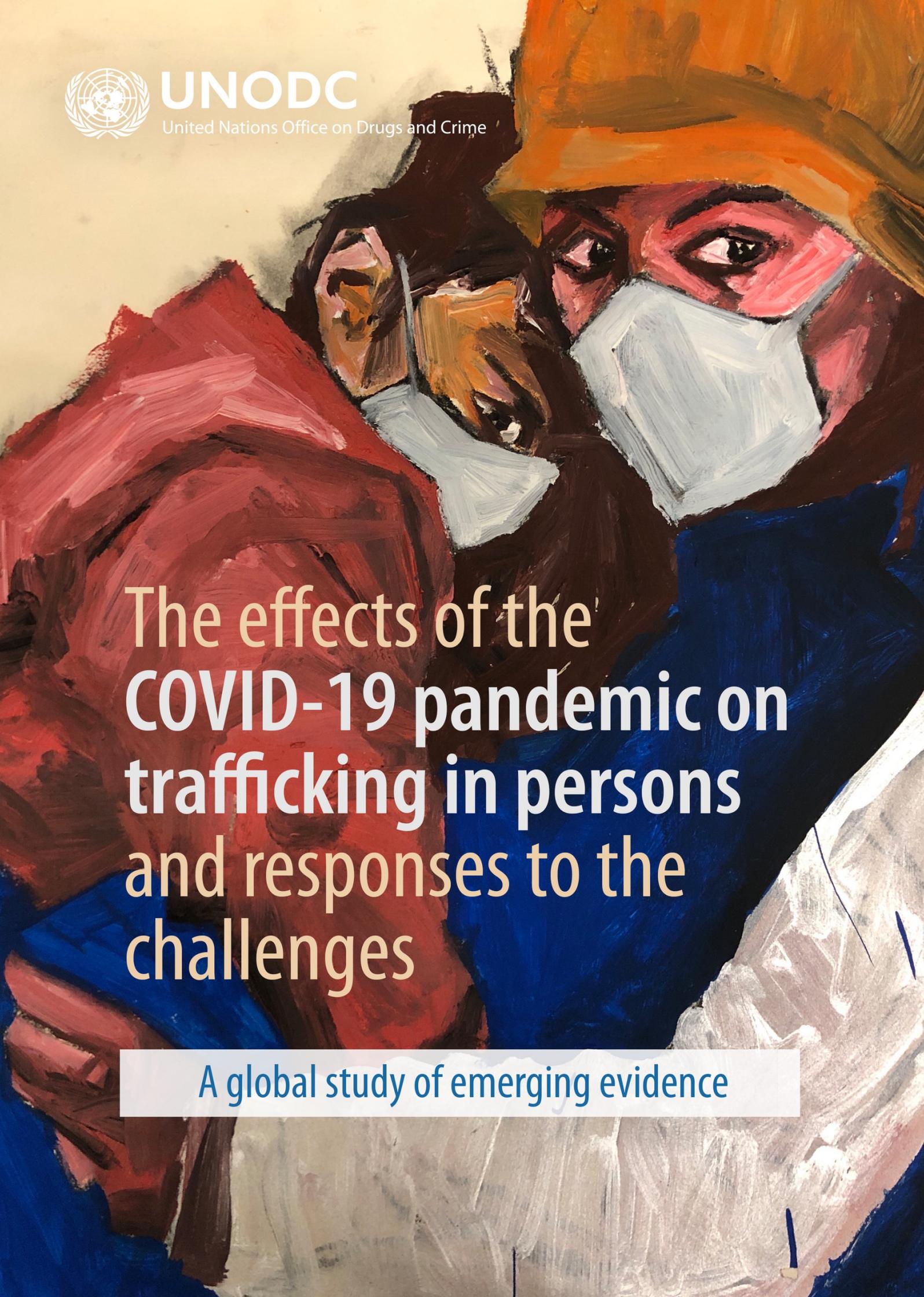




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An abstract, expressive painting in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh. It depicts several figures wearing white surgical masks. The color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones like reds, oranges, and browns, contrasted with cooler blues and greys. The brushstrokes are thick and visible, creating a sense of movement and texture. The figures are closely packed, suggesting a crowd or a group of people in a public setting during a health crisis.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons and responses to the challenges

A global study of emerging evidence

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Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected countries and people globally; it has also exacerbated existing disadvantages, poverty and vulnerabilities. The initial measures to contain the health crisis have not always considered those most vulnerable and affected by violence and exploitation. This report seeks to bring to the forefront the challenges for anti-trafficking during the pandemic and share promising practices and lessons learned in order to prepare for a more inclusive crisis-response in the future, leaving no one behind.

In particular, the report explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on (1) the scale and characteristics of trafficking in persons; (2) victims of trafficking; and (3) frontline organizations (law enforcement, prosecution services, the judiciary and the protection and reintegration services provided by non-government organizations (NGOs)). The report also examines the different initiatives developed in response to the challenges created by COVID-19 and identifies promising practices.

Effects of the covid-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons

The report identifies that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, trafficking in persons went even further underground, making any reliable estimates of the scale of trafficking in persons more difficult. However, in some regions and countries domestic trafficking has reportedly increased, especially local recruitment and exploitation. Loss of livelihoods and restrictions on movement have led to traffickers recruiting victims in their local areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has created larger pools of vulnerable persons who, due to their worsened economic situation, were recruited for labor or sexual exploitation in their local area.

Women, children and migrants have been identified by survey and interview participants as particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls have been recruited, often locally or online, for sexual exploitation, especially in private apartments. Children have been particularly affected – out of school and needing to support parents who have lost their livelihoods, children have been increasingly targeted by traffickers at the local level and online. They have been trafficked for sexual purposes, forced marriage, forced begging and for forced criminality. There is clear evidence of increased demand for child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM), which has exacerbated the exploitation of children around the world. Migrants have been affected by the pandemic in a number of ways – many have lost their employment in the destination country and have been unable to return to their home. Some of them ended up in an irregular status in destination countries after being unable to renew their residence and/or work permits. Others have been forced to stay in inadequate accommodation with limited COVID-19 safety measures in place. The families of migrants have also suffered through the loss of much needed remittances. Survey and interview respondents highlighted the plight, in particular, of migrant domestic workers who have been confined to private homes and exploited by abusive employers.

Traffickers adapted to the ‘new normal’

Capitalizing on people’s loss of livelihoods during the pandemic and the increasing amount of time both adults and children were spending on the Internet, traffickers utilized social media and other online platforms to recruit new victims. Thirty-seven per cent of stakeholder survey respondents reported that the recruitment of victims has moved online during the pandemic. Traffickers have responded to the closure of bars, clubs and massage parlors (due to lockdowns, curfews and other measures to control the spread of COVID-19) by moving the sexual exploitation of adults and children to private homes and apartments. In some countries, traffickers have also capitalized on social distancing measures to transport victims across national borders, knowing that law enforcement have, at times, been unable to carefully inspect vehicles.

Effects of the covid-19 pandemic on victims of trafficking

Victims have been more exposed to COVID-19 and social stigma

Trafficking victims, due to their working and living conditions, have faced heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19. Victims exploited in certain industries, such as the sex industry, construction and manufacturing, faced challenges in remaining socially distant from other victims and their exploiters. Some victims have been unable to access personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and hand sanitizer. Survey and interview respondents reported that in some regions and countries trafficking victims, particularly victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, have been blamed for the spread of COVID-19 in local communities. This has led to ostracism and reintegration problems.

Victims have been abandoned without means for survival and suffered more violence

Survey and interview respondents reported that trafficking victims were abandoned by their traffickers at the start of the pandemic because there was reduced demand for their labor during lockdowns. Traffickers who lost profit due to factories, farms, or brothels closing, simply abandoned victims on the streets. On the other hand, some victims have faced confinement in destination countries and cities in private homes, factories, construction sites and other locations and increased control and violence at the hands of their traffickers.

Rescued victims could not return home, receive assistance or generate income

Many trafficking victims have been forced to remain in shelters in destination countries as a result of national borders closing. In some regions and countries, victims have languished in shelters for months, not knowing when they might be able to return home. Furthermore, like millions of people around the world, many trafficking victims lost their livelihoods at the start of the pandemic. Lockdowns and other measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 led to the closure of businesses, leaving many victims who had established their own businesses or secured jobs, unemployed and destitute. Due to ongoing economic insecurity, many of these victims have not been able to access new livelihood opportunities and became reliant on NGOs and available State services for financial and other support.

Concurrently, trafficking victims in many regions and countries have faced increased challenges in accessing key services, such as shelter, health services, legal aid and basic needs. The increased number of people needing social assistance and support during the pandemic, coupled with travel restrictions and lack of technology and reliable Internet in many parts of the world meant that trafficking victims have been unable, in some countries and regions and at different times in the pandemic, to access essential services. Victims living in the community or accommodated in shelters have also faced reduced access to education and training opportunities.

The effects of the covid-19 pandemic on frontline organizations

Funding shortages

Stakeholders reported that lack of financial resources was one of the key challenges faced by NGOs that provide protection and reintegration support to trafficking victims during the pandemic. NGOs also faced increasing costs for supporting more victims and vulnerable persons, paying for victims' quarantine accommodation, COVID-19 tests, PPE, purchasing tablets and Internet for victims to access services that moved online and providing emergency cash and food packages.

Frontline organizations have experienced planning and coordination challenges

Few frontline organizations had plans in place to continue anti-trafficking activities during a global pandemic. The lack of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), guidelines and a lead State agency for coordination of the pandemic response have left many frontline organizations confused about national-level anti-trafficking operations and responsibilities during the pandemic. This has resulted in both domestic and cross-border coordination challenges. There have also been obstacles for frontline organizations in continuing normal coordination activities with partner organizations in other countries. Anti-trafficking meetings, seminars and other events quickly moved online; however, in many countries lack of equipment and reliable Internet meant that remote communication and coordination has been challenging.

Reduced staff capacity to prevent and combat trafficking and protect victims

In some regions and countries, law enforcement personnel were called to support the country's COVID-19 response. This meant that police and investigation units specialized in anti-trafficking responses were re-assigned from their normal duties to the national-level effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 such as investigating breaches of COVID-19 restrictions, shutting down non-compliant businesses, monitoring physical movement and responding to reports of people breaking lockdown and curfew rules. Some regions and countries have also experienced reduced anti-trafficking law enforcement personnel because officers were infected with COVID-19 or were forced to isolate because one of their family members contracted the disease. Similarly, prosecution services, the judiciary and NGOs all experienced similar problems of reduced staff due to COVID-19 illness and staff having to isolate at home.

Staff exhaustion and burn-out

Across law enforcement, prosecution services, the judiciary and NGOs providing support services to trafficking victims, staff have experienced increased workloads. Coupled with the reality that there is a reduced number of staff able to work, frontline organization staff have experienced burn-out. This has particularly been the case for NGO personnel who reported increased demands for assistance and reduced staff capacity to respond to the demands for assistance. The research collected several testimonials of NGO personnel continuing to work long hours even when sick with COVID-19.

Access to justice hindered

Due to emergency measures imposed by governments in response to the pandemic, there have been changes in court procedures and delays and postponements in administrative, criminal and civil cases. These delays have created significant backlogs in trafficking in persons cases and negatively affected trafficking victims' access to protection services, justice and redress. Experts reported that the main impact of the pandemic on the judiciary has been the suspension of court hearings and appearances. Where courts remained open, there have still been problems, for example, witnesses and defendants not being able to travel to court due to travel restrictions. Remote trials and hearings have in many regions and countries eased the back log of court cases; however, a lack of training on the use of equipment, as well as technology and Internet challenges have meant that remote trials are not always without complications.

Responses and promising practices

Despite the many and varied challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement, prosecution services, the judiciary and NGOs have continued many trafficking prevention, prosecution and protection activities. The study identified a number of innovative practices by frontline organizations to respond to the COVID-19 challenges, including but not limited to:

Prevention and training activities moved online. Frontline organizations continued providing awareness messages to communities by reaching individuals in online trafficking in persons awareness sessions. Workshops, seminars and other training events have also been conducted online since the start of the pandemic to ensure continued information sharing and coordination on anti-trafficking efforts.

E-justice mechanisms established or strengthened. In many regions and countries, prosecution services and the judiciary responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic by developing and/or strengthening e-justice mechanisms. They provided facilities for judicial actors to, for example, submit motions and petitions online and request official copies of documents online. Remote trials have enabled trafficking in persons trials and hearings to continue and for backlogs in cases to start to be at least partially cleared. In addition, remote victim and witness testimonies were enabled during the pandemic and identified as a promising practice that should be established and maintained beyond this period.

Planning and coordination efforts have been strengthened. In some regions and countries protocols and guidelines have been developed to guide the COVID-19 response, including trafficking in persons responsibilities and activities during the pandemic. For example, in some countries, protocols have been developed and/or amended for shelters for trafficking in persons victims, which provide guidance on the provision of health-related matters for victims and shelter staff. Protocols have also been developed for managing child protection cases during the pandemic. Anti-trafficking coordination has actually increased in many places, with frontline organizations capitalizing on the convenient set-up of online meetings to have more frequent meetings with counterparts. This has meant that anti-trafficking personnel have been able to coordinate effectively on, for example, cross-border investigations and victim repatriations.

Frontline organizations have effectively fundraised to provide support to an increased number of vulnerable persons. Realizing the need to provide financial and other basic support to an increased number of people, NGOs focused on purchasing technology, Internet packages and emergency food packages for trafficking victims and their families. Recognizing that children were out of school for protracted periods, with no technology or Internet at home in order to access online education, NGOs provided laptops or tablets to children so that they could continue learning. The study identified many positive examples of donors being flexible with their funding to enable NGOs to divert existing or planned funds to the provision of emergency aid to victims and their families.

Survivors have been provided with key services through online methods. Organizations that provide support to victims of trafficking such as psychosocial therapy, legal aid and livelihood skills training continued support provision where possible through online methods. This meant that trafficking survivors living in communities as well as those accommodated in shelters could continue to receive support, advice and training during lockdowns, including those in remote areas.

Frontline organizations have supported trafficking victims' COVID-19 health needs. Trafficking victims have at times required COVID-19 testing and quarantine accommodation during the pandemic. NGOs have paid for the accommodation and COVID-19 tests for victims. The study identified that in at least one country,

trafficking victims have been prioritized for the COVID-19 vaccines, which were provided free of charge to the victims.

Looking ahead: recommendations

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all countries around the world for well over a year. Similar crises will likely occur in the future and it is essential that the international community is prepared this time. The report provides a series of recommendations based on the lessons learned shared by experts for strengthening the anti-trafficking response during crises, including:

Regularly monitor the effect of wide-range public measures to mitigate emergencies. Responses developed to respond to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable persons, victims and organizations should be continuously monitored. Lessons learned and promising practices, as well as challenges, should be widely shared, with this report contributing to this knowledge exchange to build a strong evidence-base. Monitoring and evaluation should consider, inter alia, the effects the measures have had on different aspects of the anti-trafficking response; the effects the measures have had on adults, children and migrants; and whether the measures should be continued, or even expanded in the future.

Conduct research to inform measures to address trafficking in persons during the pandemic. Relevant frontline organizations, with support from professional research bodies, should conduct additional primary research on the effects of the pandemic on trafficking in persons in different regions and countries. Such research should consider the dynamics of trafficking in persons during the pandemic, i.e. shifts in the modi operandi of traffickers, migration dynamics and heightened vulnerabilities of certain groups. Relevant agencies should also fully implement existing UN recommendations to collect, analyze and publish all relevant and disaggregated data on trafficking in persons cases. Data collection efforts should prioritize victims' safety, privacy and confidentiality and respect the key principle of doing no harm.

Develop clear messages to the public. Official messages from health, criminal justice and protection agencies should indicate that trafficking in persons victims are exempt from COVID-19 movement restriction measures such as lockdowns and curfews when they seek help and want to report their victimization. Public messages should make it clear that trafficking victims, alongside other victims and vulnerable persons such as victims of intimate partner violence or physical or psychological violence experienced in their homes, are allowed to leave the home and access support without being apprehended for breaking lockdown rules.

Coordinate efforts at all levels. Existing working groups should continue to meet using online methods regularly. Where gaps in capacity or expertise are identified, new cross-sectoral groups should be established to discuss and collaborate on ways and means to address existing trafficking prevention and protection gaps.

Develop plans and strategies. In the context of planning for future crises, SOPs should be developed so that there is clear guidance for all frontline organizations on the division of anti-trafficking roles and responsibilities. It is important that one Ministry leads the effort to respond to the crisis, to avoid confusion, overlap or gaps in responses to trafficking in persons during the crisis. Contingency plans must ensure the availability of a minimum package of services to victims to meet their immediate needs during the period of reduced possibilities for referral, protection, investigation and judicial proceedings.

Strengthen national legal frameworks. States that have not yet ratified, or acceded to the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, or have yet to incorporate the provisions of the Protocol into national anti-trafficking legislation, should do so without further delay. States should ensure that they have robust national legislation to address all forms of trafficking, most notably online child sexual exploitation and other forms of online recruitment

and exploitation, and that relevant authorities are trained in the scope and practical application of the legislation, particularly regarding collecting and securing digital evidence.

Develop effective prevention activities. Efforts to prevent trafficking in persons should be strengthened through various measures and strategies, including, but not limited to: widely disseminating information about trafficking in persons, such as hotlines and services in multiple languages, through television and social media; setting up mobile investigation teams with full PPE; developing and implementing online Internet safety programs for parents and children; and ensuring that schools as places providing protection and often food to children remain open, with COVID-19 health precautions in place.

Strengthen protection measures for trafficking victims. Shelters should develop plans for receiving new referrals and ensuring the victims' safe quarantine in a separate wing of the shelter. Activities and trainings for victims in shelters should continue uninterrupted through online methods, with consideration of language and literacy needs of victims. Shelters should, where possible, purchase technology so that victims accommodated in shelters can access psychosocial support, legal aid and education online.

Strengthen e-justice mechanisms. The use of e-justice mechanisms should be carefully planned to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place. This requires an assessment in each country of the advisability of implementing such mechanisms, with consideration of issues of technology access by victims and witnesses, as well as safety and security. Criminal justice actors, including law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, court staff and interpreters should have access to training in using e-justice mechanisms in trafficking in persons and other important crime cases, especially how to accommodate vulnerable witnesses who have experienced trauma.

Budgeting. While the priority of States during the pandemic remains public health, governments around the world should continue to keep the issue of trafficking in persons at the top of the agenda and set aside adequate budget and resources for preventing trafficking in persons and protecting victims. Budget should be set aside for extra law enforcement and judiciary resources (e.g. e-justice mechanisms, night courts, mobile investigation units), as well as extra protection and reintegration resources (e.g. hotline staff, legal aid, psychosocial therapists, emergency food aid, health care needs and cash transfers for victims). Donors should be flexible with their funding and swift to respond to requests from NGOs to provide additional funding, or to redirect existing funding to other activities and human resourcing requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought immense challenges to the anti-trafficking field. This study explores the various challenges and obstacles faced by frontline organizations during the pandemic and highlights how frontline organizations have risen to the challenges in order to continue providing protection, support and access to justice to victims of trafficking in persons. The coming years will show if we will be able to strengthen sustainable responses to trafficking in persons, learning from each other and recognizing new trends in trafficking in persons cases, identifying victims and their needs for assistance in a victim-centered, age- and gender-sensitive as well as trauma-informed way.