

## COVID-19 Pandemic Trafficking in Persons<sup>1</sup> (TIP) considerations in internal displacement contexts March 2020

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This guidance on TIP considerations during the COVID-19 pandemic is intended as a quick reference tool to support colleagues in the field working directly with internally displaced persons (IDPs) and/or engaged in protection advocacy. It has been developed in response to requests for further guidance on how the evolving COVID-19 pandemic may disproportionately impact internally displaced trafficked persons and people at risk of trafficking. It should be read in conjunction with the Global Protection Cluster COVID-19 guidance<sup>2</sup> and anti-trafficking response guidance.<sup>3</sup>

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### TRAFFICKING IN CRISIS

Trafficking occurs before, during, and after crises. It may occur at any stage of displacement and in any location. Traffickers capitalize on the widespread human, material, social and economic losses and consequent vulnerabilities caused by emergencies. A number of factors cause people in such circumstances to be even more vulnerable to trafficking including the hampered ability of governments, families and communities to provide for their basic needs; limited options to seek domestic or international protection safely and regularly; negative coping mechanisms adopted by those affected by the crisis;<sup>4</sup> erosion of the rule of law; and the breakdown of social safety nets and other social protection systems<sup>5</sup>. These factors may be compounded by weak legal frameworks, inadequate law enforcement capacity, poor border control, and gender discrimination, leading to human rights violations.

COVID-19 virus is impacting communities worldwide, disrupting State functions, economic activities and livelihood options, as well as family and social networks, including in areas already impacted by crisis prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. This may impact trafficking in persons in IDP settings in a number of ways:

- **People previously less at risk of trafficking may become victims as a result of the pandemic while vulnerabilities of persons already at risk of trafficking may be further exacerbated.** For example:
  - The enforced measures to control the spread of the virus, together with economic downturn, and loss of employment and self-reliance opportunities may have serious implications for displaced persons, making them an easy target for traffickers who appear to offer life-saving access to employment opportunities.
  - In countries where the impact of COVID-19 impedes physical and economic access to food and essential services, there is a risk of the pandemic fuelling further displacement, increasing the number of vulnerable IDPs.
  - Disruptions to education services or separation from caregivers who fall sick as a result of the pandemic may leave children unattended and increasingly vulnerable during daytime and/or may prompt caregivers to entrust them to traffickers under false promises of providing them with education or work
  - Restrictions on movement may shift forms of exploitation, for example, women and children may be commercially sexually exploited by their trafficker online or within private homes

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<sup>1</sup> A trafficked person is recruited, transported, transferred, harboured or received, through deception, coercion, physical or psychological threats, or the abuse of their position of vulnerability, for exploitation. Exploitation has various forms including forced labour, begging, organ removal, sexual exploitation, recruitment into armed groups, domestic servitude or forced marriage. Trafficking does not require a person to be moved across a border. Almost 60% of identified trafficked persons are exploited within their own country (UNODC 2018).

<sup>2</sup> COVID 19 Response and Preparedness Related Measures, Global Protection Cluster, available at :

<https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/GPC-COVID-19-GPC-Operational-Advisory-Note-31.03.2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons](#) (2009) Part IV.8; see also, [IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking](#) (2007), [IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse](#) (2020). In addition, the following reports contain important information on trafficking in crisis: [Countering Trafficking in Persons in Conflict Situations](#) (UNODC, 2018); [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons in the Context of Armed Conflict](#) (UNODC, 2018); [Trafficking in Persons in Humanitarian Crises](#) (ICAT, 2017); [Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of Crises: Evidence and Recommendations for Further Action to Prevent Vulnerable and Mobile Populations](#) (IOM, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Negative coping mechanisms might include the sale or exchange of sex for survival, domestic violence, exploitation and abuse, increase in child, early and forced marriage, amongst others.

<sup>5</sup> [Trafficking in Persons in Humanitarian Crises](#), The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2017, available at: <https://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT-IB-02-Final.pdf>

- **Trafficked persons may struggle to access health care, information, protection and support, during and after their trafficking experience.** For example:
  - Trafficked persons may be physically confined to their place of exploitation and/or be unable to exit a situation of exploitation, thereby reducing their timely access to information, support and services related to the pandemic.
  - Trafficked persons may experience heightened violence and abuse at the hands of traffickers who are less able to make a profit from them due to labour market disruptions.
  - Trafficked persons may have no ability to self-isolate or socially distance themselves from others, especially if they are forced to provide sexual services or labour.
  - Trafficked persons who have had their personal documentation removed by the traffickers may experience additional barriers in accessing COVID-19 related healthcare and other services. Lack of documentation might also put them at risk of abuse, detention and revictimisation from security actors/police officers enforcing quarantines and managing checkpoints.
  - While all people are vulnerable to COVID-19 infection, initial evidence indicates that the elderly and people with co-morbidities suffer the most severe effects. Many trafficked persons experience grave forms of mistreatment, including abduction, incarceration, rape, sexual enslavement, forced prostitution, forced labour, organ removal, physical beatings, torture, starvation, psychological abuse, and the deprivation of medical treatment, which generate urgent, short- and long-term health conditions for victims. This may place trafficked persons experiencing compromised health conditions at higher risk of enhanced vulnerability to severe infection.
  - The pandemic has already, and may continue to result in closures of clinics, shelters and offices of service providers, or restrictions in in-person interactions, affecting the support services available to trafficked persons. Lack of services may increase the likelihood of further harm and/or re-trafficking.
  - The pandemic will result in an increased workload and/or reduced capacity and resources of law enforcement authorities to respond to reported cases of trafficking. It may also delay support to victims currently in the criminal justice process.
  - Deviation of funding due to COVID-19 may result in less support services being available to trafficked persons.



#### Note on specific vulnerabilities of women and girls

Gender inequality and discrimination may result in women and girls being disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures put in place to prevent its spread. Initial evidence of the impact these measures indicate that GBV (particularly domestic violence) is increasing. Women and girls currently in a situation of trafficking may experience heightened violence and abuse at the hands of traffickers who may be less able to make a profit from them during this period. Moreover, the economic impact of CV-19 may disproportionately affect the livelihoods of internally displaced women and girls, which may in turn further heighten their risk of falling victims to trafficking, particularly involving sexual violence.

#### KEY ACTIONS FOR PROTECTION ACTORS

- Before acting, consider the safety, security and health risks involved – to the trafficked person and their family, the responding organisation and staff, and the wider community – and adapt working modalities.
- Be aware and stay alert – traffickers have many profiles. They can be men or women, young or old, or even minors. They may be total strangers or friends or relatives of the trafficked person.
- Conduct context-specific, gender-sensitive assessments to identify new and/or increased, shared and differentiated risks for men and women.
- Introduce gender-responsive risk mitigation measures (such as targeted livelihoods interventions; vouchers for food or NFIs; strengthening women's groups, shelters and GBV services; strengthening child protection services; or supporting access to remote learning for children).
- Review and revise general community engagement messaging to ensure that it is gender-responsive and that people who flee or may have to flee from crises are warned about their particular potential risks of exploitation and trafficking *and* receive information that enables them to seek assistance, including the contact information of relevant organisations. Clear and consistent messaging should ensure that the most

vulnerable people, including those at risk of trafficking, have access to relevant health related information and know where to seek support.

- Increase efforts to integrate gender-sensitive monitoring at household level into new working modalities. Crimes and abuse can go unnoticed much longer if/when routine site monitoring is reduced.
- Where outreach activities may be reduced or suspended, replace such activities with other channels of identification and reporting, i.e. a free helpline. Team up with health practitioners, community healthcare volunteers and law enforcement to ensure they understand/identify signs of trafficking and detect potential cases.
- Arrange emergency distribution of hygiene kits, sanitizer materials, and tools for garbage disposal to counter the risk of infection where trafficked persons are likely to live (e.g. IDP camps and in proximity to massage parlours, brothels, factories, farms, construction sites and other context specific areas where labour exploitation might occur).
- If protection measures such as quarantine or self-isolation are put in place by the authorities resulting in family separations, advocate that alternative foster care arrangements for children are introduced (as relevant), and that procedures are put in place for reuniting families separated as a result of the measures and/or enabling contact to be maintained. Where children are placed in alternative care, ensure it is for the shortest possible period of time, with the objective of reintegrating the child into his / her family and based on a best interest assessment.
- Review existing referral mechanisms and see how referral and service provision, and up-to-date communication around these, can continue considering social distancing measures and possible scale-down of activities. Make sure that updated lists of the referral pathways are available to all including new online/remote services such as case management due to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Coordinate and engage with organizations who are responding to incidents of GBV to ensure they are aware of the risks of exploitation and trafficking that women and girls face. Support GBV safe/houses shelters (and trafficking-specific shelters if present) to adapt existing guidance on safe operations and management of safe houses/shelters specific to COVID-19.
- Advocate with governments for the continuation of essential protection services for trafficked people, in addition to advocating for access to healthcare regardless of status or documentation
- Advocate with donors to continue funding trafficking prevention and response, including communicating with donors on how trafficking is shifting/increasing due to COVID-19.