COVID-19 Impact
on
Trafficking in Persons
-A Protection, Gender & Inclusion (PGI) Factsheet

This factsheet is intended as a quick reference tool to support National Societies to consider how the Covid-19 global pandemic may place communities at increased risk of trafficking, how it may impact trafficked persons and provide advice on practical actions that can be taken to respond and mitigate risks.

What is human trafficking and why is it important in relation to COVID-19?
Based on the international legal definition,[1] trafficking in persons has three constituent elements:

the '**act**' (what is done), for example the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons.	the '**means**' (how it is done), for example through threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability.	the '**purpose**' of exploitation (why it is done), for example sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs.

When trafficking involves a **child**, it is irrelevant whether the means, such as force or deception, have been used or not. A child will be recognised as trafficked if they have been moved within a country, or across borders, whether by force or not, with the purpose of exploiting the child.

Trafficking exists in every society worldwide and is exacerbated in emergencies. People can be trafficked either **transnationally** (crossing at least one international border) or **domestically** (within the borders of one country). It affects men, women, boys and girls of all ages, although it also has a strong **gendered dimension** as women and girls account for the largest numbers of detected victims/survivors.

Trafficking in Persons is a core protection issue and a grave **violation of human rights**. During and after crises, many factors make people more at risk of trafficking. The Covid-19 global pandemic is no different; in addition to **increasing already existing vulnerabilities within a community, it is also exposing to risk those who may not have previously been considered so**. The following factors create increasingly vulnerable situations that **heighten the risks of trafficking**:

- **Loss of employment, income or other means of livelihood**, through change in demand for goods and services resulting in economic downturn. Poverty and unemployment are key drivers for trafficking.
- Travel restrictions and tighter border controls causing **disruption of regular and irregular migration routes** resulting in more irregular and dangerous methods of movement.
- **Changing family dynamics and greater pressure on the family unit** resulting in negative coping mechanisms such as child labour or forced marriage.
- **Loss of societal support** through disruption to education, employment and other services and networks.
- **Limited availability or access to services including** health, welfare and social protection mechanisms.

Trafficked people are also at increased risk to the direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic due to:

- **Barriers in accessing healthcare and other services** due to a lack of identity documents and/or freedom of movement.
- **Lack of or reduced access to COVID-19 preventative measures** including information and personal protective equipment.
- Being **more likely to have pre-existing health needs** and therefore at higher risk of severe illness.
- **Reduced capacity of frontline responders** to identify, refer and provide support.
- **Lockdowns and widespread** closures increasing the intensity of exploitation for those confined in an environment with their trafficker.

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[1] The _Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children,_ commonly referred to as the _Palermo or Trafficking Protocol_

COVID-19 affects the entire population, but the impacts affect different people in different ways, based on pre-existing physiological differences, health conditions, socio-economic inequalities and gender and cultural norms. **Any of the following characteristics interlinked with the factors listed above may make some people more vulnerable to the risks of trafficking and exploitation:**

- People living in existing humanitarian emergency settings
- People with poor economic or employment opportunities
- Children with reduced or no access to education
- Persons with disabilities or learning difficulties
- People with mental health issues
- People with drug and alcohol addiction
- Unaccompanied and separated children

- Migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people
- Migrant workers with irregular immigration status
- Female domestic workers
- Sexual and gender minorities
- Ethnic or religious minorities
- Homeless people or those in precarious living conditions
- Women and children

It is important to note that **human trafficking is a complex phenomenon** and the different factors listed above are interrelated elements that also impact each other – e.g. not all women are more vulnerable to risks of trafficking, but a woman in an humanitarian emergency setting with no access to livelihoods is in a more vulnerable situation to these risks, especially when common irregular migratory routes exist.

What can National Societies do?

- **Assume trafficking is occurring** even if there is no evidence of prevalence. Although often not easily visible, evidence tells us that trafficking exists in every society worldwide.
- Collect **sex, age and disability disaggregated data** and analyse the differential impacts, barriers and risks faced by different groups. Ensure the Minimum Standards for PGI in Emergencies are met in all activities.
- **Assess potential barriers in accessing services and accurate information,** especially for the at-risk groups highlighted above.
- **Offer protection and assistance through essential services** such as health and PSS, ensuring that everyone, especially the at-risk groups identified above, have access regardless of status or documentation.
- Ensure **staff and volunteers in all sectors** have received training in all relevant PGI areas, including trafficking, are aware of and equipped to provide accurate and up-to-date information on **support services** for vulnerable cases, including survivors/victims of trafficking, and are aware of current limitations of response services. Ensure they can all provide **safe referrals**.
- **Include migrants, including irregular migrant workers and displaced people,** in preparedness and response plans and activities and ensure support is accessible and based on vulnerability criteria rather than criteria related to employment/immigration or legal status, address, etc. to determine need and eligibility.
- Ensure **regular check-ins and communication** with local PGI focal points or teams. Ensure they are regularly consulted and included in meetings, information-sharing and decision-making to provide technical advice.
- **Include those who are most vulnerable** to the risks of trafficking or their caretakers/guardians **in Covid-19 awareness raising initiatives.** Consult the CEA hub for further resources.
- **Prioritise livelihood interventions** for those most at risk of trafficking and exploitation, especially those in high-risk employment situations, those in the informal labour market, those dependent on their work for immigration/residency status, and those who live with their employer, among others.
- Utilise the role of the RCRC Movement in **Restoring Family Links** to support individuals in re-establishing or maintaining family if separated or disconnected and to support the maintenance of family structure.

Any National Society considering to **engage directly with people who have experienced trafficking**, must **carefully assess the capacities and capabilities** of the NS including skills, specialised knowledge, resources, procedures and expertise required to engage in this area, in line with the principle of **do no harm**. If your National Society is considering taking such action, you can **connect with the IFRC Global PGI team:** pgi.support@ifrc.org. The IFRC approach to TiP is outlined in the guidance documents for European National Societies and Asia-Pacific National Societies. **For more elaborate guidance on trafficking in persons and Covid-19, please see the** *Impact of Covid-19 on Trafficking in Persons Technical Guidance Note*

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