COVID-19 IMPACT ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

We are amid a pandemic and a resulting global economic crisis that has intensified poverty and systemic inequality — both root causes of human trafficking. Trafficking exists for various exploitative purposes including forced labor, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage, and organ harvesting.

Given the nature of this crime, it is already difficult to track and connect its victims to social protection services. Now, we must factor in lockdowns, quarantine, and travel restrictions. While at first sight, these enforcement measures seem to dissuade crime, they may also drive it further underground. With COVID-19 dominating the global conversation, the consequences for trafficking victims are often hidden and rarely discussed. The Global Economic Forum predicts the virus will worsen the situation for victims, increase those vulnerable to exploitation, and disrupt anti-trafficking efforts.

In human trafficking, criminals are adjusting their business models to the ‘new normal’ created by the pandemic, especially through the abuse of modern communications technologies. Criminal enterprises have evolved in the face of stay-at-home lockdowns and travel bans, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime warns that criminals will use the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit those economically alienated. As criminal “entrepreneurs,” crime networks are looking to further exploit and profit off the most vulnerable, becoming ever more creative in their illicit endeavors.

Given the enormous financial hardship on families, the mass movement of people, and the closing of schools (through which many social interventions are delivered to those most at risk), human trafficking can flourish in this current environment. With the economic crisis accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals are vulnerable to both labor and sex trafficking.

DANGEROUS SITUATIONS FOR VICTIMS

In the COVID-19 era, many criminal activities are already moving online, taking advantage of the increased time people spend connected at home, going further underground. Crime detection and investigation are more demanding, and victims become less visible to the authorities. Services provided via the internet such as hotlines and helplines are often the only possible option for victims in the current circumstances. However, this switch is not possible in many parts of the world that lack infrastructure. Even where it is possible, providers may not be equipped to meet the sudden surge in demand, while victims may be restrained from accessing such means of communication.

HIGHER VULNERABILITY INCREASES EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING

Identification of trafficking victims is difficult, even under normal circumstances. The main reasons include the fact that trafficking victims are often exploited in illegal, informal or unregulated sectors (e.g. petty crime, sex industry, domestic settings, drug cultivation and trafficking, agriculture and construction); the capacity of organized crime to hide its operations in plain sight; the lack of willingness by the victims themselves to report their victimization or their inability to do so; and limited law enforcement capacities to detect this crime.
There are fears that COVID-19 is making the task of identifying victims of human trafficking even more difficult. They are also more exposed to contracting the virus, less equipped to prevent it, and have less access to healthcare to ensure their recovery. Dramatic increases in unemployment and reductions in income, especially for low wage and informal sector workers, mean that significant numbers of people who were already vulnerable find themselves in even more precarious circumstances. Children are at heightened risk of exploitation, especially since school closures have not only precluded many from access to education but also from a main source of shelter and nourishment.

For the victims still in confinement by their traffickers, COVID-19 measures may make their desperate situation even worse. The increased levels of domestic violence reported in many countries is a worrying indicator for the living conditions of many trafficking victims, such as those in domestic servitude or sex slavery, forms of exploitation that disproportionately affect women and girls. In an environment where priorities and actions are geared towards limiting the spread of the virus, it is easier for traffickers to hide their operations, making victims increasingly invisible. Identification of victims and subsequent referral to social protection schemes may therefore become more challenging.2

LOOKING FORWARD

In the effort to halt the global spread of COVID-19 and save lives, strict control measures are in place in many countries at a scale previously unseen in peace time. In addressing the pandemic, we should not overlook the real and concrete risks that this unprecedented situation presents for vulnerable individuals and groups, who are not always very visible in our societies. A much-needed focus on alleviating the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should not and must not exclude the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Recovering from the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to look at deeply entrenched inequalities in our economic development model that feed marginalization, gender-based violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons. Human trafficking is the result of the failure of our societies and economies to protect the most vulnerable and enforce rights under national laws. They should not be additionally ‘punished’ during times of emergency. As we work together to overcome the global pandemic, countries need to keep shelters and hotlines open, safeguard access to justice and prevent more vulnerable people from falling into the hands of organized crime.

Defeat Human Trafficking Ministry
Awareness is Our Weapon

JANUARY HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS MONTH

Thank you for your donations through the month of January and participating in our service project inspired by Chaleen DeStephano’s receiving of The Spirit of Emily - Compassion Award. With your help, we have been very successful in putting together packages for the nurses to give to the survivors at Providence Hospitals! Your generosity is appreciated.

Reminder: We are continuing our collection for the packages through February 14th. Donations of fair trade clothing items and monetary gifts can be dropped off in the small hall at Church.
Sources:
1. www.usglc.org (US Global Leadership Coalition)
2. www.unodc.org (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)
3. www.cfr.org (Council on Foreign Relations)