



Recommendations on enhancing efforts to identify and mitigate risks of trafficking in human beings online as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine

In recent weeks, an unprecedented number of people have fled armed violence in Ukraine and headed west. The risks of exploitation for these people are high. Many are vulnerable women and children; these two groups make up the majority of identified victims of trafficking in human beings (THB). Further, in the past, traffickers have preyed on migration and refugee flows to exploit vulnerabilities including trauma or lack of financial resources, housing, and support systems.

The risks of exploitation extend to the virtual space. First, many Ukrainians are using social media to look for help and support, thus revealing important information about their location and difficult situation that can be used by traffickers to identify and contact them under a pretext of assistance. Instances of attempted recruitment of Ukrainians online have already emerged.

Second, the THB business model has largely shifted online, particularly for recruitment and advertisement of victims for sexual exploitation. According to data from Thomson Reuters Special Services, online traffic since the start of the humanitarian crisis has shown huge spikes in online searches – across multiple languages and countries - for explicit content and sexual services from Ukrainian women and girls. For example, global search traffic for “Ukrainian porn” increased 600% since the start of the humanitarian crisis, while searches for “Ukrainian escorts” increased 200%. These data confirm a spiking demand for sexual access to Ukrainian women, and this demand will serve as a strong incentive for traffickers to recruit and exploit Ukrainian women at scale.

To respond to these challenges, the Office of the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (OSR/CTHB) developed recommendations on enhancing efforts to identify and mitigate risks of trafficking in human beings online. The recommendations are primarily for cyber and THB police, technology companies, and NGOs working to prevent and combat online exploitation.

Anti-trafficking stakeholders should account for the fact that Ukrainians may use different services than those predominant in countries of transit or destination. However, based on research and direct evidence, the OSCE considers the following types of platforms most relevant:

- Sites oriented to sexual services such as prostitution, pornography, escorting, sugar daddy, and erotic massage, as well as sex buyer forums and hobby boards
- Employment/classified websites
- Social media
- “Matching” websites for accommodation, transportation, etc.
- Video chat and livestreaming platforms
- Messaging Services
- Online search engines
- Cloud services and data storage

1. **Map the landscape of online platforms with high risks of THB.** Exploitation of THB victims can be facilitated by a myriad of websites and platforms that State institutions, technology companies or NGOs might not be aware of or systematically monitoring (examples above). Mapping is important for all stakeholders in order to assess the scope and scale of risk online and to prioritize areas of intervention.

2. **Pro-actively monitor high-risk platforms for indicators and patterns of sexual exploitation online.** High-risk platforms should be monitored and analysed, preferably using data scraping and analysis software for indicators of human trafficking.

- a. Monitoring should examine *larger scale trends* in the marketplace such as increases in advertisements for Ukrainian, east European/Slavic or “new” persons selling sex; increases of content related to Ukrainian/Eastern European/Slavic women on pornographic websites; and increases in online searches for Ukrainian pornography or escorts, and Ukrainian women or girls for sex/marriage/dates.
 - b. Monitors should also pay attention to *individual indicators* of potential exploitation such as grooming or recruiting behaviour on social media, or suspicious indicators on sexual service sites including inconsistent aliases or ages, frequent or restricted movement, third-party control, etc.
 - c. *Sex buyers forums* should be monitored by law enforcement (THB and/or cyber police) and NGOs in order to identify trends related to sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women, girls, men and boys. Monitoring such forums has proven to be an effective tool for identifying trends in marketplaces as well as potentially exploitative situations.
3. **Pro-active monitoring of indicators and patterns in job offers targeting Ukrainian citizens.** Traffickers may try to recruit victims with attractive job offers advertised online, particularly in light of financial hardships Ukrainian citizens are facing. Law enforcement, NGOs, and online employment advertising platforms must monitor their services for suspicious ads (such as low skill-high pay offers) that could serve as a cover to recruit vulnerable Ukrainians for exploitation. High-risk sectors include domestic work, caregiving services, agriculture, tourism, cleaning services, and construction.
4. **Establish highly visible reporting mechanisms** on online platforms to allow the public, including victims, to flag and report illicit and illegal content related to various forms of exploitation online, including of women and girls, men and boys from Ukraine. The reporting mechanism should specifically include options to flag for sexual exploitation or human trafficking to ensure targeted reporting and responses. Prohibited content must be removed expeditiously and referred to law enforcement or relevant NGOs as appropriate.
5. **Implement digital awareness-raising campaigns** targeting people from Ukraine seeking refuge about the risks of different forms of trafficking in human beings. Many online platforms and mobile applications have mechanisms to identify target audiences, such as geolocation of users in combination with language settings; these mechanisms can be used to provide advice and guidance to Ukrainians seeking refuge on how to avoid being exploitation or access assistance. The campaigns should be age and gender sensitive.
6. **Disable search results or search ads related to terms potentially linked to exploitation of Ukrainians, and instead serve awareness-raising ads.** A common method to look for explicit content or sexual services – including, as demonstrated by the data above, from Ukrainian women, girls, men and boys – is the use of search engines. In light of high risks of THB for sexual exploitation, technology companies providing search services should disable search results or search ads potentially related to exploitation of Ukrainians. Instead, companies – or NGOs – can use platforms to serve ads discouraging risky or exploitative behaviour involving Ukrainians, in line with Recommendation #5. Given the wide distribution across languages of spikes in online searches for Ukrainians, action should be taken in a number of languages.
7. **Online platforms should proactively enable default safety and privacy settings for minors** to reduce the ease of online grooming and exploitation (e.g. turn geotagging off; set posts to the highest level of privacy; not allow strangers to direct message minors, etc.)

8. **Increase online undercover operations** in accordance with respective national and international legal frameworks to deter demand that is increasing in response to the humanitarian crisis. These operations could target persons seeking to purchase sex from minors, recruit vulnerable people to exploit, or harm adults.

9. **Establish partnerships between law enforcement, technology companies and NGOs specializing in combating human trafficking.** Preventing and combating human trafficking facilitated by technology requires specialized knowledge about this crime. It could take time for the relevant stakeholders to build in-house expertise on the topic. Law-enforcement authorities should establish partnerships with technology companies and NGOs specialized in CTHB, with the following objectives:

- Implementation of digital awareness raising campaigns for Ukrainians seeking refuge on spotting human trafficking risks and accessing support and assistance;
- Identification and reporting of human trafficking facilitated by the misuse of online platforms;
- Rollout of specialized technology tools used by law enforcement and specialized NGOs focusing on identification of victims of THB on online platforms. A number of NGOs have developed data scraping and analysis software which can support the identification of THB victims on platforms such as adult services, escort services, broader 'classifieds' advertising platforms or advertising aggregators.