

Transcript of Speech Panelist Maximilian Scheid, Assistant Project Officer, OSCE/ODIHR: Presentation of the joint OSCE/ODIHR and UN Women Report on Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thank you, Youla, dear excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I'm gonna quickly share my screen for a presentation.

So it's a pleasure to have this presentation here today. I will talk about ODIHR's and UN Women's Policy recommendations report addressing emerging human trafficking trends and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic created new risks and challenges to victims and survivors of trafficking and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of at-risk-groups to trafficking. To analyze emerging trafficking trends and dynamics and to develop recommendations based on empirical data to address the impact of the pandemic, OSCE-ODIHR and UN WOMEN conducted a global survey of survivors of trafficking and frontline stakeholders. Based on these survey findings and empirical data collected a set of policy recommendations were developed which resulted in this SET? Report which is available online in English, Russian and French, as well as its brief in English, Russian and Spanish. We would like to extend special thanks to all the survivors and organizations around the globe that have answered the survey as well as to Dr. Maia Rusakova for drafting and analyzing the report.

The empirical data was collected from two surveys, from survivors of trafficking, as I have mentioned, from 41 countries, and from frontline stakeholders from over 103 countries. We would like to recognize the panel of experts, consisting of representatives of states, international organizations and a survivor leader who contributed to the development of the policy recommendations and were also part and are still part of this conference. I'm very glad to see you all here.

So a little bit about the scope of the survey.

The survivor's survey had the highest percentage of survivor response represented from United States, Canada and South Africa. Respondents were here able to select from 25 languages and we also put in place safety and ethic protocols for informed consent and the security of survivors. For the survey of frontline stakeholders respondents were predominantly female which was very striking. This disproportion is particularly evident to the OSCE region with almost 90%. Participants were here able to choose from up to 18 languages.

Coming to the key findings.

One of the key findings is that compared to the situation before the pandemic, the survivors had difficulties in accessing almost all services. Survivors of trafficking were recorded to lack access to basic needs that includes for instance, food and water, safe and comfortable accommodation, a lack of access to testing for COVID-19, and also, access to information, employment, psychological, medical and social services was prioritized by the respondents. The survey also revealed that the differences in COVID-19 related changes in access to services were not drastically different between male and female survivors of trafficking. According to the survivor survey, the areas of life most negatively impacted by the pandemic were psychological and financial wellbeing, around 70% of the respondents. Survivors reported a decline in financial wellbeing due to a lack of job opportunities, unemployment and of course the overall economic downturn.

Psychological wellbeing, likewise, declined due to a high level of uncertainty, isolation due to restriction of movement, and the retriggering of PTSD.

Overall, both male and female respondents believed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a more significant negative impact on women survivor than on men.

Overall, survivors were poorly informed about changes in service provision during the pandemic. About half of the survivors experienced delays in receiving statutory status of victims of trafficking or in other types of legal procedures. And this is particularly worrying, because these delays negatively affect the survivors' ability to access shelters, re-unification with children and financial compensations.

More than half of the survivors believed that the COVID-19 has exacerbated the vulnerability of at-risk-groups to trafficking. They noted that the economic downturn that I mentioned earlier will increase the vulnerability to recruitment by traffickers, and the risk of revictimization by survivors.

They added that these factors are further negatively impacted by the re-priorization of human and financial resources by government institutions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic every third survivor respondent was targeted with at least one or even several offers which were directly or potentially related to possible exploitation. The most common offers were employment in the same country, including offers from the sex industry, and employment without provision of information on the type of job or skills required for it, which is also again very worrying. In most cases, these offers were made online, suggesting that online forms of recruitment by traffickers continued during the pandemic.

Victims of trafficking who were currently in situations of exploitation may also be facing new or more severe forms of exploitation due to the financial downturn which has affected the traffickers' possibility to generate profits. Moreover, victims of trafficking also had higher risks of contracting COVID-19 due to their trafficking situation.

The survey of frontline stakeholders clearly showed that governments' capacity to combat trafficking in human beings has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This impact is particularly evident in the following areas:

Identification procedures,
Shelter and accommodation, and
social services.

Furthermore, the proper functioning of national referral mechanisms or its equivalents has also been affected. Approximately half of the countries currently have partial operational NRMs or equivalent systems. One general finding, though, is that countries with NRMs have been better able to address the vulnerability to trafficking of at-risk-populations and to re-trafficking of survivors of trafficking compared with countries without NRMs. Since most OSCE-participating states have operational NRMs or equivalent systems, accessibility of services has been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, but not as much as in other parts of the world. According to frontline stakeholders, it has become more difficult for survivors and victims of trafficking to access rehabilitation services, administrative procedures and protection as stated by an overwhelming majority of respondents. Yet, respondents working in OSCE-countries reported higher accessibility to services for victims of trafficking in their countries compared with other countries in total.

So while traffickers have been able to quickly adapt their activities to the online sphere during the pandemic, government agencies and civil society have had difficulty in doing so. Approx. 9 out of 10 respondent organisations are able to provide access to services to their beneficiaries, but mostly by phone.

Survivors noted that access to online tools which became increasingly popular, or simply access to WIFI can be costly or inaccessible to them.

Emerging trafficking trends and consequences due to the COVID-19 pandemic are marked by gender-specific vulnerabilities and are further exacerbated by already existing gender-equalities. So prior to the pandemic, women and girls constituted already the majority of detected victims of trafficking and it is likely that this trend will continue during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, and here especially impacting marginalized communities. Respondents reported an increased vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation – especially women in physical locations and girls online. At the same time, there was an increase in trafficking of men and boys for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities.

Overall, the pandemic has also exacerbated the vulnerabilities of children to trafficking, which requires the preparedness of all stakeholders to provide additional services for trafficked children as a result during and also post-pandemic. For instance, online sexual exploitation, and especially here, the production of child sexual abuse material, is increasing. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the operation of shelters for victims of trafficking. Almost half of the respondents stated that their shelters lacked sufficient space, could not accommodate new beneficiaries, or simply had to close. And this is again very, very worrying because it posed additional risks of secondary victimization as it leads to decreased accessibility of safe accommodation for victims and survivors of trafficking.

Beneficiaries of anti-trafficking organizations may have additional needs and organisations require additional funding to manage the pandemic's mid-, but also longterm consequences for combatting trafficking in human beings. More than 3 quarters of the respondents stated that their organisations currently required additional funding to address the needs resulting from the pandemic. Moreover, an overwhelming majority reported the need for additional funding in the next 12 months, and we have conducted the study, so that it was published in July 2020, to address the longterm consequences. And they also highlighted if organisations do not receive the required funding in 2020/2021, only about a quarter of them will remain fully operational, more than half will remain partially operational, and one out of 28 of the respondents will have to close. And a lack of necessary funding can therefore result in a loss of a large number of anti-trafficking NGOs, but also experienced staff, and the longterm ability to ensure the effective functioning of national referral mechanisms and equivalent systems.

The survey of frontline stakeholders also revealed that there is an urgent need to strengthen anti-trafficking frameworks during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, respondents pointed to the need for governments to undertake measures to address demand for trafficking in human beings and the areas of legislation, prevention and strengthening of anti-trafficking frameworks. In addition, more efforts are needed to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on at-risk-groups vulnerable to trafficking, and this includes migrants, women in prostitution and unaccompanied minors. And those, whose vulnerability has been exacerbated due to the subsequent economic downturn.

Overall, the majority of the respondents expressed a strong interest in the development of a national protocol on prevention of trafficking and the protection of the human rights of victims and survivors of trafficking during states of emergencies, including pandemics.

So based on these survey findings and additional research, ODIHR and UN Women have developed policy recommendations to address the consequences of the pandemic, covering

11 areas and also tailored to a wide variety of stakeholders including states, policy makers, civil society, law enforcement, private sector and so on.

And again, this report is available online, and I really recommend to take a look at it. I'm just quickly browsing through some examples here. And before I conclude, I would like to focus again on the voices of survivors. Because their voices need to be included to ensure that appropriate efforts are to be made to combat trafficking in human beings with a human-rights-based, gender-sensitive, victim-and survivor-centered approach. And to strengthen this approach, ODIHR in January 2021 established the international survivors of trafficking advisory council, in short ISTAC. The ISTAC consists of 21 incredible survivor leaders from 14 countries. And I am very glad to see that many of these members are here today or yesterday as speakers and participants at this conference. For instance, we have Malaika on this panel. The role of the ISTAC is to provide advice, guidance and recommendations to ODIHR, and through ODIHR to all OSCE participating states on all matters pertaining to trafficking. It may also provide guidance to foster growth of national and international survivor leadership and networks. Survivor voices were also instrumental for the update on ODIHR's handbook on national referral mechanisms which will provide states with guidance on how to strengthen anti-trafficking frameworks with a human-rights-based, gender-sensitive, trauma-informed and victim-and survivor-centered approach. And I am very delighted today to announce that ODIHR has its soft launch on the 30th of July which is the world day against trafficking in persons and will fully launch the handbook in September of this year.

Thank you very much for your attention.

(Unverified transcript by Caroline Sander (GGMH). Do not quote.)