ICAT calls on States to harness the opportunities presented by technology to counter trafficking in persons

Joint Statement of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) on the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, 30 July 2022

"Use and abuse of technology"

As the world has continued to transform digitally, so have traffickers who have kept pace by developing sophisticated systems and using technology to commit criminal activities, at every stage of the process, from recruiting, exploiting and controlling victims to transferring the profits of their criminal activities. Rapid technological change presents opportunities for traffickers to adapt their *modus operandi,* taking advantage of digital platforms to target their victims.

As one in every three victims of trafficking detected globally is a child, and one in five girls and one in 13 boys are reportedly sexually exploited or abused before reaching the age of 18, it is evident that children are vulnerable to exploitation by criminals, including traffickers. As a result of school closures and lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in many parts of the world, children had extended periods of screen time and unsupervised Internet access, with more younger children than ever before being introduced to digital platforms. This has increased the risk of children being exposed to, among others, technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Aware of the risks of detection, traffickers are using encrypted and anonymised online services to perpetrate crime in an environment of secrecy. Technology allows traffickers to operate across borders and in multiple locations simultaneously and can offer a single trafficker opportunities and channels to connect a victim with many potential buyers of exploitative services, gaining access to an increased pool of customers. This ability to transcend multiple jurisdictions makes detecting, investigating and prosecuting technology-facilitated trafficking in persons difficult.

In view of the frequent abuse of technology by traffickers and the related vulnerabilities of migrants, as also highlighted in a Statement this World Day by the UN Network on Migration, the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) calls upon all States, in cooperation with relevant stakeholders including the private sector, to harness the immense potential that technology offers in countering trafficking in persons when used in accordance with international human rights principles. Technology provides, among others, avenues through which communities, including migrants and refugees, can connect and share information on risks along migration routes and in relation to trafficking in persons.

While technology presents challenges, it also presents significant opportunities that States can leverage to effectively counter trafficking in persons, especially by improving intelligence collection and analysis, investigations and awareness raising. In this regard, ICAT calls upon States to take **16 key actions**:

1. partner with other stakeholders, including the private sector, media and social media companies, academia and civil society, to develop and implement innovative responses to trafficking in persons, including by leveraging technology to support existing responses, and by developing data-sharing procedures and cooperation protocols.

2. ensure that national legislation is enhanced to address technology-facilitated trafficking in persons, and the collection and use of electronic evidence, including the application of artificial intelligence, in investigating and prosecuting trafficking in persons, complemented by appropriate regulations to foster online safety, with due regard for the protection of victims' rights.

3. legally require online platforms under their national jurisdiction to put in place effective content moderation measures.

4. establish accountability and liability mechanisms for technology companies for harm caused by content on their platforms or exploitation occurring through their platforms, notably where they fail to implement moderation and other appropriate measures.

5. develop and implement a multidisciplinary approach, including within National Referral Mechanisms and equivalent systems, to technology-facilitated trafficking in persons, including counter-cybercrime stakeholders and other relevant specialized units.

6. ensure a victim- and survivor-centred, gender- and child-sensitive, trauma-informed approach to the fight against technology-facilitated trafficking in persons and protection of its victims.

7. ensure that data protection standards are respected and regularly assess the ethical and rights implications of using technological solutions to fight trafficking in persons, including in relation to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

8. involve survivors of trafficking in developing responses and solutions reflecting on their expertise in situations of technology-facilitated trafficking in persons, and actively involve survivors and those at risk, including children and youth, in the development of technology solutions to address trafficking in persons.

9. use technology to facilitate criminal justice processes and improve access to justice, including through proactively detecting and preventing trafficking in persons, identifying and rescuing victims of trafficking, and protecting their rights, consistent with international law and human rights obligations.

10. train judiciary and law enforcement personnel in conducting child and victim-friendly online investigations on trafficking in persons, and collecting digital evidence admissible in courts, while respecting the right to privacy.

11. strengthen targeted awareness-raising and social and behavioural change initiatives, and further monitor the impact of these initiatives.

12. mobilize the financial sector to promote the use of technology to provide vulnerable populations and survivors with access to finance as a preventive measure, and work with financial institutions to more effectively use technology to detect proceeds of trafficking in persons. Confiscated criminal proceeds should be proactively used to secure access to protection, justice and remedies for victims of trafficking in persons, including witness protection.

13. foster cooperation with other States, especially considering the transnational nature of technology-facilitated trafficking cases by, among others, putting in place necessary bilateral agreements to swiftly exchange intelligence and electronic evidence in a timely manner.

14. document and share evidence-based good practices in using technology to address trafficking in persons, including by addressing the limitations associated with collection of reliable and accurate sex- and age-disaggregated on trafficking in persons.

15. increase support for technology-based solutions to identifying cases and victims of trafficking.

16. explore transparent policy and operational solutions to address the misuse of technology platforms, including websites that can be used to facilitate trafficking.

About ICAT

ICAT was established in 2007, by the UN General Assembly, to enhance cooperation and coordination among UN agencies and other relevant international organizations to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to trafficking in persons. Its members include 31 UN entities and other international and regional organizations. In 2022, ICAT is co-Chaired by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

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For further information, please contact:
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Key resources from ICAT members

1. ICAT, 2019, Issue Brief 7, Human Trafficking and Technology: trends, challenges and opportunities

2. UNODC, 2020, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020 (Chapter 5: *Traffickers Use of the Internet: Digital Hunting Fields*)

3. Council of Europe, 2022, Online and technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings: summary and recommendations and full report

4. OSCE, 2022, Policy Responses to Technology-Facilitated Trafficking in Human Beings: Analysis of Current Approaches and Considerations for Moving Forward

5. UN University, 2019, A Blueprint to Mobilize Finance Against Slavery and Trafficking (Goal 5: *Investment in Innovation for Prevention*)

6. UNHCR. Telling the real story: communicating the dangers of onward irregular movement

7. WeProtect Global Alliance and UNICEF, 2022, Framing the future: How the Model National Response framework is supporting national efforts to end child sexual exploitation and abuse online

8. UNICEF, 2022, Legislating for the digital age: Global guide on improving legislative frameworks to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse

9. UNICEF, 2021, Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse - Lessons Learned and promising practices in low and middle-income countries

10. OSCE/ODIHR and UN Women, 2020, Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic (this report has a dedicated section on growth of trafficking in persons in cyberspace)

11. OSCE/ODIHR, 2022, National Referral Mechanisms: Joining Efforts to Protect the Rights of Trafficked Persons (this NRM has practical guidance on use of technological tools for trafficking investigations and to combat cyber-trafficking)

12. IOM, 2020, Leveraging technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship to support young migrants and refugees

13. IOM CTDC: The Global Synthetic Dataset 2021, released through Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) the first ever synthetic dataset of individual victims of trafficking, in partnership with Microsoft.