

## **Karen HOUGH**

**Project VANGUARD <https://vanguard-horizon.eu/>**

(involving 22 partners and 12 countries; aims to strengthen the fight against trafficking in human beings at the nexus of advanced technological solutions)

### **High-Level Conference: Empowering Change: Technology and Artificial Intelligence in the Fight against Human Trafficking**

**Rabat, Malta, 11 June 2025 (9:30 – 5 minutes)**

[Panel 2](#) - The use of AI in prevention and protection: human rights implications:

Dr Karen Patricia Hough holds a D.Phil. (PhD) in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Oxford. Her research has been recognised with several distinguished accolades, including the Vice-Chancellor's Award and the Bagby Award from the University of Oxford. Dr Hough has submitted expert evidence to the Home Affairs Commission and has an extensive publication record with leading academic publishers, including Routledge, Springer, Oxford University Press, Franco Angeli, Emerald, and Open Democracy. She has held teaching appointments in Anthropology and Migration Studies at the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University, and the University of Salento. Over the course of her career, she has contributed to more than 35 European Union-funded research projects in the area of human security in the Russian Federation and Europe. Dr Hough currently serves as the lead researcher at the Euro-Arab Foundation on the Horizon Europe project *Vanguard*, which addresses the prevention of human trafficking. Her current research explores the nexus between human trafficking and terrorism. She is also involved in the €60 million EU Knowledge Hub for the Prevention of Radicalisation, where the Euro-Arab Foundation is a consortium member.

*Thus, during the Conference, Mrs. Hough presented us the "project VANGUARD":*



VANGUARD

adVANced technologIcal solutions coupled with societal-oriented  
Understanding and AwaReness for DIsrupting trafficking in human beings

Council of Europe and the Government  
of Malta

10-11 June 2025

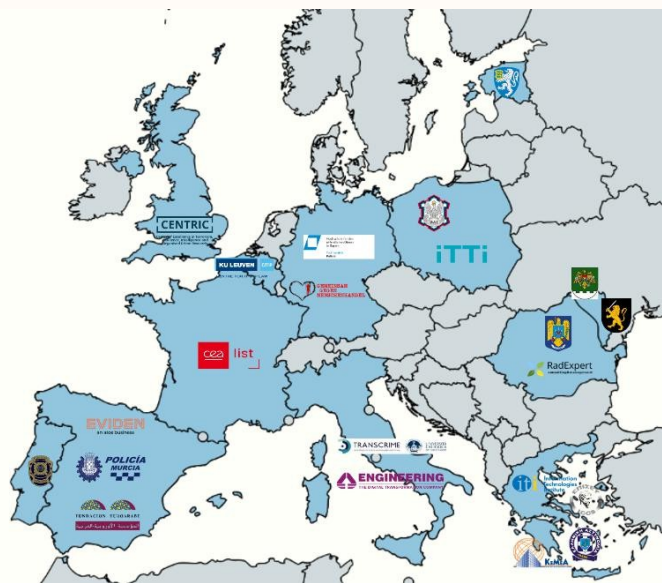
Dr Karen Latricia Hough (FUNDEA)

Dr. Theodora Tsikrika (CERTH-ITI)

Dr. Despoina Chatzakou (CERTH-ITI)

Theoni Spathi (CERTH-ITI)

Dr. Tatiana Duarte Nicolaou (KU Leuven)



**22 Partners**

**12 Countries**

**36 Months**  
Started: November 2023

**4,536,682.5 EU Contribution**

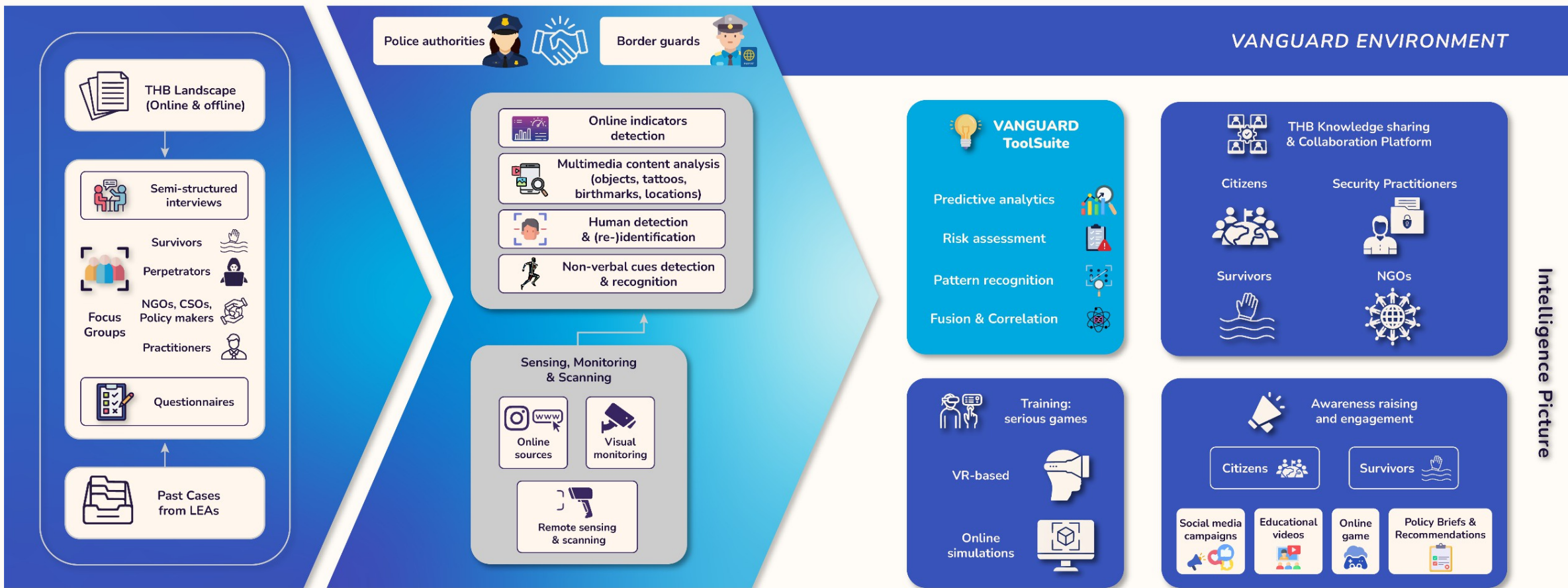
Topic: HORIZON-CL3-2022-FCT-01-07  
"Effective fight against trafficking in human beings"

Type: HORIZON-IA  
HORIZON Innovation Actions



*VANGUARD aims to strengthen the fight against trafficking in human beings (THB) through the provision of **improved intelligence picture**, delivery of **advanced and trustworthy suite of tools**, realisation of **innovative training activities**, and **raising awareness***





## Legal & Ethical Overview

# Provide an improved and comprehensive **intelligence picture** of (cross-border) THB-related criminal activities and establish an enriched common **understanding** of the trafficking chain



- Societal-oriented gap analysis and correlation based on **more than 280 THB sources** (policy papers, peer-review papers, books, reports, audio/video resources, case studies, 3 surveys, collection of 15 good practices etc.) aimed at **mapping the THB landscape**, focusing on sex trafficking, labour trafficking, and forced criminality
- Intensive empirical research based on **67 semi-structured interviews**, consultations (LEAS, Survivors, NGOs, perpetrators, border force, policy makers) for the identification of the vulnerabilities and protective factors of both THB victims and perpetrators and models of inclusion for survivors in both preventative measures and policy making
- Development of a **spatio-temporal map** for identifying potential THB hotspots and emerging trends



Factors that drive victims to get involved in THB	Factors that drive victims to sustain involvement in THB	Protective factors that prompt victims to escape from THB	Factors that drive perpetrators to get involved in THB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty, lack of employment opportunities</li> <li>• Lack of educational opportunities, personal and professional development</li> <li>• Death of parents, family members / weak relational network</li> <li>• Lack of awareness about the activities they will be doing</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge on THB</li> <li>• Having been exploited in the past</li> <li>• Lack of trust in police</li> <li>• Travel, vacation, get out of routine → peer influence (no coercion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats → shame</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Isolation from their family/friends</li> <li>• Language barriers</li> <li>• Be irregular / lack of ID documents</li> <li>• Fear of loosing job</li> <li>• Lack of trust in police</li> <li>• Debt bondage</li> <li>• Lack of awareness of being a victim</li> <li>• Relatives involved in trafficking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong links with the family / friends</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Trust in police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic gain, high reward activity</li> <li>• Low risk</li> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Threats</li> <li>• Having been exploited before</li> <li>• Previous links with organised crime and street gangs</li> </ul>

# ICT-facilitated THB

- COVID-19 pandemic – **change model in sexual exploitation** – off the streets to private apartments- webcams – harder for the police to enter
- ICAT (2019) (EUROPOL, 2021) - direct evidence shows that technology is being misused by human traffickers during **all the stages of the crime – not just recruitment** - (Hiding identities and increasing anonymity online; Facilitating recruitment and exploitation of victims by traffickers; **Facilitating transactions**, accessing new venues, and expanding the marketplace; Expanding the means by which victims may be controlled and exploited)
- VANGUARD – perpetrator – broadcast function – look for girls flashing high end products on internet – grooming on sites – self publish
- Instagram is also frequently used. In some cases, adverts were more veiled, using **only emojis, or code words** – language that surrounds this crime – cuckooing – trap house
- Victims experience violence - Use **blackmail and humiliation** and threaten to post images online or use debt bondage

- Advertisements on **classified job websites**, but also posted and circulated on social media in **specialised job searching groups and mutual aid groups**- webpages meant to foster information exchange among migrant workers (Volodko, et al 2020)
- Most used websites are offering **sexual services, escort services, and massage services**, as well as broader 'classifieds' advertising platforms Language – errors – minimum wage and laws
- All forms – **poly-exploitation**
- **County lines** – acceleration via technology, broadcast function - grooming, control, GPS, staging, Use of social media to show a high-class lifestyle – use to recruit others – victim-perpetrator dynamic
- Get compromising images
- Once young people have engaged with these social media accounts, on Instagram, Snapchat or Telegram, the conversation will be moved onto an **end-to-end encrypted messaging environment**



- **Technology is now a central element of human trafficking.** For example, 75% of sexual trafficking now happens online. The main issue is that legislation has not kept up with the digital age. For me, technology has turned trafficking into tech- facilitated trafficking. COVID also exacerbated things, such as grooming, abuse of authority, and coercion toward victims. Technology misuse, especially involving children, has worsened—dating apps have become breeding grounds for trafficking and other crimes like scams and fraud. Then there is the dark web, child pornography, live games, live streaming (NGO, GREECE)
- **Technology can easily control the movements and such of any victim, right, GPS signal.** Simple. You know, location tracking, transactions, et cetera So, it's much easier to monitor and control from afar and what traffickers have learned is that you don't need to be; to tie women to radiators and such anymore, you could control them psychologically ...also getting AI generated pornography and child sexual abuse (policy maker– UK)



- *Traffickers take advantage of these platforms because they allow them to communicate directly and efficiently. For instance, they use WhatsApp groups to coordinate movements, set up appointments and issue instructions. Telegram is also popular because of its encrypted messaging, making it harder for authorities to track them. This method isn't just for recruitment, it's also how they maintain control over victims – sending threats, instructions, or even monitoring their behaviour remotely. It is a digital network of control that's become increasingly common and very challenging to disrupt (NGO, Greece)*
- *is basically recruiting...recruiting...through...through Facebook. Through dating sites. There are many dating sites that recruit girls young, girls, young girls, adult or minors. (Moldova, Police)*
- *County lines (UK) more trauma and difficulty reintegrating those that have never seen the perpetrator – where to hide?*



# Develop improved and trustworthy **AI-based solutions** for detecting, identifying, investigating, preventing, and overall disrupting **THB activities**, ultimately enhancing investigation methodologies and decision-making



- Development & provision of **modular** and **trustworthy** suite of AI tools
- **Detection, identification, investigation, and prevention** of THB activities at **online** environments (webpages and social media platforms) and at **(border) checkpoints**
- Monitor and analysis of online **multilingual text** (entities, relations, etc.) & **multimedia content** (objects, tattoos, birthmarks, locations, etc.)
- Processing and analysis of **multimodal streams** for human detection and recognition & non-verbal cues detection (e.g., body posture recognition, thermal face emotion recognition)
- **Remote sensing** using fixed or movable terahertz (THz) devices
- Actionable intelligence through **multimodal data fusion and correlation, pattern recognition, predictive analytics, and risk assessment**

Enable continuous evaluation and improvement of overall **capacity building** of security practitioners (Police and Border Guards Authorities) and their **training** over the developed tools and solutions to enhance uptake of new technologies for existing and emerging capability gaps



- Develop targeted interfaces and **visual analytics**, establish a secure **data management** mechanism focusing on court-proof crime evidence collection
- **Capacity building and training**: VR-based serious games & synchronous/asynchronous learning methodologies
- Evaluate the functionality of VANGUARD solutions
  - **Pilot use case scenarios** tailored to real operational needs co-created with relevant stakeholders
  - **Demonstrations** involving Police and Border Guards Authorities on the field and/or in semi-controlled environments



Promote **cooperation**, **raise awareness**, and formulate strategic **policy recommendations** based on the insights and knowledge gained from project activities



- **Exchange of knowledge and experience** among security practitioners, CSOs, and survivors
- **Awareness raising:** promotional campaigns, Web-based game targeting youth
- **Policy recommendations:** actively engaging all potential actors
  - Public authorities, governmental representatives, NGOs/CSOs, security practitioners, Academia, THB survivors, general public

- **Ethics committee** meetings every six months – external actors – robust monitoring for all the phases of the research
- *Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA)*
- **Continual legal and privacy monitoring of the research**, tools and origin of the data sets used to ensure compliance with GDPR and AI act, Adherence to Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI from the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence set by the Commission and the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union 2012/C326/02 by the Legal team at KU Leuven



- **VANGUARD** -designing technology based on robust research to adapt in the face of rapidly evolving forms of harm - including gender sensitive perspectives
- **Survivor informed policies, -observatories – designed awareness campaigns** – pop ups on sites- understand which sites – grooming of those who are flashy on Instagram, also those who go on self publish sites
- **Counteract- ICT-facilitated THB with influencers** - creation of mirroring posts
- **Offline** still important – **county lines**



VANGUARD

# WORKSHOP

*From Research to Policy:  
Insights from Societal-Oriented Research  
on Human Trafficking*



June 17, 2025



KU Leuven, Belgium & Online



13:00 - 14:00 CEST - Registration and  
light lunch  
14:00 - 17:00 CEST - Workshop

Registration is mandatory and will be open  
until May 30, 2025.

Secure your spot



Organised by the VANGUARD Horizon Europe project,  
focused on disrupting Trafficking in Human Beings  
for sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, and forced criminality.

[www.vanguard-horizon.eu](http://www.vanguard-horizon.eu)



Co-funded by  
the European Union

- Present the **desktop and empirical research results** and the **good practices**, as emerged from the research conducted under the project activities;
- Discuss **emerging policies** and develop initial *recommendations*; and
- Gather **feedback, inputs, and recommendations**, exploring in parallel research gaps and discussing **future initiatives**.

# Thank you for your attention! Questions?

Dr Karen Latricia Hough

FUNDEA

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**VANGUARD**

Find us on:



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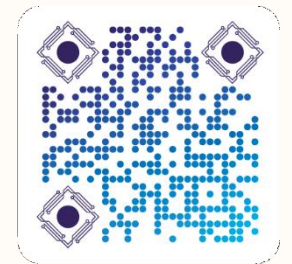
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