

Building Collaboration and Partnerships among Governments, Tech Companies, Financial Institutions and Civil Society

Moderator: Ioana Bauer

Background

On the 11th of June, the Council of Europe and the Presidency of Malta gathered together some of the key stakeholders in the anti-trafficking field in order to explore how technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can be harnessed in the fight against human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a complex, transnational crime that adapts quickly to new technologies and increasingly exploits digital platforms and financial systems. AI has the potential to identify trafficking networks, detect online exploitation, track illicit financial flows, and support victim identification and protection.

However, AI's effectiveness in this space depends heavily on coordinated efforts across governments, technology providers, financial institutions, and civil society. During the 90-minute dedicated workshop, representatives from all the aforementioned fora, along with academia, gathered to explore how to best initiate and sustain fruitful collaborations with the common purpose of putting a dent in the human trafficking business.

Workshop overview

The workshop was set up as a collaborative platform in which participants could interact and share their experiences with multi sector collaborations that included a tech component in the design.

To start off the conversations, five case studies were presented that each involved a unique way of using AI in anti-trafficking work:

1. Thorn's **Spotlight Tool** that uses machine learning and image recognition to detect trafficking-related online ads. The collaboration model includes tech companies that provide the infrastructure and engineering support. Thorn, a CSO, developed and maintained the tool. Law enforcement agencies integrated the tool into investigations. Civil society groups informed ethical safeguards.
2. **Traffik Analysis Hub** that uses big data analytics and AI to aggregate trafficking-related reports and identify trends. In this collaboration, IBM built the tech infrastructure. STOP THE TRAFFIK contributed frontline data. Financial institutions and law enforcement shared non-sensitive indicators. All stakeholders collaborated through a secure data-sharing platform. The project enabled risk mapping of trafficking hotspots across global supply chains and facilitated proactive corporate responses to labor exploitation.

3. **Financial Coalition Against Child Sexual Exploitation** brings together International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC), Bank of America, Mastercard, Interpol, and financial regulators to monitor transaction algorithms and flag trafficking-linked financial behavior. In this collaborative model, banks shared anonymized financial data. ICMEC developed policy recommendations. Regulators created a legal environment conducive to responsible data use.
4. **AI for Safer Children**, an initiative spearheaded by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), with contributions from AI and cybersecurity experts, law enforcement agencies, and global child protection NGOs applies machine learning to detect and classify child sexual exploitation material on the dark web. The AI model helps prioritize and route digital evidence for law enforcement investigations to detect previously unknown patterns of abuse and perpetrators, while reducing exposure to traumatic content for human investigators.
5. **“Slavery from Space”** was developed by the UN University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), and it involved collaboration between universities, anti-slavery NGOs, and satellite imaging companies. The project employed satellite imagery and machine learning to identify features consistent with forced labor operations, such as brick kilns and rural labor camps and helped NGOs and authorities monitor previously inaccessible or unregulated worksites in order to direct interventions more precisely.

After exploring these existing examples, the workshop participants got to work together on a practical exercise that highlighted UNODC’s **911 Call Center AI Project**: In a 2024 project, UNODC partnered with national police forces and telecom operators to apply natural language processing (NLP) to emergency 911 calls to detect patterns of gender-based violence.

The AI system was trained on thousands of anonymized calls to identify distress signals and behavioral markers of abuse. It then alerted operators of high-risk situations, even when callers could not speak freely.

The project led to increased early interventions and more accurate routing of emergency resources. Its success prompted proposals to expand the model to detect human trafficking indicators in similar call center contexts, therefore participants got to break into groups to discuss how that adaptation could happen in order to engage AI in the fight against human trafficking.

Key Takeaways:

The practical exercise involved assigning the workshop participants in four different groups. The working groups were organized around the following topics:

- Ensuring multi sectoral participation.
- Ethical data sourcing for AI training.
- Human rights and privacy concerns.
- Expected challenges.

As a result of the exchanges, this is a summary of the key topics discussed:

1. Data Sharing and Ethical AI Development

- All stakeholders involved need to ensure ethical frameworks for AI development.
- Tools and expertise provided to process vast datasets must protect privacy.
- Civil society can play a role in ensuring that the use of AI respects victims' rights and includes survivor input.

2. Online Exploitation Detection

- Tech companies can deploy AI to identify trafficking indicators across platforms (e.g., language cues, image recognition).
- Governments can enforce regulation while facilitating lawful access to platform data.
- NGOs can verify and respond to identified risks.

3. Financial Monitoring

- Financial institutions can use AI to detect suspicious transaction patterns.
- Governments can align financial surveillance laws with anti-trafficking goals.
- Civil society organizations can contextualize financial data with on-the-ground knowledge of trafficking patterns.

4. Policy and Regulatory Alignment

- Governments need cross-border policy frameworks to enable responsible AI use.
- International financial bodies and tech alliances can create standards.
- Civil society should be involved to ensure human rights safeguards are upheld.

5. Capacity Building and Innovation Hubs

- Multi-stakeholder innovation labs can develop AI tools tailored to local contexts, while governments and donors can fund cross-sector projects and training initiatives.

Recommendations

Across all conversations, it was clear that multi-sector collaboration can maximize the impact and ethical integrity of AI tools. While civil society organizations and survivor involvement are crucial for contextualizing data and centering victim protection, tech and finance sectors bring the scale, infrastructure, and pattern-recognition capabilities.

Governmental and international bodies must establish governance, privacy, and regulatory frameworks developed through open consultations with the other relevant stakeholders already mentioned.

Funders, governments, and private sector leaders are urged to invest in multi-stakeholder AI initiatives that center human rights and survivor leadership, ensuring survivor inclusion from design all throughout the implementation.

Proliferation of successful pilots are just as important as continuing to innovate in the sector, therefore ethically scaling AI's potential in combating trafficking worldwide. The following recommendations should be considered:

- Ensure collaboration is prioritized and institutionalized by creating **multi-stakeholder task forces** to pilot and scale tech and AI initiatives in the fight against human trafficking.
- Ensure **survivors** and survivor-led organizations are funded and included in the design, governance and oversight of the initiatives. They play a vital role, along with civil society organizations, in **localization** of solutions and ensuring **ethical safeguards**.
- Establish **data governance frameworks** for responsible AI use against trafficking and prioritize **international cooperation** for responsible data-sharing and standard setting. This would promote **interoperability and standardization** for cross-sector AI tools.
- Mandate **victim-centered impact assessments** before deploying surveillance AI. Conduct Independent **bias audits** and **feedback** from marginalized communities.
- Adapt **terminology** to prevent victim blaming, as '**self generated**' does not equal consent and it could lead to situations in which perpetrators could exploit this as a legal loophole.
- **Support cross-sector pilot programs** using AI in trafficking contexts modeled on successful GBV initiatives.

- **Invest in localized AI training datasets** that reflect regional trafficking patterns and language. **Anonymize** data so that only non-identifiable patterns are retained.
- **Ensure ethical oversight** of AI systems, particularly regarding consent and discrimination risks. Localize AI tools for **multilingual** and **culturally** diverse contexts.
- Comply with **data protection** laws and ethical review protocols. All data should be anonymized and used with explicit, opt-in consent.
- Ensure AI supports, not replaces, human judgment and is subject to **regular auditing** to ensure **transparency** and **human oversight**, including through operator-controlled override functions and ability to report false flags. Use AI to **suggest secondary screening** only, not automated decision-making.
- When used in coordination with financial transactions, AI should be used for **flagging** purposes and as a **trigger for investigation**, not sanctions; additionally, **independent appeal** channels should be provided.

Conclusions

The workshop confirmed that AI and related technologies can play a transformative role in countering human trafficking, but only when developed and implemented through coordinated, ethical, and human rights-centered approaches. Participants underscored that no single sector can combat trafficking alone: collaboration between governments, tech companies, financial institutions, civil society, and survivor-led organizations is essential to success.

AI's strengths in pattern recognition, large-scale data processing, and predictive modeling offer powerful tools for detecting trafficking networks, monitoring financial flows, and supporting victim identification. However, these technologies must be anchored in strong data governance, privacy protections, and meaningful survivor engagement to ensure that they do not inadvertently cause harm or reinforce existing biases.

The case studies and practical exercise demonstrated that multi-stakeholder initiatives, when properly resourced and ethically guided, can lead to scalable, high-impact solutions. At the same time, participants highlighted the urgent need for clear regulatory frameworks, cross-border cooperation, and ethical oversight mechanisms.

The fight against human trafficking must evolve with the digital age, and this workshop illustrated that with the right safeguards and partnerships in place, AI can be a force for good, enhancing the ability to detect, prevent, and respond to trafficking, while upholding the dignity and rights of those most affected.