

World Day against Trafficking in Persons

## **"Human Trafficking and Organized Crime"**

### **ICAT urges action on criminal networks behind human exploitation**

**JOINT STATEMENT 2025**

Trafficking in persons has become a cornerstone of organized crime, posing a critical threat to global security, governance, and human dignity. Most traffickers operate within structured criminal networks, enabling them to exploit more victims than individual traffickers, for extended periods and with greater violence – disproportionality affecting women and children, who frequently endure the most severe abuses.

According to the [UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024](#), nearly 74% of analyzed cases were linked to organized crime groups. Women and girls continue to be the most commonly detected victims worldwide, exploited across all forms of trafficking, but particularly for sexual purposes. Children, especially those who are unaccompanied or separated, are increasingly targeted by traffickers due to their heightened vulnerability and a lack of protection and support services.

Traffickers exploit a wide range of factors, especially those affecting children, while reinforcing systemic gender inequalities. They operate in a context of rapidly evolving technologies, weak legal frameworks and inconsistent enforcement of rule of law. Gaps in labour regulation, including of recruitment practices further enable traffickers to operate with impunity.

Human trafficking transcends local, national and regional boundaries but also occur within communities. Traffickers exploit people's vulnerabilities through complex methods and with the collaboration of multiple individuals, with each member playing a specific role throughout the trafficking process. The profitability of these operations, combined with their effective use of corruption, techniques to evade law enforcement, low punishment rates, and a lack of public awareness of effective prevention increase the risks of trafficking. This underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive and collaborative response involving the State authorities, civil society, the private sector and international organizations. Such a response must include targeted measures that address the specific risks faced by women and children, ensuring gender-responsive and age-sensitive prevention, access to justice, protection, and support services.

Trafficking networks often depend on illicit financial markets, fraudulent practices and the infrastructure of other criminal activities, such as drugs and firearms trafficking, as well as online fraud and deception, to sustain their operations and avoid detection. This convergence of crimes and increasingly symbiotic relationships among criminal groups amplify the complexity of trafficking in persons, making it a critical national and transnational security threat. This requires urgent and coordinated policy and operational responses. These responses should include targeted labour market interventions, including strategies that address the inequality between women and men, while addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls within the broader context of organized crime.

Organized criminal networks often operate along irregular routes used by both migrants and refugees, profiting from limited safe and legal pathways. This exposes migrants and refugees to abuse, extortion, and exploitation. In many contexts, trafficking in persons and smuggling networks overlap, with

individuals initially smuggled across borders and then trafficked for forced labour, sexual exploitation, or forced criminality.

Trafficking in persons is often a consequence of organized crime's expansion and weak States' enforcement mechanisms. As criminal networks grow and become more sophisticated, they diversify into new illicit markets, incorporating human trafficking into their operations by leveraging existing infrastructure, such as migrant smuggling routes, money laundering channels, and corrupt networks. In this context, trafficking in persons becomes both a tactic and a byproduct of broader criminal strategies.

Organized crime also thrives in conditions of instability, in situations of armed conflict, weak rule of law, poverty, and inequality—particularly where protection systems are inadequate, and justice systems are fragile. These conditions intensify the vulnerability of individuals, especially children, to human trafficking. In areas heavily impacted by crime, people face greater risks of displacement within and across borders, unemployment, and exploitation, while fear of corruption and retaliation discourages them from seeking help from authorities. Criminal networks often exacerbate preexisting conditions, further enabling trafficking.

States' strategies must prioritize comprehensive, human rights-based and protection-sensitive responses. These should integrate political, security, and human rights strategies, uphold international human rights and refugee law obligations and emphasize prevention, accountability, and access to protection and support services for all victims—regardless of status.

Victims may be forced into criminal activities such as drug trafficking, theft, smuggling of migrants, money laundering and cybercrime. Alarming, a growing number of migrant children - especially those unaccompanied or separated - are being trafficked for forced criminality, particularly drug trafficking. Evidence also shows that some women involved in trafficking in persons, particularly for sexual exploitation, are themselves victims before becoming perpetrators.

Trafficking in persons and organized crime form a mutually reinforcing cycle that threatens global and national security, weakens governance, and undermines human rights. Human trafficking erodes the rule of law, and sustainable development, while reinforcing structural gender inequalities and perpetuating gender-based violence and discrimination.

Effectively addressing human trafficking requires unity of purpose, clarity of commitment, shared responsibility, and a gender-responsive and age-sensitive approach. This means coordinated efforts in prevention, investigation and prosecution, alongside victims' identification, support and protection.

The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons reaffirms its [key recommendations](#) to the [fourth appraisal of the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons](#), and calls on States and relevant stakeholders to:

- Strengthen measures to prevent and respond to trafficking in persons, particularly of children, through comprehensive strategies that address underlying vulnerabilities. These strategies should target organized crime, corruption, illicit financial flows, cybercrime, migrant smuggling, and enhance resources and action to prevent and respond to trafficking in humanitarian emergencies as well as in mixed movements, while ensuring policy coherence across sectors. Emphasis should be placed in tackling the root causes of trafficking in persons—especially the demand that fuels exploitation of women and girls and promoting survivor-centered support and gender-responsive policing and justice systems.
- Enhance financial intelligence and investigative efforts to detect and disrupt illicit financial transactions linked to organized crime and trafficking in persons. This should include stronger

cooperation with and between the financial services sector and financial intelligence units to detect, trace, and act on suspicious activity. Recovered assets and proceeds of crime should be forfeited and used to, among other purposes, provide comprehensive support, protection, and assistance for victims of trafficking in persons.

- Provide comprehensive support services to survivors of trafficking in persons, independently of their migration status, prioritizing their safety, recovery, and reintegration. Continuously train personnel to proactively identify victims and ensure they have access to support services.
- Promote the consistent application of the non-punishment principle across law enforcement, judicial, and migration systems, recognizing that victims of trafficking in persons may be coerced into committing crimes as a result of their exploitation and should not be punished for such. Individuals and children must be properly identified and referred to assistance and protection services. Children should be referred to child protection authorities in full compliance with the non-punishment principle
- Invest in sustained multilateral cooperation and data-driven solutions to effectively respond to trafficking in persons and its intersection with other forms of organized crime. This includes intelligence sharing and evidence-based policy development, dismantling transnational criminal networks, and strengthening prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts.
- Strengthen the prevention of child trafficking among forcibly displaced, stateless and migrant children, including through fostering access to territory and child-friendly asylum procedures for children in need of international protection, durable solutions and safe and legal pathways for refugee and migrant children and their families as promoted by the GCR Multistakeholder Pledge “Protection for Refugees and Migrants at Risk of or Affected by Trafficking in Persons”.
- Support coordinated action to address the heightened risks of trafficking in persons in humanitarian settings and along mixed movement routes of refugees and migrants, while upholding international refugee law and human rights obligations, in addition to the protection obligations enshrined in transnational criminal law instruments.
- Adopt and promote a route-based approach to implement the commitments of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact on Migration by addressing human trafficking and other abuses along mixed movement routes used by refugees and migrants. This includes strengthening prevention, risk mitigation, response, and access to protection and solutions for those at risk or survivors of trafficking, gender-based violence, and other violations.
- Strengthen the collection of reliable data in line with a do-no-harm principle, disaggregated by gender/sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, citizenship, disability, income, form of exploitation and other relevant information. This is essential to better understand the differentiated impacts of organized crime on women, men, girls and boys; the interconnections between gender-based violence and trafficking in persons; and the structural barriers women and girls face in accessing justice.
- Ensure that the voices of survivors inform the development of policies and interventions to prevent and respond to trafficking in persons.
- Prioritize child-sensitive, rights-based responses to trafficking, including early identification, protection, and specialized support services for children.
- Promote the route-based approach to tackle human trafficking along irregular migration routes exploited by criminal networks, in alignment with the commitments of the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) to strengthen intelligence sharing, cross-border cooperation and enhance judicial coordination to ensure accountability and end impunity.
- Prioritize addressing organized crime related to trafficking in persons and ensuring access to justice for migrants who fall victim to crime, as established by the Progress Declaration of 2022 International Migration Review Forum.

- Increase financial support to the dedicated Trust Funds which resource coordinated efforts in prevention, investigation and prosecution of trafficking networks as well as victim identification and support across borders (e.g. UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking (UNVTF), the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund, and the OAS Inter-American Voluntary Contribution Fund for the Prevention of Violence and Crime)

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The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) is a UN policy forum mandated by the General Assembly resolution 61/180 to improve coordination and cooperation among UN agencies and other relevant international organizations, and to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating trafficking in persons, including protection and support for victims and survivors.

In 2025, ICAT is co-chaired by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which is also responsible for its continuous coordination.

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