International Migration and trafficking

International migration flows have increased substantially over the past decades. Today, the number of international migrants is estimated to be 244 million people. They are migrating to escape poverty, improve their livelihood and opportunities, or escaping conflict and devastation in their own countries. Around half of the world’s international migrants are women, and one third are young persons between 15 and 34 years of age (and half of the world’s refugees are under 18).

The intensification of migration flows over the past few years, both through regular and irregular means, has increased migrants’ exposure and risk of falling prey to human traffickers. Migrant children and women, in particular those without documentation, are vulnerable to trafficking, abuse and exploitation. In transit and destination countries, migrants and their families often find themselves victims of discrimination, violence and social marginalization.

There is a strong connection between trafficking in persons and migration. Many people migrate driven by the hope for a better future. Whether they go through regular or irregular migration processes, those migrants, especially women and girls, may be vulnerable to trafficking for the purposes of sexual and labor exploitation as well as other forms of exploitation. UNODC’s 2016 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons has demonstrated how cross-border trafficking flows resemble migration flows, and thus shows how migrants are vulnerable to trafficking en route or at destination. In particular individuals fleeing anticipated or actual conflict, or the aftermath of conflict, are vulnerable to trafficking. The pressure to move is often urgent and intense it leads people to take risks that would be unacceptable under normal circumstances. Increasingly, persons who have escaped conflict by fleeing to another country as part of a larger, mixed migration process have become victims of trafficking at some point in their journey or at their destination. The connection between migration and trafficking in persons particularly in the case of mixed migration flows was also noted at the 2016 High Level Summit on Large movement on migrants and refugees and was then reflected in the New York Declaration (A/71/L.1).

The crime of trafficking in human beings has also been recognized by Member States not only as a human rights violation but also as a critical issue for development. The
issue features strongly in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has specific targets under the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 (target 5.2), Goal 8 (target 8.7) and Goal 16 (target 16.2). The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), also known as the “Palermo Protocol”, which includes the first internationally agreed definition of the crime of trafficking in persons, provides a framework to effectively prevent and combat trafficking in persons.

**Trafficking and armed conflict**

Indeed, although exact figures are difficult to obtain, the risk of trafficking significantly increases in large movements of refugees and migrants. Besides the above-mentioned UNODC report, recent reports published by the International Organization for Migration and Caritas Internationalis, and other initiatives, such as the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative, led by the United States and the Philippines, have shown that trafficking in persons in conflict and crisis situations is not a mere possibility or isolated incident; rather, it happens on a regular basis as a consequence of conflict, mainly because conflict is accompanied by a breakdown in public institutions and a collapse of the rule of law.

According to the Special Rapporteur in trafficking in persons, especially in women and children, who has undertaken extensive research on this topic and presented the ensuing reports to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/32/41) and the General Assembly (A/71/303) in 2016, human trafficking is an increasingly common feature of modern conflict, whether national or international. Existing forms of trafficking and vulnerabilities ranging from gender-based violence to discrimination to lack of economic opportunities are exacerbated before, during and after conflict.

Individuals fleeing anticipated or actual conflict, or the aftermath of conflict, are vulnerable to trafficking. The pressure to move is often urgent and intense, leading people to take risks that would be unacceptable under normal circumstances. Conflict weakens State structures, removes protections and enables criminal networks to operate more freely, including across borders. Sometimes trafficking will occur within the conflict zone or in another part of an affected country to which the victims have been displaced.

The impact of conflict on trafficking in persons for purposes of sexual, labour and other forms of exploitation is an issue that warrants further research and international attention. Indeed, the scale and magnitude of these phenomena has called the attention of the Security Council, which held in December 2015 its first thematic briefing on human trafficking in conflict and adopted in December 2016 resolution 2331, which clearly highlights and explores the link between armed conflict and trafficking.
Risks of trafficking on women and children fleeing conflict

According to UNODC (2016), adult women account for more than half of all human trafficking victims detected globally. Women and girls together account for more than 70 per cent, with girls representing almost three quarters of child trafficking victims.

The journey of female migrants and unaccompanied children is particularly hazardous. Thousands of such women and children have disappeared, presumably abducted for purposes of trafficking related exploitation. Clearly, irregular migration exacerbates the risk of exploitation for female migrant workers, who may be more likely to accept adverse working conditions, fearing that they will be reported to authorities and possibly deported. Migration may result in trafficking, especially in cases where cultural constraints and gendered international emigration and immigration policies may limit women’s ability to migrate.

The number of children on the move, and, in particular, those who are unaccompanied and separated, is also growing dramatically. Nearly 250 million children live in regions affected by conflict. Children are increasingly being forced to flee their homes alone, which makes them even more vulnerable to exploitation, forced labor and trafficking when compelled to work to sustain themselves and/or to support their families. For instance, since 2008, nearly 200,000 unaccompanied minors have applied for asylum in Europe – including 96,000 in 2015 alone. Some 25,800 unaccompanied or separated children reached Italy by sea in 2016 – that’s more than double the 12,360 arriving the previous year. These figures indicate an alarming rise in the number of highly vulnerable children risking their lives to get to Europe. Girls, in particular, are at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation by criminal gangs. Several girls interviewed by UNICEF reported being forced into prostitution in Libya as a means to ‘pay off’ the cost of the boat travel across the Mediterranean, whilst many of the boys who arrive in Libya are forced into manual labour. Additionally, numerous unaccompanied children, have been kidnapped or lured from refugee camps or while travelling, sold and subsequently held captive for purposes of exploitation through extortion. Refugees are also trafficked for purposes of labour exploitation in the agricultural, industry, manufacturing, catering and informal sectors.

Trafficking is a serious human rights violation of which the majority of detected victims are women and girls. Persistent gender inequality is a root cause of this human rights violation alongside a persistent demand for trafficked women and girls. The harms of trafficking are known to be more severe for women and girls than for men and boys given the exposure of the former to specific forms of exploitation such as sexual exploitation and violence, domestic servitude and forced marriage. In addition, the ability of women to access support and other services is limited. Together, these factors make the impacts long lasting and recovery particularly difficult.
Although trafficking, especially in women and children, is a significant concern on the agenda of Governments and non-governmental actors globally, anti-trafficking interventions frequently do not sufficiently respond to the specific needs of women and children. Responses to trafficking continue to place a greater focus on the prosecution and conviction of traffickers rather than on support for victims. As a result, many interventions to address trafficking may not be effective or empowering for victims.

**CSW Side-event on Trafficking in women and children**

Italy, Jordan, Nigeria, the Philippines and Ethiopia (TBC), in cooperation with UNWOMEN and UNODC, are proposing the organization of a CSW Side-event on this subject, bringing together Member States (countries of origin, transit and destination); the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; UN Agencies; civil society and other stakeholders.

Especially as the United Nations General Assembly undertakes its High-Level Appraisal of its Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons (A/Res/64/293) later this October, it is crucial that the international community focus its attention on this crucial issue.

By hearing the views of the countries of origin, transit and destination of these movements, the main objectives of the meeting are:

- To share good practices and lessons learned in protecting victims of trafficking and people at risk of trafficking, especially women and children fleeing conflict;
- To share good practices and lessons learned in protecting victims of trafficking while investigating / prosecuting the perpetrators of crime;
- To discuss examples of effective partnerships between countries of destination, transit and origin, including through regional processes such as Rabat, Khartoum and Valletta, as well as how the international community, particularly the United Nations, could support them;
- To share measures promoting protection outcomes for women and children on the move from exploitation and violence.