



Human Trafficking and Digital Media

Human trafficking (HT) is a crime that uses every means available to abuse, exploit and enslave human beings. With all its restrictions, COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of potential victims to being trafficked and boosted the profits from that evil trade.

Traffickers have found cunning ways to circumvent movement restrictions. They use digital technology at every stage of their criminal process, from recruitment to the ongoing exploitation of their victims. Traffickers employ two main digital strategies. First, they “hunt” for likely victims on social media whom they then groom. Second, they “fish” for victims by posting attractive job advertisements - which are largely or totally false - on the internet, to which potential victims imprudently respond.¹

The Migrants & Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development embraces the Holy Father’s concern for all victims of trafficking, made more vulnerable due to the pandemic, and heeds his urgent call to fight this gruesome criminal business in all its forms. In this regard, the M&R Section seeks a greater commitment from all political and social stakeholders to ensure that digital media no longer serve as tools for traffickers to ensnare and exploit their victims.

Reasons

Beyond a crime, HT is also a grave sin that offends the dignity and freedom of its victims. Freedom and dignity are the constitutive dimensions of being human as willed and created by God. Policies and programmes designed to combat HT should promote the integral human development of all people and should take a holistic approach that places the human person at the centre.²

Commenting after the Angelus on 9 February 2020, the Holy Father pointed out that “various studies show that criminal organisations increasingly use modern means of communication to lure victims under false pretences.”³ It becomes necessary, therefore,

¹ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*

² Migrants and Refugees Section, *Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking* 18

³ Angelus, 9 February 2020 | Francis (vatican.va)

for all political and social stakeholders to act in a synergistic and coordinated manner in order to restore the proper use of these means of communication.

States have the primary responsibility to oversee digital media and to ensure they are not used for criminal purposes. In August 2021, Pope Francis earnestly called upon the members of the *International Catholic Legislators Network* “to make every effort to undertake serious and in-depth moral reflection on the risks and possibilities associated with scientific and technological advances, so that the international laws and regulations governing them may concentrate on promoting integral human development and peace, rather than on progress as an end in itself.”⁴

Again, in February of 2020, he also stressed how necessary it is to “monitor and remind service providers of their responsibilities”⁵ to counter the criminal use of digital media for trafficking purposes.

All users of social media and other technology tools are responsible for their use. The “Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking”, published in 2019 by the M&R Section, for example, affirms that “[e]veryone should be encouraged to unmask and denounce illegal recruitment practices, engage in various initiatives within their reach, and work towards a spirit of fairness.”⁶ Education and awareness raising are of fundamental importance, particularly among young people, regarding the healthy uses of digital media, if efforts to prevent and combat HT are to be effective.⁷ This is a work that begins in the home and at school, with parents and teachers helping kids to be responsible in their use of the internet, and informing them not only about its benefits but also its dangers.

Methods

The M&R Section welcomes the establishment of suitable mechanisms, particularly at the local level, to identify and report irregularities and crimes related to the use of social media and of other digital means of communication to carry out human trafficking.

In addition, the competent authorities should promote laws and policies to combat the criminal use of digital media for the purpose of trafficking. These should be matched by effective measures to monitor the criminal use of digital media and concrete efforts to prosecute those responsible. At the same time, laws and policies should also encourage

⁴ Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the Meeting promoted by the International Catholic Legislators Network* (27/08/2021)

⁵ Pope Francis, *Angelus* (09/02/2020)

⁶ POHT, 37

⁷ Cfr. Pope Francis, *Angelus* (09/02/2020)

positive uses of digital media in support of the integral human development of all people.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the same authorities will conduct financial and other investigations into the operations of criminal organisations, so as to detect and eradicate illicit trafficking, as well as to stop the criminal use of digital media. Seized assets and information obtained could be made available to programmes for victims of trafficking. The same could be done with sanctions that may apply to service providers acting irresponsibly.

For their part, internet service providers should promote the development of increasingly safe technological solutions; introduce monitoring mechanisms to detect illegal activity in their networks; promote the mandatory identification of users of telematic services;⁸ and promote anti-trafficking prevention campaigns and victim support initiatives.

Finally, awareness campaigns and specific training programmes need to be promoted at both the national and international levels with a view to contributing to the prevention, protection and prosecution of HT, and to increasing users' awareness of the risks and their competence to use digital media correctly.

Migrants & Refugee Section

Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

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⁸ Cfr. FATF, *Guidance for a Risk-Based Approach to Virtual Assets and Virtual Asset Service Providers*, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/fatfrecommendations/documents/guidance-rba-virtual-assets.html>.