



Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls

The COVID-19 pandemic has now gripped the world for over half a year. People across the world have faced unprecedented health, humanitarian, and economic crises. The damage wrought on both developed and developing countries has exposed the fragility of all our systems and structures. Widening socioeconomic divides has created deep social insecurity. Women and girls are among the most affected demographics as they share the brunt of the impacts of this ongoing crisis, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Worrying reports from Asia have reported an increase in trafficking and exploitation of women since the onset of the pandemic. Poverty and unemployment are key drivers for trafficking in persons. COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in global economic hardship. UNU-WIDER warns of an additional 500 million people (8 per cent of the world's population) pushed into poverty, and the World Bank projects an increase of 50–60 million people in extreme poverty. Rises in unemployment and reductions of household and individual incomes mean that those who were already at risk of trafficking before COVID-19, in particular, low-wage and informal sector workers (again, mostly women and girls) are more likely to find themselves in extreme vulnerability.

Women and girls constituted the majority of detected victims of human trafficking before the outbreak, and now they are being specifically targeted by traffickers during the pandemic. Restrictions of movement, which is already inherent to trafficking for sexual exploitation, is further amplified by lockdown measures and travel prohibitions. Thus, victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation might find themselves pushed “underground” and in grave desperation without an exit route. Moreover, along with the increase in reports of domestic violence, victims of sexual exploitation might face abuse and physical/psychological violence perpetrated by their exploiters, especially when they share the same premises.

The COVID-19 crisis has changed the patterns of sexual exploitation, which is now operating less on the streets and more ‘indoors’ or ‘online’, as many services (educational, financial, business) migrate to virtual spaces. Young girls are especially susceptible to grooming, the precursor to exploitation and trafficking.

Human trafficking is always invisible. Since outreach activities and pathways to receive assistance and help are disrupted, the identification of victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation might be harder, which makes them more invisible and vulnerable to further exploitation. The COVID-19 pandemic has created new risks and challenges to victims of human trafficking and survivors of trafficking, as a majority of them are women and girls. Violence against women and girls is emerging as a persistent feature of this pandemic, severely undermining women's fundamental rights and security at a time when the wellbeing of women and girls is critical.

Although many governments have failed to respond to this crisis, grassroots women's organisations and communities have played a critical role in preventing and responding to trafficking in women and girls. They now require more active support in their efforts. Local women's organisations, women of faith, and women's rights activists are providing essential services for those left behind, as well as information, advocacy, and oversight to help ensure that the most marginalised are not further affected by human trafficking. It is imperative for us all to not only survive the COVID-19 pandemic but emerge renewed with women as a powerful force at the centre of recovery.

The challenges of the post-COVID-19 era call for the partnership of women's organisations for joint actions and advocacy to combat trafficking in women and girls. To reach this ambitious goal, new networks, collective efforts, and leadership of women must be nurtured and sustained. This new type of leadership primarily involves resilience, courage, flexibility, active listening, empathy, collaboration, care, and recognition of collective contributions.

As a step to address this serious concern, CCA will organise a webinar titled: *'Towards Wider Partnerships in Action for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls'* on 1 October 2020, at 12 noon Thailand time, as a follow-up of a webinar which addressed 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Asia: Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery', which was held on 21 May 2020.

This webinar aims to:

- analyse the current situation and impact of COVID-19 in the acceleration of the trafficking of women and girls in Asia;
- understand and share preventive measures, advocacy initiatives, and good practices adopted by various actors in combatting trafficking in women and girls; and,
- establish collaborations and partnership with multilateral agencies, civil society organisations, and faith-based organisations to combat trafficking of women and girls.