



**TECHNOLOGY AND
TRAFFICKING:
THE NEED FOR A STRONGER,
GENDERED AND
COOPERATIVE APPROACH**

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THE NEED FOR A STRONGER, GENDERED AND COOPERATIVE RESPONSE

Technology, in particular the internet, has enabled sex trafficking and sexual exploitation to become the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. Like any other “successful” business, sex traffickers rely on online marketing and communication tools to ensure a steady cycle of demand and supply. The increasing use of the internet has changed the nature of trafficking and how it must be addressed. We welcome the release of Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) issue brief addressing the intersections of technology and trafficking. This is an important issue that must be addressed and we welcome ICAT’s leadership in the discussion.

A COORDINATED AND COOPERATIVE RESPONSE

ICAT wants to “kick-start a dialogue across countries, involving all stakeholders with a view to developing stronger responses both to the misuse of technology and to harness its useful potential.”

This is much needed and in line with what we have been calling for. We are encouraged to have been a part of the series of panel discussions co-organized by ICAT in Geneva and New York which brought different stakeholders together. This is only the beginning.

It is imperative that all stakeholders - including governments, the UN, tech companies, CSOs, and survivors - are at the table and come together to develop stronger and coordinated legal, policy and technological solutions. This will ensure that any response is effective.

BETTER RESEARCH AND UNDERSTANDING

ICAT recommends that data collection and research on the misuse of tech to facilitate human trafficking needs to be significantly expanded. We completely agree, but add that it should also be gendered. In finding solutions, we believe that a deeper understanding of the problem is an important step. Not enough is known about this. For example, in the United States 78% of child victims of sextortion, which occurs when someone threatens to distribute private and sensitive material if they are not provided with something in return such as images of a sexual nature, sexual favors, or money, are females and the majority of them had engaged in-person with their perpetrators before the online threats, but we do not know how many of these victims are then exploited further or sex trafficked despite this being a recognized form of coercion.

There is a need to do more in increasing understanding - through research and analysis - on:

- how exactly technology and the internet fuel sex trafficking and sexual exploitation,
- how online platforms are being used to sexually traffic and exploit adolescent girls,

- the survivor experience of routes into online sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, and the mechanisms for entrapment and ongoing sexual exploitation over time, and how it is connected to in-person exploitation,
- the situation on exploited children as they reach the age of majority, and are no longer legally protected as minors in different policy and legal contexts,
- what legal and tech solutions are working and which ones are not.

Most importantly this research and any solutions **MUST** be informed by the experiences and perspectives of survivors.

BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The brief also mentions the insufficiency of existing legal frameworks and recommends that gaps in legal systems be identified and addressed. We entirely agree with this; the existing legal frameworks are diverse and insufficient to handle the transnational and ever evolving nature of technology and the internet. Different national legal frameworks alone will not be sufficient to address the issue, furthermore reliance on national frameworks would result in different standards and not everyone around the world being afforded protection

That is why we at Equality Now believe in the importance of developing an international framework and common standards addressing online sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, perhaps in the form of a Global Compact or an addition to the Palermo Protocol, signed on to by both governments and tech companies, that informs national laws and policy frameworks. We feel that a reporting mechanism on the implementation of the Palermo Protocol and any additional amendments is equally important in ensuring effectiveness and accountability, for both governments and tech companies.

Equality Now sees a clear role for governments to work with international bodies, tech companies and civil society to come up with a convention or common regulations highlighting responsibility and accountability of all actors involved in the trafficking chain.

TECH OPPORTUNITIES: TACKLING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND PROTECTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

We are also glad to see the positive use of technology to fight human trafficking as highlighted in the brief. Technology can be harnessed in positive ways to combat trafficking, and as the ICAT brief points out many initiatives have already been launched on the use of tech in fighting human trafficking.

However, despite the fact that trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most common form of human trafficking and that women and girls are the majority of victims of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation (both online and in-person), only 18% of the tools identified by Tech Against Trafficking focus on trafficking for sexual exploitation. Adolescent girls are particularly at risk of online sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, and it is with adolescent girls that we have seen a particular gap in technological solutions.

Tech solutions must also increasingly pay attention and respond to the specific issues on sexual exploitation of adolescent girls and ensure that they are not trapped in exploitation into adulthood.

It is with their technology and on their platforms that traffickers are recruiting, grooming, buying and selling their victims, but they can play an even bigger role in discovering, deterring and ultimately preventing these acts. Tech companies can be a force for good and do more than just avoid liability, they can provide solutions.

WE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER

Technological and legal solutions cannot work in silos. Online sex trafficking is a global problem and requires cooperation and coordination among governments, tech companies, civil society, and survivors. Bringing together different actors and “expanding partnerships and coalitions” like ICAT recommends is a first step.

The UN, at the General Assembly, and regional bodies prioritizing country level solutions that reach the lives of girls most affected is a second step, and we are encouraged to see ICAT taking a lead on this.

The Sustainable Development Goals commit to “Leave No One Behind” and states and the international community need to address online sex trafficking and sexual exploitation as an important global issue to ensure that the commitment stands.

We at Equality Now, are committed to working with all stakeholders, including ICAT, to address this issue.