Mapping the online landscape of risks of trafficking in human beings on sexual services websites across the OSCE region

BRIEF

Introduction

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is increasingly occurring online, and thus an understanding of how technology is enabling and facilitating this crime must be central to global counter-trafficking efforts in the 21st century.

This Brief summarizes the findings of the Office of the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings' report ***Mapping the online landscape of risks of trafficking in human beings on sexual services websites across the OSCE region***.

The phenomenon of THB online generally takes two forms – technology-enabled (or cyber) trafficking and technology-facilitated trafficking. The former involves the exploitation of victims through online means – the live streaming of the sexual abuse of children is a prime example. The latter involves the more 'traditional' elements of trafficking – including the grooming, recruitment, movement and advertising of both child and adult victims – but all conducted at a far greater scale than ever before, facilitated by the platforms, services, reach and interconnectivity of the online world. Traffickers are effectively utilizing tools such as social media, online gaming, instant messaging, online shopping and advertising platforms to facilitate almost every stage of the trafficking process at both local and transnational levels.

Technology facilitates or enables the marketplace at the heart of THB in which people are treated as commodities. Central to this marketplace are sexual service websites that have proliferated across the OSCE region and beyond, and serve as a primary venue for commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. Unlike labor trafficking, in which the services of victims do not usually need to be advertised to third parties, advertising targeted at sex buyers is core to the business model of those who traffic persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Sexual services websites thus facilitate sexual exploitation at a specific point in the trafficking cycle: websites where traffickers and their victims intersect with sex buyers through the advertisement of sexual services. The online method has many benefits for exploiters, including allowing traffickers to expose victims to a geographically broader customer base, as well as being correlated with higher numbers of buyers per day compared to solicitation in the context of street-based prostitution.

A review of States' existing laws and policies to address technology-facilitated THB demonstrates that the market is developing faster than laws to protect victims, highlighting the need for domestic legislation and international law to tackle this phenomenon. However, to date very little legislation with a specific focus on technology-facilitated THB has been developed across most of the OSCE region. Some of the limited number of examples in this area include:

- 'Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act' (SESTA) and 'Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act' (FOSTA) (2018) in the US, designed specifically to combat human trafficking facilitated by technology and online platforms;
- The case taken by French prosecutors against Vivastreet France under France's anti-pimping laws, which considered that websites facilitating an illegal activity (as the purchase of sex is in France) are indeed illegal and that the publishers of such sites can be considered pimps;
- Israel's Powers to Prevent Online Offences Act (2017), which enables a district judge to issue a warrant directing a website to be blocked, in whole or in part, if there are sufficient grounds to believe that the website offers prostitution services or child sexual abuse images – in 2020 alone action was taken against 36 major websites that published sexual services in Israel, alongside almost 3500 websites depicting child sexual abuse and exploitation.

It is notable in this context that States' responses to technology-facilitated THB, especially at the policy level, usually differ based on the statutory system in a given country. For example, where prostitution is legal, traffickers can more easily use the legalized system as cover for their activity. On the contrary, in jurisdictions where any activities like selling or buying sex or benefiting from the prostitution of another person are illegal, some governments have demonstrated that there are policies that can significantly impact the online THB landscape by prohibiting online platforms from facilitating the sale of sexual services that traffickers use as cover for their business.

Aim

The aim of this report is to respond to the threat of technology-facilitated THB by building increased awareness about websites that facilitate sexual exploitation and potential responses to the misuse of online platforms among policymakers, lawmakers and anti-trafficking practitioners, particularly law enforcement. In addressing the online advertisement of trafficking victims, it is clear that States must understand the scope, scale, and features of this online marketplace. Mapping the online landscape serves to identify – in selected OSCE participating States – the market-leading websites and platforms for the explicit and non-explicit selling of sexual services where victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation could be advertised. The objective here is to inform and mobilize a concerted and strategic response to online exploitation.

Methodology and scope

The approach to mapping involved selecting a group of OSCE participating States, assessing the landscape of sexual services websites within each country, and then analyzing these sites individually.

Countries were selected from six sub-regions based on a number of variables including population, GDP, size of the tourism market and prevalence of THB. The list of platforms identified is not comprehensive, but provides a general landscape to guide the development of a response strategy within each country and across regions.

The analysis focused on websites advertising sexual services, including prostitution sites, 'escort sites' and online classifieds, as these sites are considered to be at higher risk to facilitate trafficking for sexual exploitation. Examples of platforms analyzed include sites advertising escort services, massage services, broader 'classifieds' advertising platforms, advertising aggregators, hobby boards, sugar daddy sites, dating and social networking websites. Private/restricted groups on social media are outside the scope of the report, as is content on the dark web, given that most trafficking for sexual exploitation gravitates to open markets to attract as many customers as possible.

In each selected country, websites were identified through Google searches, scanning of online discussion forums (both seller and buyer-run), cross advertising from other similar sites, affiliation lists, media and civil society materials. Google Translate and Deepl were used for non-English research. Back-searching individual escorts' profiles also proved to be an effective approach to identify further sites. Once identified, a standard set of data was gathered from each site, including variables such as name, URL, type of site/platform, number of advertisements and evidence of use, the services on offer and their prices, geographical scope, nationality/ethnic origin, language and the particular 'lingo' used, company affiliation and connections to other related sites.

Indicators

Indicators are clues or signals that an advertisement for sexual services could feature or relate to an exploited person. It must be borne in mind that these indicators are not concrete evidence in themselves of THB, but rather a set of 'red flags' that can provide a critical starting point for further investigation by law enforcement. The working list of 'red flags' developed for this mapping exercise was built by reviewing studies that compiled indicators, through review of trafficking legal cases and analysis of interviews with trafficking survivors conducted by different organizations.

In the course of mapping, 'weak signals' or indicators should not be considered in isolation; rather, there is greater significance when multiple indicators accumulate. It is also important to note that in the context of THB, coercion can be context-specific, influenced by local norms, while at the same time visual indicators of psychological coercion can be very limited. This can be addressed in part by looking for patterns and networks using data scraping and analysis software – for example if an advertisement for a person in prostitution has the same contact details as multiple other advertise-

ments, this is a strong indicator that these persons are part of a group and may not be in control of their circumstances. Key signals or red flags that online advertisements for sex services might indicate sexual exploitation or trafficking are arranged under the following categories:

- Inconsistent ages
- Inconsistent aliases

- Frequent movement
- Third party involved/managing
- Ethnicity/nationality referenced
- Restricted movement
- Unconventional sex acts advertised
- Physical attributes
- Photo dehumanized/suspicious
- Behavior.

Analysis and Findings

All OSCE participating States are believed to have online markets for sexual services, although they may differ in size, format and norms. It has been determined that the existence of platforms facilitating possible exploitative sexual activity is a common feature in the majority of OSCE participating States.

The 1000+ sites identified across forty countries in this mapping report are highly localized in that they are specific to cities, markets and the individuals involved – an example of a 'glocal' phenomenon. Norms within each country's marketplace can differ substantially, and yet are nevertheless tied to the social norms, demand, and legal and political context of the region concerned. As a result of this, what looks like trafficking, and the mechanisms that will be required to detect it online, will vary from country to country, and region to region.

The sites encountered in the mapping fit into the following categories: escort services catalogue/directory, escort agency, brothel, classifieds site, hobby board, booking app, site directory, dating site, social network and 'sponsorship'/sugar daddy site. The overall online market for sexual services primarily consisted of women. The primary means of communication for sex buyers booking appointments across all observed jurisdictions are private messaging applications. The majority of advertisements refer to services provided for short periods of time. The advertisements for longer periods like seven, fourteen or twenty-one days are an exception, but do exist and may be a potential indicator of THB. Prices vary significantly across jurisdictions – for example, the equivalent of fifty euro will acquire intercourse in one country but be insufficient for an 'erotic' massage in another. Knowing the mean price of services in a given market is important because advertisements offering services at a price outside the local norm (lower or higher) can also be a red flag for further investigation.

Advertisements for the same individual can be found across multiple international sites. 'Verification' is a mechanism used by larger sites to ostensibly provide greater assurance to consumers that the advertisements feature real people and accurate photographs, but there are few guarantees that the process is trustworthy, including in screening out minors. There have been observed cases of verified profiles being 'swapped out' by the controller of the profile who changes the pictures to different women, while there have been reports from some national authorities of verified profiles being sold on social media platforms.

Mapping by region

The mapping results that follow are merely illustrative examples from the OSCE region. While these examples refer to specific country contexts, other countries and markets will likely share some of these characteristics. The OSCE is not providing the names of the countries researched, in order to avoid the possible erroneous interpretation that only these particular countries have online marketplaces facilitating exploitative practices. In fact, all OSCE participating States have similar online markets for sexual services. Therefore, policymakers and law enforcement in each participating State are urged to explore and map the online landscape of high-risk websites facilitating sexual exploitation in their own countries.

Western Europe

Some common features from the mapping of three countries in this region include:

- All countries have a large online prostitution market (26-29 separate websites detected per country)
- Women are often advertised using 'professional' staged photoshoots.

Other notable features detected within individual countries in this region include:

- Prices are illustrated using kisses/roses instead of euro in Country A, possibly as a result of crackdowns on websites for aggravated pimping;
- The operation of over 1200 sexual services websites run under one umbrella in Country B
- A large number of non-national women from minority ethnic backgrounds, in particular Asian women, are advertised in Country C, where providers are advertised in agency-run brothels, with their photos and written profiles organized by these agencies.

Northern Europe

Many common features were identified in the mapping of two countries in this region, including:

- Both Country D and Country E have a large online prostitution market (85 and 81 separate websites respectively)
- Advertisements are often targeted at tourists or business travelers

- Potential indicators of THB were observed across the websites in both countries – for example multiple websites are operated by a small number of administrators, indicating an interlinked network, women are advertised as 'travel girls' that can be sent or brought to the buyer's location, some are available for a period of seven or more days, and many are advertised with their faces obscured.

Southern/South-Eastern Europe

Some common features from the mapping of four countries in this region include:

- All four countries have relatively large online prostitution markets (10-44 separate websites)
- Multinational websites are the norm in Country F and Country I, with mostly migrant women being advertised in Countries F and H and advertising targeted at tourists or foreign travelers in F, G and I
- Escort agencies organizing prostitution are common in Countries G and H
- Potential indicators of THB were observed across the websites in all four countries – for example the use of foreign phone numbers and the same numbers for multiple women in advertisements, movement of women/'travel girls', long hours/ 24/7 availability, long-term services and many women advertised with their faces obscured.

Other notable features detected within individual countries in this region include:

- Country F features one website advertising a huge number of people in prostitution across the country, while another site for 'members' only and featuring visibly young girls offers 'virginity auctions' and advertises arranged marriages
- Country G advertises mainly local women, and the websites present themselves as merely 'hosting' services to avoid prosecution
- In Country H chains of brothels were identified with a large portion of the market coordinated by a single organization, while photoshoots are noticeably low budget and ad hoc with faces obscured – sex buyers do not select a woman until they enter the brothel, so this style of marketing relies on the women being anonymous interchangeable stock, rather than distinct individuals.

Eastern Europe

Some common features from the mapping of two countries in this region include:

- Both Country J and Country K have a large online prostitution market (430 and 65 separate websites respectively)
- Many migrant women are commonly advertised in both countries, often as 'Russian', 'Asian' or 'Black', in addition to 'Ukrainian' women in Country K specifically
- There is evidence of those advertised being 'run' by pimps or agencies in Country J, while in Country K numerous sites are being administered by the same account
- Potential indicators of THB were observed across the websites in both countries – including sites featuring young women, the presence of 'travel girls' and long-term services.

Other notable features detected within individual countries in this region include:

- Country J's market is very diverse and includes low-cost advertisements for 'cheap whores', with an average hourly rate of 17-22 euro as well as 'exclusive escort' agencies, while there is also a separate market of 'mistress and sponsor' websites which connect young women with older 'successful' men who provide a monthly stipend in exchange for sex.

South Caucasus

A number of common features were identified in the mapping of two countries in this region, including:

- Both Country L and Country M have a relatively large online prostitution market (37 and 33 separate websites respectively)
- Both countries feature advertisements targeted at tourists/foreign buyers

- Potential indicators of THB were observed across the websites in both countries – including a network of interlinked sites, amateur, poor-quality photos in which persons cannot be identified, and women transient and 'on tour' both within and outside the country.

Central Asia

Many common features were identified in the mapping of two countries in this region, including:

- Both Country N and Country O have a large online prostitution market (69 and 65 separate websites respectively)
- Multinational websites feature in both countries, with the majority of advertisements in Russian
- Mainly local, 'European', 'Russian' and 'Ukrainian' women are advertised in Country N, while Country O features advertisements from locals, Europeans and persons of another specific Central Asian ethnicity
- Potential indicators of THB were observed across the websites in both countries – including the same phone numbers used for multiple women in advertisements, faces obscured in photos, lower prices or a more diverse list of services provided than the market norm, and traces of bruising in photos.

Other notable features detected within individual countries in this region include:

- Country N's market features 'salons' and sex parlors that do not have specific websites and instead place profiles on dating sites; some sites also have dedicated private messaging bots to promote automated ordering of and payment for services.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the scale of the online market for sexual services that has been identified through this mapping research, as well as the apparent correlation with THB, it is recommended that law enforcement shift to a more proactive approach of monitoring websites with high risks of THB in order to identify instances of exploitation. There is also a clear need for policymakers to design market-based interventions at policy and operational levels in order to ensure that online platforms are not misused for trafficking purposes. The need for constant monitoring and pro-active investigation has long been the recommended approach to identifying trafficking cases given that the crime of human trafficking is a process, not an isolated event and thus investigations may look different to those of other crimes. Law enforcement and policymakers must be cognisant of the existence, and extent, of online markets. This can be accomplished by implementing the following recommendations:

Law enforcement:

i. Explore and map at a basic level the online market within the jurisdiction with input from survivors to inform the local context and search criteria;

ii. Investigate THB cases online, adapting online indicators based on this casework;

iii. Supplement pure casework with more pro-active interventions at operational levels through investigation and prosecution of platforms which are knowingly or with gross negligence facilitating THB.

Policymakers:

i. Allocate resources for capacity building for law enforcement to undertake online investigations and gather admissible evidence from online sources;

ii. Ensure co-operation/collaboration across departments to ensure that cybercrime resources and expertise are being put toward THB investigations;

iii. Ensure co-operation/collaboration across jurisdictions – most observed cases have involved cross-jurisdictional actors and websites;

iv. Create standards for data collection of information from online platforms with high risks of trafficking and ensure the ability to share data across agencies and regions;

v. Find mechanisms under national laws, or adopt provisions, as needed, to effectively incentivise legitimate platforms to assume an active role in combating the use of their sites to facilitate trafficking;

vi. Establish a mechanism to prosecute platforms, and their owners, for failing to prevent trafficking and exploitation on their sites;

vii. Incentivize more pro-active, market-based interventions through the development of policies and legislation which would require online platforms to operate taking into account certain online safety standards.

Additional recommendations in this regard can also be found in the OSCE report *Policy responses to technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings: Analysis of current approaches and considerations for moving forward*.

Example list of red flags

Below is a list of signals in online ads for sex services that might indicate exploitation or trafficking:[1]

Inconsistent Ages	The advertised age changes within or across ads of the same provider across platforms.
Inconsistent Aliases	The advertised alias changes within or across ads of the same provider.
Frequent Movement	Language indicating recent or imminent movement; foreign phone number; same provider posting in different locations; "new in town", "new girl".
Third party involved/ managing	Shared phone/repeated phone number across multiple ads for different providers; one post advertising multiple providers; third person language used in ad; same wording/text used across multiple ads for different providers; same phone number being used across multiple ads; same grammar, spelling, punctuation or syntax errors across multiple ads featuring different women.
Ethnicity/Nationality referenced	Ethnicity known to be at higher-risk of being trafficked in that region (can also be determined through languages spoken); provision of services to clientele of a particular ethnicity or nationality; disparity in pricing between local and foreigners/particular ethnic groups.
Restricted Movement	In-call only; references to a handler; other restrictions; availability (advertised working hours) indicates long hours or few days off.
Unconventional Sex Advertised	Unprotected sex and/or broader range of services allowed (subjection); passive roles.
Physical attributes	Low weight of person advertised (<50kg); pubescent body OR surgical augmentation; tattoos/ branding on the neck and/or lower back.
Photo de-humanised/ suspicious	Face obscured or hidden; denigrating pose (photo of the back, on a bed); pixilation to remove context/visual clues of location; photos not well staged or edited (no marketing of a 'character').
Behaviour	Reviews by clients indicate that subject does not smile; low enthusiasm; mention of a handler; fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous/paranoid, shows signs of substance use or addiction; lack of or difficulty in engaging in social interactions; dissociation; does not speak the local language.