

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses¹, its impact on the most vulnerable populations increases. Border closures and trade restrictions have particularly affected migrant populations due to the loss of livelihoods and difficulties to meet basic needs such as food, shelter and health care. These conditions increase risks of human trafficking as well as other types of abuse and exploitation.

COVID-19 ENHANCES THE CRIME OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN MIGRANT POPULATION



Criminal networks operations: Already existing trafficking networks are strengthened, taking advantage of the higher vulnerability currently affecting migrant population, mainly those who cannot meet their basic needs.



Lack of income as a risk factor: Migrant workers, mainly in the informal sector, are affected by interruptions in trade activities. Some are women heads of households, who rely on survival sex in exchange for food, shelter or protection, which increases the risk of human trafficking.



Migrants exposed to labour exploitation: Forced to fill jobs in precarious conditions, migrant workers face exploitation situations similar to human trafficking: not being paid as agreed, extended working hours, movement restrictions averting to be identified by authorities, and debt bondage, among others. Confinement makes it difficult for victims to seek help and limited labour inspections create opportunities for traffickers to act with impunity.



Migrants take on unpayable debts: If unable to repay, they may be subject to modern slavery and forced labour. The debt becomes a submission mechanism that limits the possibilities of reporting abuses.



Homeless migrants: Migrants who have lost their jobs and hence are unable to meet their basic needs or comply with confinement measures, are forced to live in the streets. The street becomes a highly accessible space for recruiting potential trafficking victims, where case identification by authorities is even more complex.



Online recruitment is on the rise: Due to the closure of educational centres, migrants remain at home connected to the Internet for long periods of time. This context increases the likelihood of recruitment for trafficking purposes, especially for sexual exploitation through pornography and other forms. The greatest concern is for adolescent women and children.



Invisibility is aggravated by confinement: Making case identification even more challenging. Traffickers find new means of exploitation through appointments in private homes or other clandestine sites. As these are private spaces, the possibility of detection is much lower. People engaged in prostitution have no support networks, they are at greater danger of being abducted by traffickers and at permanent risk of contagion.

1- <https://www.who.int/es/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march-2020>



Family reunification processes currently on hold put children and other family members at risk: Due to the complete or partial closure of migration institutions, numerous families are unable to begin or continue with their reunification procedures. Many families remain separated, without close emotional ties or protection networks, which becomes a factor of vulnerability and increases the risk of abduction of any family member by trafficking networks.



Higher levels of exploitation of children and adolescents: The loss of income in families compounded by the inability to access virtual education may put children under high levels of pressure to earn money, who can in turn be subjected to trafficking for child labour.



Limited detection, referral and assistance of survivors of human trafficking: There has been a decline in the number of reports of trafficking cases. In part, this is due to the limited action of labour, health and safety inspectors who are currently focused on other priorities. In addition, migrant reception centres are somewhat collapsed, with limited capacity to provide assistance to all persons in vulnerable situations, including trafficking survivors.

Migrants who work as domestic workers; cleaners; construction; caretakers; tourism, hotels; taxi drivers; street vendor; bars and restaurants workers, as well as those engaged in prostitution are amongst the most vulnerable to human trafficking and other types of exploitation.

IOM RESPONSE IN SOUTH AMERICA

IOM South America contributes to the assistance and protection of migrants. Protection mechanisms and social services for quarantined migrant populations; referral mechanisms for victims of trafficking and other forms of exploitation have been strengthened. IOM assists migrants in accessing shelter, food, medicine, psychological support and other services. IOM is conducting prevention campaigns on trafficking in cross-border contexts and crime assessments in the current context.² Direct assistance funds have been established to respond to assistance and protection requests for victims of human trafficking and persons at risk of abuse, violence and exploitation.

WEBINAR SERIES

Last June, IOM South America launched the Webinar Series: Trafficking in Persons in the Time of COVID-19. The first session addressed the challenges and good practices in combating human trafficking in the current context. The webinars will be held throughout July - the month that commemorates the International Day against Trafficking in Persons- and sessions will be open to general public and broadcast through social networks.³

2- Findings will be presented at the July 30th webinar.

3- Webinar sessions will take place every Thursdays during July on the following topics: Lessons learned exchange on direct protection, Combating human trafficking at the local level and Launching of the Regional Assessment about the situation and incidence of human trafficking within humanitarian contexts in South America.

These infosheets have been elaborated by the Migration Analysis Unit of the IOM Regional Office for South America. These documents are designed to capture the most recent information in a fast-moving environment.



OIMSuramerica



OIMSuramerica



ONUMigración