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## Trafficking in Human Beings in the European Union: Gender, Sexual Exploitation, and Digital Communication Technologies

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# Trafficking in Human Beings in the European Union: Gender, Sexual Exploitation, and Digital Communication Technologies

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## Abstract

In this article, the intersection of gender, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and use of digital communication technologies are analyzed based on data from the European Union (EU). Over the past two decades, an increase in trafficking in human beings in the EU has been accompanied by an increase in the development and availability of digital communication technologies. The first statistical analysis of trafficking in human beings (2008-2010) carried out by the European Commission found 23,632 victims of human trafficking in the reporting member states. Eighty percent of victims were women and girls; 20% were men and boys. The majority of the victims (62%) were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Digital communication technologies are widely used for trafficking for sexual exploitation, and more rarely for trafficking for forced labor. This article concludes that the combination of gender, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and use of digital communication technologies has created a nexus of victimization for women and girls. Based on this analysis and other sources of information, the European region is the world's leading region for trafficking for sexual exploitation.

## Keywords

trafficking in human beings, sexual exploitation, forced labor, digital communication technologies, Internet, European Union

## Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the use of digital communication technologies, particularly the Internet, has greatly expanded criminals' capacity to traffic human beings for different types of exploitation (Council of Europe, 2003; Hughes, 1996, 1999a; Latonero, 2011; Sykiotou, 2007). As new technologies have been developed, criminals have quickly adopted them to assist with their criminal enterprises. Seekers of justice have countered with new laws and policies to lawfully combat the misuse of new technologies. Law enforcement agencies have become skilled in the use of digital technologies and forensics to combat these serious crimes. The development of new types of communication media and devices keeps the race going between traffickers and law enforcement.

Although communication technologies are frequently used by perpetrators of trafficking, the underlying crime of trafficking in human beings remains the same: a trafficker tricks, coerces, or exploits the vulnerability or the age of a victim to compel the victim to work, provide services, engage in commercial sex acts, beg, or commit criminal acts. Trafficking in human beings became a European Union (EU) crime in 2004 with the implementation of the Council Framework Decision (2004) on combating trafficking in

human beings. Trafficking in human beings is a serious violation of the law and human rights that is frequently compared with slavery. Therefore, the EU is committed to eradicating it (European Commission, 2012).

This article will analyze the trafficking in human beings in the EU and the use of communication technologies. Recent statistics on the number and type of victims will be used as a basis for the analysis. Finally, the nexus of gender, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and use of digital communication technologies will be discussed.

## Trafficking in Human Beings in the EU

Trafficking in human beings is recognized as a serious criminal enterprise in the EU. It has been called one of the "most prevalent" types of organized crime activities in the EU by Steve Harvey, then Acting Head of Europol's Operational

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Department (“Monitoring Mechanisms,” 2010). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC; 2010) estimates the market for sexual exploitation in Europe to be €2.5 billion annually.

The EU has acted to combat the problem of trafficking in human beings. In August 2004, the Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA (2002) criminalized trafficking in human beings at the EU level. In 2006, the European Commission issued the EU Action Plan (2006), which set combating trafficking in human beings and money laundering as priority areas. In 2011, the European Parliament and the Council issued Directive 2011/36/EU on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting Its Victims (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2011).

In 2012, the European Commission adopted a Communication on the EU Strategy toward the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings 2012-2016. One of the strategic actions was to collect and publish data on trafficking disaggregated by age and gender.

The collection of data on the number of victims of trafficking in human beings has been a challenge for organizations, agencies, and governments (Laczko & Gozdzik, 2005). Although no methods of data collection are without flaws, analyses must be made on the best existing data. Researchers and The International Organization for Migration (David, 2007) have made the case that data collection on trafficking in human beings needs to constantly be improved, but data on the number and type of victims are an essential tool for combating trafficking.

In 2013, the European Commission issued the first EU statistical report on the trafficking in human beings in the member states and affiliated countries. The Eurostat report includes data from all 27 of the EU member states and 7 acceding, candidate or associated countries, but the total number and percentages are based on data from the EU member states. The report included data on victims and traffickers. This is the first collection of EU-wide data. Not all countries had complete data in each category for each year, so interpretation has to be done with caution. Still, preliminary findings show that there are differences and trends for types of trafficking, the gender of victims, and source and destination of victims. These new data provide bases for further analysis of trafficking in human beings.

The quantitative report on the trafficking victims in member states of the EU from 2008 to 2010 reported 23,632 identified or presumed victims of human trafficking in the reporting member states (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013). An “identified” victim is defined as “a person who has been formally identified as a victim of trafficking in human beings according to the relevant authority in Member States.” A “presumed” victim of trafficking is defined as

a person who has met the criteria of EU regulations and international Conventions but has not been formally identified by the relevant authorities (police) as a trafficking victim or who

has declined to be formally or legally identified as trafficked. (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013, p. 20)

Data on “identified” victims mostly came from the police, whereas data on “presumed” victims mostly came from national rapporteurs, victim assistance services, immigration services, labor inspections, and border guards (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013, p. 23). Over the 3-year period of data collection (2008-2010), the number of victims increased by 18%. The authors of the report urge caution in assuming that the 18% increase in victims over the 3-year period from 2008 to 2010 means an actual increase in the number of victims. They suggest that the increase in numbers may reflect an increase in identifying victims (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013). This cautionary note is reasonable considering that this is the first report done for the EU. Still, the data indicate an increase in trafficking in human beings or new awareness of a serious crime. The goal of this article is to look at the intersection of type of trafficking, gender, and the use of communication technologies. The new EU report provides a basis for this analysis.

### *Type of Trafficking*

Of the total number of victims, 62% were trafficked for sexual exploitation and 25% were trafficked for forced labor. The remaining approximately 14% were trafficked for begging, organ removal, criminal activities, forced marriages, or selling of children (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013). Over the 3-year period, the percentage of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation increased each year and the percentage of victims of forced labor decreased from 28% in 2008 to 23% in 2009 and 2010 (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013).

Another source of data lends support for the findings in the EU that trafficking for sexual exploitation is the dominant form of trafficking. The UNODC (2012) found that trafficking for sexual exploitation accounted for 58% of trafficking cases globally, but when world regions were compared, Europe had the highest percentage—62%—of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and the lowest—31%—for forced labor. From these two sources of data, the percentage of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation appears to be higher in Europe than in other regions of the world.

Recently, there have been campaigns for increased awareness of forced labor and other types of trafficking, and it is likely that forced labor is still a largely unrecognized crime. Still, these statistics indicate that trafficking for sexual exploitation is the dominant type of trafficking in the EU, and it is likely increasing according to findings of this first collection of data.

### *Gender and Age of Victims*

The EU recognizes that trafficking in human beings is gendered. Directive 2011/36/EU noted that there is “gender-

specific” trafficking, and the women and men are often trafficked for different reasons. A goal of the European Commission in 2013 was to

develop knowledge of the gender dimensions of human trafficking, including the gender specificities of the way men and women are recruited and exported, the gender consequences of the various forms of trafficking and potential differences in the vulnerability of men and women to victimization and its impact on them. (European Commission, 2012)

The EU data found that a majority of victims were women or girls. Of the total number of identified or presumed victims, 80% were female (68% women, 12% girls) and 20% were male (17% men, 3% boys). Children were 15% of the total number of victims of trafficking in the EU (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013, p. 10).

Of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, 96% of them were women and girls in 2010. Of the victims of trafficking for forced labor or services, 77% were male in 2010. The majority of victims of forced begging, organ removal, criminal activity, and selling of children were female, although there was a gradual increase in the number of males over the 3-year period (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013).

The findings from the first EU-wide collection of data on trafficking in human beings reveal that trafficking is a gendered phenomenon. The majority of victims are women and girls (the predominant type of trafficking is for sexual exploitation, and the majority of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are women and girls). Also, trafficking for sexual exploitation increased every year over the 3-year time frame (58% in 2008, 60% in 2009, and 66% in 2010). In addition, UNODC found that the European region ranked the highest of all regions in the world for trafficking for sexual exploitation in the world (62%).

Women and girls are also the majority (72%) of victims in the “Other” category, which includes forced begging, criminal activities, removal of organs, forced marriages, and selling of children. Although the majority of victims of forced labor were male, 25% of the victims were female.

These data indicate that trafficking in human beings in the EU is largely comprised of exploitation of women and girls.

Although there may be less awareness and identification of male victims or victims of forced labor and other types of trafficking, this is still an overwhelming finding from the first round of data collection in the EU.

### *Country of Origin of Victims*

The majority of trafficking victims in the EU come from other EU member states. If victims are exploited within their own borders, this is called internal trafficking. As a result of the Schengen Agreement, 22 of the 28 EU member states are open to travel with each other without border controls. Of the

total number of victims, the majority, 61%, of victims came from other EU member states. According to Europol’s (2013) EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment, the levels of intra-EU trafficking (internal trafficking) are increasing due to freedom of movement throughout the EU.

There was also a gender difference for victims of internal trafficking. More male victims (74%) were internally trafficked than female victims (66%). This means that female victims are more likely to be recruited outside the EU and transported into the EU (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013).

From 2008 to 2010, the percentage of the identified and presumed victims from outside the EU increased. For male victims, the percentage from outside the EU increased from 12% to 37%. And for the female victims, the percentage from outside the EU increased from 18% to 39%. These are dramatic increases in the number of female victims coming from outside the EU (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013).

One of the weaknesses of the Eurostat report is that some member states were not adequately collecting data on the number of victims by country of recruitment (Eurostat, European Commission, 2013). This indicates that although there were some countries that were strong sending countries, more work needs to be done to ensure that all member states give more precise information on the source of victims so more robust analysis can be done.

In the next section of this article, the role that digital communication technologies play in human trafficking, particularly in the EU, will be examined.

## **Use of Digital Communication Technologies for Human Trafficking**

Since the commercial use of Usenet and the Internet began, they have been used for sexual exploitation (Taylor, Quayle, & Holland, 2001). For example, one newsgroup was called alt.bin.pictures.child.pornography (Lanchet & Hornat, 2008). They have been used to transmit pornography and child sexual abuse material, previously called child pornography (Taylor et al., 2001). These forums were also used to transmit information on venues for commercial sex acts and sex tours (Hughes, 1996, 1999a). With the commercial development of the Internet, it quickly became the site to purchase pornography, exchange or purchase child sexual abuse images (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Quayle, 2003). The Internet has been used to advertise sex tours. In the early to mid-1990s, websites for sex tours could be found that openly advertised the availability of children for sexual exploitation (Hughes, 1999a). And the Internet has been used to advertise numerous locations and services for commercial sex acts (Council of Europe, 2003; Hughes, 2004a).

As a venue for sexual exploitation, sexual predators using the Internet were ahead of laws and law enforcement. Often

laws had to be revised to apply to digital material, storage and transmission of illegal images. In addition, law enforcement needed training and tools to investigate crimes facilitated by the Internet or digital technology. With the recognition of the existence of human trafficking, almost every country has passed a law against human trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation, and researchers are documenting how digital technologies are used by traffickers.

As social forums on the Internet grew, they became sites for traffickers to contact and recruit victims. Traffickers could place false advertisements on employment sites, offer young women jobs as waitresses or nannies, careers as models or dancers, and present themselves as boyfriends. Later, the traffickers would force victims into prostitution (Sykiotou, 2007). Also women who signed up at marriage agencies could be deceived (Hughes, 2004b).

Although anti-human trafficking laws are more than a decade old, as the EU statistics show, trafficking is a continuing, even growing, crime. The Internet is playing a major role in facilitating these crimes. There are now 2 billion Internet users worldwide (International Telecommunications Union, 2010). According to the World Bank (2012), 75% of the world's population now has a mobile phone, and access is expanding into rural areas. As more communication technologies are available, traffickers will quickly adopt them. This growing access and use of digital communication technologies will increasingly become the way that traffickers contact victims and how victims of sex exploitation are offered to sex buyers.

What we call "online" no longer means using a desktop or laptop computer or Internet cafe. As new communication technologies continue to develop, they include wireless devices, such as smart phones, which are small computers, with access to the Internet through telecommunications companies. These sophisticated, hand-held digital devices have created a "mobile revolution" and increase the capacity of criminals to engage in all aspects of human trafficking.

As the growth and development of digital communication technologies and devices continues, this area will continue to be important for research, investigation, and action for prevention and prosecution of human trafficking.

### **Cases of Trafficking in Human Beings Involving the Internet in EU Member States**

Digital communication technologies are used for trafficking victims for forced labor and sexual exploitation. There are more documented cases of technologies being used for recruiting, controlling, and advertising victims of sexual exploitation than for forced labor. Here are a few typical examples of cases of trafficking in human beings involving digital technologies in EU member states.

- United Kingdom, 2008: Police arrested three men and one woman who trafficked women from Thailand. The perpetrators' network used an escort agency site on the Internet as a front for their activities. Thirty women were recovered and taken to a victim support center. The offenders were charged with controlling prostitution for gain, trafficking, and money laundering ("15 Arrests as Internet Vice Ring Smashed by Police," 2008).
- Czech Republic, 2010: Two perpetrators used the Internet to advertise underage girls for prostitution. They were convicted of human trafficking (UNODC Case Law Database, Czech Republic, CZE0202).
- Germany, 2001: A 16-year-old Polish girl was transported to Germany and used for prostitution in a brothel. One of the perpetrators took photos of her, which were used for an advertisement on the Internet that read "girl for sale" (UNODC Case Law Database, Poland, POL007).
- Romania, 2003-2007: A trafficker contacted high school girls between ages 14 and 17. His apartment was equipped with computers, cameras, and video recorders used for producing pornography. He used the images to coerce the girls into sex acts. He threatened to publicly expose the images on the Internet or to their parents and friends if they did not comply with his orders of exploitation (UNODC Case Law Database, Romania, ROU003).
- Sweden: A man met a woman who was diagnosed with a mental disability on the Internet. He used her vulnerability to exploit her. Another man assisted the first to take explicit photos of the woman. They designed a website for the purpose of making money from the photos (UNODC Case Law Database, Sweden, SWE021).

Although the focus of this article is on relatively new communications technologies, "low" technologies are still used as well, and may be the choice of some criminals because they can avoid detection that newer digital devices allow.

- Czech Republic, 2010: Perpetrators forced women into "window prostitution." The victims were provided with walkie-talkies and had to report to the traffickers about the sex buyers and the earnings. The victims had to hand over most of the money they received to the defendants (UNODC Case Law Database, Czech Republic, CZE022).

A combination of high technology and old means of control is also used to coerce and control victims, such as this case involving voodoo religion.

- Sweden, 2010: Two women from Cameroon coerced women from Rwanda, Nigeria, Uganda, and Cameroon into prostitution. The traffickers used religious rituals and voodoo to control a dozen African women. Medicine Men used rituals, slaughtered animals, and made the women take an oath to reimburse travel costs. They told the women that they would die if the debt was not repaid. Advertisements were placed on the Internet for the women in Sweden. The victims were given mobile phones. They had to respond to calls from sex buyers (“Traffickers Intimidated Victims,” 2010; UNODC Case Law Database, Sweden, SWE014).

### **Use of Digital Technologies for Trafficking for Forced Labor**

Traffickers appear to make less use of digital technologies for forced labor compared with sexual exploitation. There are many documented cases of the use of digital technologies for sexual exploitation, but fewer documented cases for cases of forced labor.

Research on the use of digital technology for forced labor in the United States found that traffickers did not rely on technology other than pay-as-you-go cell phones. Victims of forced labor in the United States were recruited by word of mouth from impoverished villages in Latin American countries. Once the victims were trafficked, they had little or no access to technology (Latonero, 2011). An Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE; 2009) report on human trafficking for labor exploitation in the agricultural sector in European countries reported that people were recruited from newspaper advertisements and by word of mouth. In one large case of forced labor for vegetable picking in Italy, workers were recruited from Poland by newspaper and website advertisements (OSCE, 2009).

These findings are from a limited number of cases and from research done in the United States. It appears that traffickers use job advertisement on the Internet to recruit some workers, but do not use digital technologies to maintain control of victims of work in agriculture, construction, or manufacturing. It is more likely that traffickers contact each other and employers with digital communication technologies. The researchers concluded that how forced labor traffickers operate makes it harder to track them through digital technology (Latonero, 2011).

It is likely that traffickers for forced labor use digital technologies to transfer and launder profits, as they do with trafficking for sexual exploitation, but more research is needed in this area.

In cases of trafficking of domestic workers, victims may be recruited through employment agencies or exploiters make private arrangements with contacts they know in source countries. The situation probably depends widely on the level of available technology in the sending region,

particularly outside the EU. It seems likely that some victims of domestic servitude have responded to advertisements online. One of the ways that exploiters of domestic workers maintain control is to prevent the victims from having contact with others and monitoring victims’ communications.

Domestic workers are increasingly remotely monitored by their employers. Following several cases in which domestic workers were accused of harming or killing children in the Gulf States, some employers are installing video cameras to monitor workers (Many Installing Cameras at Home to Monitor Maids, 2012). The activities of the domestic worker can be viewed on a smartphone or other remote computer. This surveillance is also a way to monitor and control a worker who is being abused and exploited (Home Surveillance, 2012). The monitoring of domestic workers is being discussed as an issue of privacy and worker rights, but video monitoring of workers is increasingly being recognized as a way that traffickers monitor and control victims (Immigration and Custom Enforcement, 2013).

### **Use of Digital Technologies for Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation**

There are many documented cases of the use of digital communication technologies for trafficking for sexual exploitation. In a recent report, Europol (2011) emphasized the “key role that the Internet was playing in recruiting victims [of sexual exploitation] and advertising their services” (p. 25).

Mobile devices and technologies create a more fluid environment for traffickers, victims, and sex buyers. All of the concerned parties can be in motion, with real-time communication among all of them. Traffickers can engage in real-time communication, such as voice messages, videos, and texting, with the victim. Traffickers can pose as the woman in the advertisement and set up an appointment with a sex buyer. For online “adult entertainment” advertising sites, the ads can be changed and updated throughout the time that sex buyers are most likely to be actively looking for appointments. Sex buyers can search for and make arrangements for sex acts from almost anywhere.

The following activities can be carried out online:

- Recruitment of victims with false employment advertisements
- Contact and groom victims in online forums or dating sites
- Capture images and videos of victims that will be used in advertisements or to threaten the victims with exposure to their families or friends
- Upload text advertisements, images, and videos to brothels, entertainment businesses, or prostitution businesses that operate only from the Internet, such as escort services and online advertisement sites for prostitution
- Arrange meetings between sex buyers and victims



- Communicate with victims to monitor their activities, give them orders, threaten them, and control them
- Make business arrangements with criminal colleagues or legitimate businesses
- Transfer money

Previously, these activities could be done over the Internet with a laptop or a desktop computer, but now, they can be carried out with a mobile, wireless device, enabling criminals to be more mobile.

There are many documented cases of human traffickers using social networking media, such as Facebook, and online advertisement sites, such as Craigslist, and micro-blogging services, such as Twitter (Federal Agents Arrest Twitter Pimp for Sex Trafficking of Child, 2012; Latonero et al., 2012). Many of them are mainstream services commonly used by adults and children. Online, traffickers often commit serious crimes such as human trafficking in public or semi-public spaces.

Organized crime groups involved in human trafficking are flexible and quickly change their tactics following changes in laws and law enforcement investigations (Europol, 2013). New devices, media forums, and mobility increase the flexibility for criminals.

On the “adult entertainment” websites, as they are called, the images of women available for commercial sex acts are displayed. Some of the images are made while the victim is engaged in sex acts. The Dutch Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings has noted that these images “constitute a new dimension to victimhood” (“Monitoring Mechanisms,” 2010).

Traffickers for sexual exploitation can be flexible in how they advertise victims to sex buyers. They may post advertisements on mainstream, legitimate, public forums or post to a more marginal site that advertises riskier, rougher sex acts. A website that offers women for prostitution may be run by a criminal gang. A website like this can offer many women for sex acts and also include a comments section, so men can write reviews of the women’s performances (Gray, 2010). Digital technology–assisted sexual exploitation is widespread in the EU, particularly in countries where prostitution is legal or tolerated.

There are some positive aspects to the widespread use of digital technology by traffickers. A record is made of all transactions and communications. A smartphone holds a large amount of data that law enforcement can use for investigation and prosecution of traffickers. “The internet has been a good thing for police officers—it has brought all these worms to the surface. We can now identify them and track them down,” said Jonathan Rouse, Detective-Inspector with the Queensland Police in Australia in charge of a taskforce on computer-facilitated crimes against children (UNODC, 2013).

Technologies are used for every aspect of sexual exploitation, from recruitment of victims, advertising the victims to

sex buyers, coercing them with digital images, to monitoring their behavior. In addition, the financial management of the criminal business is often done online.

## The Nexus of Gender, Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation, and Digital Technologies in the EU

According to UNODC (2012), the European region leads the world in trafficking for sexual exploitation. This specific type of crime and human rights violation is the result of factors coming together to enable the criminal victimization of thousands of women and girls.

This article reviewed the first statistical report on EU data on trafficking in human beings by gender and type of exploitation. Then, the article reviewed the use of digital technologies for trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Three factors emerged—gender, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and digital technologies—to create a nexus of exploitation of women and girls facilitated by digital communication technologies. The nexus of these factors is contributing to gender inequality in the EU, which all EU governmental bodies are committed to eliminating.

Police and governmental bodies in the EU recognize the serious nature of trafficking of human beings and combating it is a priority. In 2013, Europol recommended a high-level response to trafficking in human beings (Europol, 2013).

EU governmental bodies also recognize the seriousness of trafficking in human beings. For over a decade, they have issued directives and recommendations on combating trafficking in human beings. Reports by EU committees, police organizations, and rapporteurs call for making combating trafficking in human beings a top priority, and almost all of them emphasize the importance of understanding and combating the use of new technologies, particularly the Internet. There have been calls for more research on technologies used for trafficking to determine an appropriate response. The Dutch National Rapporteur noted that the “Internet is becoming more anonymous and more accessible at the same time” (“Monitoring Mechanisms,” 2010) and called for more research on the use of the Internet for trafficking.

The important role that digital communications is playing in the trafficking of human beings has been recognized as well by the European Commission. In 2014, the European Commission intends to fund programs and support projects that “aim to increase knowledge of recruitment over the Internet and via social networks” (European Commission, 2012).

All aspects of trafficking in human beings need to be researched, but when some factors, particularly gender, sexual exploitation, and digital technologies, converge to create enhanced victimization, special attention is needed to look at the nexus of the problem and not just the separate elements. Trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation facilitated by digital technologies has contributed to making

Europe into the world region with the largest amount of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

More research needs to be done on all aspects and categories of trafficking in human beings. To date, most of the research and awareness raising has focused on trafficking for sexual exploitation. More research is needed on forced labor to better understand this type of trafficking in the EU. More research is particularly needed on how digital communication technologies are used to traffic women and girls for sexual exploitation in the EU.

This article looked at the data on gender and type of trafficking for all of the EU. It did not look at inter-EU regions or states or the intersection of gender, type of trafficking, and trafficking in human beings from regions and countries outside the EU. Further research and analysis is needed to look at the dynamics of sending and receiving countries, gender, type of trafficking, and the use of digital communication technologies.

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