



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

Ambassador to monitor and combat trafficking in persons

**Conference “We Do Not Give Out of Charity What is Already Due In Justice.
The Society of Gratuitousness and Political Action”
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“Human trafficking today: the specific case of sex trafficking”

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Today, 50 million people are living in conditions of modern slavery¹. Human trafficking is a pervasive global phenomenon that affects every country, both rich and poor. **Since 2022, the number of identified victims has increased by 25 %, with a growing proportion of them being children².**

In 2022, 61% of victims were women and girls, but men and boys are also affected. 74% of traffickers belong to organized crime groups, but trafficking also occurs within families and relationships of trust. Sometimes it even involves police officers, health workers, or members of the victim’s own family.

The Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, or harboring of a person; the use of coercion, deception, or abuse of vulnerability; and the purpose of exploitation. Importantly, trafficking does not require victims to cross borders. It can take place entirely within one country.

Trafficking is driven by the demand for exploitation across many sectors. The risks are heightened by conflict, displacement, climate change, irregular migration, weak governance, and structural inequality. These vulnerabilities intersect with gender, legal status, and country of origin, which is why women, girls, and migrants are disproportionately targeted.

The stereotype of the "perfect victim" (powerless and female) too often prevents the recognition of other victims, such as men, boys, and those exploited within Western societies.

Trafficking can take many forms, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, forced criminal activity ranging from begging to terrorism, child trafficking, organ trafficking, and exploitation in or around sports. Despite this diversity, the most common forms are forced labor (42% of detected cases) and sexual exploitation (36%)³.

¹ Global Slavery Index, 2024.

² UNODC, 2025.

³ UNODC, 2025.



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Human trafficking is also closely linked to other organized crimes. Its routes often overlap with those used for drug trafficking and the circulation of counterfeit goods. Human trafficking is also connected with the illicit tobacco trade and wildlife trafficking, especially along the Africa–Europe and Asia–Europe corridors. Though legally distinct, **human trafficking and migrant smuggling** often intersect, relying on the same networks and infrastructure.

At its core, **trafficking is an economic system based on unlimited profit and human disposability.** It operates as a business. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that human trafficking generates 236 billion dollars in illicit profits each year, making it the second most lucrative criminal enterprise after drug trafficking.

Traffickers exploit the lack of transparency in global supply chains to hide behind legitimate business models and rely on money laundering to conceal both financial flows and human rights abuses.

Despite treaties, action plans, and training programs, implementation remains gravely inadequate. Unenforced laws and unfunded plans amount to empty promises. Vague definitions leave loopholes that traffickers relentlessly exploit. Above all, the absence of genuine political will—evidenced by the lack of a comprehensive global framework, compounded by weak prosecutions and minimal accountability—perpetuates a system that protects perpetrators and abandons victims.

In 2020, a mere 10,000 prosecutions for human trafficking were recorded worldwide—an utterly negligible response to the estimated 40 million people enslaved today. As Judge Fausto Pocar has noted, slavery is perhaps the oldest crime against humanity; yet trafficking remains one of the least prosecuted crimes, not by accident but by failure. Traffickers operate with power and profit, while victims are abandoned without justice, protection, or redress. This is a systemic betrayal of humanity’s most vulnerable.

On November 15, 2025, the Palermo Protocol will mark its twenty-fifth anniversary. It was the first international instrument to define human trafficking and impose obligations on states under three pillars: prevention, protection, and prosecution. Yet a quarter of a century later, the promise of Palermo remains unfulfilled. Trafficking networks have not been dismantled—they have grown stronger. They have adapted, diversified, and expanded, thriving on inequality, corruption, conflict, and the power of digital technologies.

The fight against human trafficking requires the active engagement of a wide range of stakeholders : national and local governments; international and regional organisations; humanitarian actors like the Red Cross; human rights NGOs; the financial sector and private businesses, trade unions; faith-based organisations; local communities and diaspora groups; the media; and universities and research centers⁴.

⁴ List of stakeholders :



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Above all, victims and survivors must be placed at the centre, not only as witnesses but also as experts, trainers, and advocates in prevention and rehabilitation efforts.

The Specificities of Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking remains one of the most widespread and fastest-growing forms of human trafficking. It accounts for around half of all detected cases⁵.

It is defined as the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act where such act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or where the person is under the age of 18⁶.

Sex trafficking takes many forms. Victims may be coerced into prostitution through violence, debt, or deception. Others are treated as property and subjected to sexual slavery, often in situations of armed conflict. Many women and girls are trafficked through forced or servile marriages, which result in sexual exploitation and sometimes forced pregnancy. Increasingly, victims are forced to produce pornography or participate in live-streamed sexual abuse, facilitated by digital platforms and artificial intelligence.

Children are trafficked for sexual exploitation through grooming, abduction, or coercion. Armed groups and terrorist organisations also exploit women and girls for sexual purposes, as tools of financing, recruitment, and community control. Even the world of sports is not immune to sexual exploitation, with vulnerable children and athletes being abused by recruiters, agents, or managers.

One of the greatest obstacles to ending sex trafficking is the lack of an internationally shared, common definition of the crime. This vacuum fractures international cooperation, weakens legal frameworks, and

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- Governments (national and local)
 - International and regional organizations (UN agencies, AU, ASEAN, OAS, OIF, etc.)
 - Red Cross/Red Crescent and humanitarian NGOs (e.g., MSF, SOS Méditerranée)
 - Human rights NGOs (HRW, ICJ)
 - Financial sector and businesses (responsible supply chains, due diligence)
 - Trade unions and professional associations (attorneys at law, medical personnel)
 - Faith-based groups (Scalabrinians, SIMN, ICMC, G20 Interfaith Forum, etc.)
 - Local communities and diasporas
 - Media, especially radio in local languages, artists
 - Universities and research centers
 - Victims and survivors, as witnesses, experts, and actors in prevention and rehabilitation.

⁵ Allan, C., Winters, G.M. & Jeglic, E.L. Current Trends in Sex Trafficking Research. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* **25**, 175–182 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-023-01419->

⁶ U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. Public Law 2000:106–386.



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allows traffickers to exploit inconsistencies—undermining the possibility of comprehensive prosecution.

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 92% of identified victims of sex trafficking are female (64% are women and 28% are girls). Most are under 18 years old when first trafficked, with an average entry age between 12 and 15 years old.

In low-income countries, children are more often trafficked for labour, while in high-income countries such as those in Europe and North America, they are more often trafficked for sexual exploitation. Although nearly all perpetrators are male, survivors who do not fit the stereotype of the powerless "ideal victim" are often overlooked. Male victims, in particular, too often remain invisible in both policies and support services.

The difference between "choice" and "coercion" is inadequate to reflect the reality of sex trafficking. Often, victims are compelled into situations where their survival tactics are confused with consent.

Risks are heightened for children who have suffered abuse, lived in foster care, or run away from home, as well as for those facing poverty, substance abuse, poor mental health, unstable families, or discrimination linked to gender identity, disability, or sexual orientation. Recruitment is often carried out by people known to the victim (family members, friends, or partners) who exploit trust.

Sex trafficking differs in domestic and international contexts. In domestic cases, traffickers often target minors and runaways, controlling them through drugs. In contrast, international traffickers more often target poor, uneducated individuals, using debt, threats of deportation, or confiscated documents to maintain control.⁷

Technology as a Game-Changer

Online sexual abuse and exploitation are on the rise. Digital platforms facilitate recruitment by enabling coercion, fraud, and deception on a large scale. Children can be targeted directly and with alarming ease⁸.

Recruiters now use online job ads, marriage agencies, fake dating profiles, and social media grooming to find victims. Exploitation often involves victims who are forced to advertise themselves on dating sites and video chats under the control of traffickers.

⁷ Veldhuizen-Ochodničánová E, Jeglic EL, Boskovic I. Separate routes, similar crimes? Conceptualizing differences between domestic and international sex traffickers in the United States. *Int J Law Crime Justice* 2020;62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2020.100395>.

⁸ Facilitation of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) in the Philippines Analysis and recommendations for better detection, deterrence and prevention, April 2024



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Traffickers rely on prepaid phones, encrypted messaging, and anonymity tools. Clients use escort sites, mobile apps, and forums to search for, review, and pay for services, often online.

The “lover boy” method⁹ is another common recruitment strategy: a young man targets vulnerable girls, builds trust with gifts and affection, isolates them from family, and then manipulates them into leaving home or travelling abroad. Emotional dependency becomes a weapon of control.

Sex trafficking has expanded into online child sexual abuse material and livestreaming, which is enabled by social media, remittance services, and encryption. The anonymity and global reach of digital platforms make detecting online exploitation far more difficult than detecting traditional street-based exploitation.

Case Study: Nigerian Women and Voodoo Rituals¹⁰

Nigerian women are among the largest groups of people who are sexually trafficked into Western Europe. Recruitment often begins when acquaintances or "madams" promise them work abroad. The trafficking route typically passes through countries such as the Netherlands before reaching Italy or Spain, where the majority of exploitation occurs through street prostitution.

What distinguishes Nigerian networks is their use of voodoo or juju rituals. Before departing, victims undergo ceremonies and rituals that create a spiritual contract binding them through fear.

The victims and the traffickers themselves often believe that disobedience will result in supernatural punishment for themselves or their families. Even when women are geographically free, the psychological chains remain. Priests sometimes act as contract enforcers, intimidating victims and influencing trials.

This case illustrates that **trafficking is not only physical, but also psychological and cultural**. It embeds control mechanisms that law enforcement often struggles to address.

The consequences for survivors are devastating. Compared to other forms of trafficking, victims of sex trafficking often face stigma and rejection from their families and communities, who see them as dishonored. They face extreme health risks, including violence, sexually transmitted diseases, and mortality rates up to forty times higher than national averages.

⁹ Ad Laudato Si Webinar : [#8 Demand As Root Cause for Human Trafficking - Sex Trafficking and Prostitution](#) (13.04.2021)

¹⁰Baarda, C. S. (2015). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The role of voodoo rituals in the functioning of a criminal network. *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(2), 257-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370815617188> (Original work published 2016)



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In 1995, the world marked 50 years of the UN Charter. In 1998, we commemorated 50 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1999, we honored 50 years of the Geneva Conventions. But **2025 cannot be a time for celebration. It must be a time for reckoning—and for mobilization.**

Measures to Prevent and Combat Trafficking

- **Our systems are reactive rather than preventive, identifying victims only after they are already trapped in exploitation.**
- The response must combine:
 - **Prevention:** Sensitizing families, communities, and public opinion to the risks.
 - **Identification:**
 - Train a wide range of actors—police officers, prosecutors, judges, lawyers, doctors, medical staff, social workers, teachers, faith leaders, and even customers—to recognize the signs of trafficking and exploitation.
 - Fully apply and enforce existing laws by ensuring that all these actors receive **continuous, practical training** and are equipped to protect victims, prosecute traffickers, and uphold human dignity.
 - **Protection and rehabilitation:** ensuring access to shelters, legal aid, and physical, psychological, professional, and spiritual support.
 - **Justice:** guaranteeing access to courts, prosecuting traffickers, and compensating victims while applying the principle that victims must never be punished for crimes committed under coercion.
 - **Empowerment:** Survivors speak out, share experiences, and protect others.
- **We must work with survivors, not just for them.**
- It requires cross-border cooperation and mobilization of governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, trade unions, civil society, religious groups, the media, and universities.
- **History proves what is possible when alliances of like-minded governments, international organizations, faith-based groups, NGOs, artists, and individuals unite. The 1997 Ottawa Convention banned antipersonnel landmines. The 1998 Rome Statute established the International Criminal Court. With the same collective determination, we can eradicate modern slavery.**
- **But success demands more than new promises. It requires the rigorous application of existing legal instruments. Every framework available—not only anti-trafficking laws, but also human rights, labor, financial, and criminal justice mechanisms—must be used to prevent modern slavery, protect victims and survivors, and prosecute traffickers without exception.**
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 - **Human Rights** – Protection and remedies for all, regardless of legal status.



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- **Labor Law** – Address wage theft, unsafe conditions, and forced overtime.
 - **Migration & Refugee Law** – Safe migration pathways, victim-based refugee protection, and the principle of non-refoulement.
 - **International Humanitarian Law** – Safeguards life and dignity during armed conflict.
 - **Maritime Law** – Stronger enforcement at sea to protect workers and rescue victims.
 - **Air and Space Law**, which monitors air transport as well as the use of satellites to prevent and combat human trafficking.
 - **Environmental Law** – Address the destruction of the environment. This destruction uses slave labor and fuels modern slavery.
 - **International Economic Law** – Ensure trade and investment respect labor and human rights. Monitor supply chains of Governments, businesses, religious communities.
 - **AI Regulation** – Prevent technology from enabling or profiting from exploitation.
 - **Criminal Law** – Deliver justice through effective national and international prosecutions. Provide for compensation to victims and survivors.
- **Most importantly, it requires political will and public mobilization.**
 - Three key messages should be kept in mind:
 1. **Faith-based actors** play a vital role in anti-trafficking efforts, but they must confront their own ambiguities since faith can be a resource for both liberation and control.
 2. **Survivors are not only victims**; they are also experts, trainers, and agents of change.
 3. **Narratives matter, including religious, political, feminist, and abolitionist ones.** These narratives shape responses, sometimes constructively and sometimes problematically. We need inclusive cooperation across ideologies and sectors to build a victim-centered approach.

Conclusion

Twenty-five years after the Palermo Protocol, trafficking networks have not been dismantled. They remain entrenched—adapting, expanding, and thriving. Combating human trafficking is not charity. It is a moral imperative and a demand of justice – and it is also a matter of national, regional and international security.

Justice requires dismantling the economic and cultural systems that enable exploitation. Justice also means recognizing survivors as agents of change, not passive victims.



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Only then can we credibly claim to be fighting human trafficking and aiming to eradicate modern slavery.

In conclusion, we must recognize that this is ultimately a spiritual battle. Therefore, it is imperative that we commit ourselves to prayer—for the victims, for those who work tirelessly on their behalf, and for the conversion of the traffickers.

Geneva, 27 August 2025

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