**World Day Against Trafficking in Persons:   
UP Human Rights Specialist Weighs in on the Scale of the Scourge**

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On 30 July, the world commemorates [World Day Against Trafficking in Persons](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/endht/index.html), under the theme ‘Leave No Child Behind in the Fight Against Human Trafficking’. The terms ‘human trafficking’ and ‘trafficking in persons’ are used interchangeably. Alarmingly, children constitute [one-third](https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-make-almost-one-third-all-human-trafficking-victims-worldwide) of victims of sexual exploitation, forced labour, servitude, forced marriage and early marriage, which are major forms of human trafficking.

**What is human trafficking?**

The discourse around human trafficking has not yet been properly settled, despite international human rights instruments being in place. [Although legal ownership](https://theconversation.com/slavery-is-not-a-crime-in-almost-half-the-countries-of-the-world-new-research-115596) of human beings was abolished more than two centuries ago, today, the world is grappling with [modern-day slavery](https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/) in the form of human trafficking.

The United Nations’ [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons) is more commonly known as the Palermo Protocol, and defines trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them. The protocol is an international legal instrument to combat human trafficking.

Three [core elements](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/faqs.html) are related to trafficking: act (recruitment, transportation, harbouring and the receipt of people); means (force, deception, coercion and the abuse of power); and purpose (for exploitation). Sexual exploitation and forced labour continue to be the leading forms of human trafficking.

**Who are the victims of trafficking?**

Human traffickers prey on [vulnerable groups](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/our_work/DMM/MAD/Who-are-the-traffickers.pdf) such as those from poor families, unaccompanied minors, street children, illegal immigrants and those without parental care. Globally, in 2021, more than [50 million people](https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/50-million-people-worldwide-modern-slavery-0) were the victims of trafficking. However, while anyone could become a victim, women, yosung children and those who are in financial dire straits, such as unemployed young people, are more susceptible.

The [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf) shows that more than 50% of victims of modern-day slavery are people in financial distress who are misled by traffickers under the guise of employment. Those who come from dysfunctional families are also prone to being duped; in fact, about [20% of victims](https://theexodusroad.com/human-trafficking-victims/) are children who come from dysfunctional families. At least 13% of victims are being trafficked by their intimate partners; 10% are vulnerable migrants; 9% are children deprived of parental care; 6% are children without formal education; and 3% are people with physical disabilities.

**Trafficking versus migrant smuggling**

There is a fundamental difference between human trafficking and human smuggling. Human trafficking involves the mistreatment of someone through sexual exploitation or forced labour, whereas human smuggling is a “service” provided to someone who is seeking to enter another country illegally. A person who is being smuggled consents to the act, whereas a person who is being trafficked does not consent – their consent was obtained through misrepresentation, coercion, force or deceit.

With smuggling, the emphasis is on evading [the laws that regulate migration](https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2017/CSReport-13-1.pdf), whereas human trafficking can happen at someone’s home without crossing borders. However, in some cases, a crime can start out as smuggling but end up as trafficking.

**The global prevalence of human trafficking**

The most prevalent form of human trafficking is sexual exploitation, which constitutes more than [70%](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html) of cases. Most victims of sexual exploitation are women and young girls. The second-largest form of human trafficking is forced labour, which constitutes about 20% of cases. Around the world, [almost 20%](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html) of victims are children. However, the trend is different when it comes to Africa, where children make up more than 80% of victims, with the most affected region being West Africa.

**The conundrum of combating human trafficking**

Although the fight against human trafficking in general and child trafficking in particular is challenging for most regions in the world, Africa is one of the hardest-hit places. Many factors are exacerbating trafficking in Africa, but the following issues constitute major challenges that need to be addressed to comprehensively tackle the problem.

**Unemployment**. Volatile macro-economic conditions make people vulnerable. Joblessness, the rampant abuse of drugs, and learners dropping out of school are putting young people, especially girls, at risk. Research conducted for Sierra Leone in 2023 revealed that portering and fishing were the most [hazardous s](https://cenhtro.uga.edu/_resources/documents/Kambia_Summary_APRIES.pdf)ectors for child trafficking.

**Migration.** High levels of poverty, conflict and unemployment has led to an increase in labour migration, refugees and asylum seekers. Over [30 million Africans](https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/migration-dynamics-refugees-and-internally-displaced-persons-africa) are not living in the country of their origin, making them ripe for the picking. For example, in [Malawi](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2022/June/90-victims-of-human-trafficking-rescued-at-refugee-camp-in-malawi-five-arrests-made.html), traffickers were known to be preying on young girls at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp. As long as Africa continues to face migration and immigration calamities, human trafficking will continue to haunt the continent.

**Economic shocks.** Most African states are facing economic volatility due to rampant corruption and mismanagement, causing them to be classed as ‘[fragile states](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b1ee5274a31e00009a0/CRISE-InBrief-05.pdf)’. Shrinking economic conditions make access to health, education and basic social amenities difficult, resulting in a large portion of people in Africa, especially young people, falling prey to traffickers. In April this year, the [World Bank](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/04/08/african-afe-afw-economies-projected-to-grow-in-2024-but-faster-and-more-equitable-growth-needed-to-reduce-poverty) revealed that over 100 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of food insecurity due to conflict and climate. This makes young Africans susceptible to sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced labour and being recruited as child soldiers.

**Lack of education.** Africa continues to record the highest number of school drop-outs compared to other continents. In Nigeria, [more than 18 million children](https://blog.mustardinsights.com/in-africa/school-dropout-rate-in-africa-worsens-as-nigeria-ethiopia-lead-the-pack-mEEvB) dropped out of school in 2022; 60% of them were girls. In the same year, more than [6000 000 children dropped out of school](https://www.voanews.com/a/drought-prompts-over-600-000-school-dropouts-in-ethiopia/6566861.html) in Ethiopia due to drought. Data from only two African states shows that nearly 20 million children are at risk of being trafficked. After leaving school early, most young people find themselves idle and the only option is to look for employment or to get married. Traffickers find them desperate on the streets and easily swayed into exploitative situations.

**Legal and policy frameworks.** Legal and policy frameworks to combat human trafficking remain a challenge. Some countries continue to deny the existence of modern-day slavery, and the lack of political will has worsened the response of most states to promulgate legislation to combat trafficking. Research conducted by the [Conversation](https://theconversation.com/slavery-is-not-a-crime-in-almost-half-the-countries-of-the-world-new-research-115596) four years ago revealed that 94 countries do not have legislation to criminalise slavery; 112 had no penal provision to punish forced labour; and 180 states have no legislative provisions to criminalise servitude. While a lot might have changed since then, the statistics show how reluctant governments are to address modern-day slavery.

**The advent of technology.** Technology allows traffickers to streamline their methods of trans-organised crime. Despite the presence of internet safety precautionary measures, human traffickers make use of social media platforms, and fraudulent online scholarships and job recruitment websites to ensnare vulnerable individuals, with young people who are in search for greener pastures becoming their victims.

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