
Statement of Caritas Ukraine on child trafficking during war

Constructive Dialogue on Trafficking in Persons (9-10 July 2024)

Over the last 2.5 years, the vulnerabilities of Ukrainian children to trafficking have immensely increased. During wartime risks of child trafficking are growing both inside the country and abroad, presenting equal and urgent concerns.

According to 2024, HNRP¹ over 14.6 million people, including 3.2 million (22%) children, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The nearly two-thirds of children who have been forced to flee their homes continue to be exposed to various protection risks, including family separation, abuse, neglect, abduction, physical and sexual exploitation, injury and disability, violence and trafficking, psychosocial distress, mental health issues, leading to an acute child protection crisis.

Since the beginning of the war following growing risks of child trafficking are outlined:

Internal:

- **shortcomings in the implementation of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)** and assistance to trafficked persons. **Discrepancies** exist in the number of identified survivors by state social services and NGOs; for example, Caritas counter-trafficking centers in Lviv region registered 30 survivors over the last 12 months, and Caritas Chernivtsi - 18, yet local social services in Lviv region granted only 3 official status and in Chernivtsi – 0.
- the most vulnerable group is the **internally displaced population**, especially those without identification documents who cannot access state benefits or assistance programs, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Among the 12 cases of child trafficking identified by Caritas, 3 children were forced into begging, all from internally displaced families.
- **unexplored situation - shelters and collective centers for IDPs.** They require screening to identify potential victims, since on the 3rd year of the war, the most vulnerable people remain there. According to IOM findings, 65% of households intend to stay in collective centers over the next 12 months, with 15% being children.
- vague legislation **on surrogacy.** In 2023 a large-scale scheme of trafficking newborns abroad under the guise of surrogacy was exposed. The investigation established the facts of illegal transfer of 8 babies abroad and prevented an attempt to take another child abroad during martial law. Information on about 40 cases of transfer of newborn children from Ukraine abroad in violation of the current legislation is being checked. Criminal organization used vulnerable state of women for recruitment and further exploitation
- in occupied territories, **new forms of trafficking have emerged**, including involvement in military conflict.

Recommendations:

- Ensuring full implementation of state programs for combating human trafficking and survivors assistance especially during armed conflicts;
- Provision of sufficient continuous social and material assistance to vulnerable IDPs through national and international support;
- Constant monitoring of collective shelters and centers for IDPs and asylum/temporary protection seekers;
- Elaboration of clear legislation on surrogacy that will prevent the use of grey scheme for newborn trafficking.

Abroad:

- One of the biggest risks is that **social protection programs for temporary protection and asylum seekers** in some host countries **are being reduced**, potentially leaving many vulnerable forced migrants, primarily women with children, without decent support and exposed to human trafficking

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2024/01/Ukraine-HNRP-2024-Humanitarian-Needs-and-Response-Plan-UA-20240110.pdf>

- We also want to draw attention to the **educational system** which suffers from severe deficiencies - (900.000 children in Ukraine study remotely) Many children abroad continue their education through online Ukrainian schooling but do not attend local schools, often missing out on education entirely. Parents, typically the sole income earners, cannot supervise their children's education, leaving them unattended at home.
 - Online schooling without proper attention from the parents leads to risks of **cyber trafficking and online grooming**. Besides deterioration in students' academic success in basic school, this leads to lack of "live communication" between teachers and students, which also means – a lack of proper attention to the child's problems, and their physical and mental state.
- **Another group of children under the high risk of trafficking are children evacuated from Ukrainian care institutions**, especially children with disabilities.
- A new wave of migration which might be not that visible. **Fear of conscription** leads to the mass migration of Ukrainian boys under 18 years old. These unaccompanied children face high risks of trafficking due to economic hardships and language barriers. They are often reluctant to seek help or report exploitation for fear of deportation and conscription. This risk also exists within the country, where male trafficking victims may be unwilling to report for similar reasons.

Recommendations:

- Continuous funding and implementation of protection programs for international/temporary protection seekers on sufficient level; promotion of inclusion and integration of migrants into welcoming society;
- Obligatory enrollment of migrant children into local schools;
- Proactive monitoring and screening of evacuated children from care institutions on every stage of evacuation – in transit, destination countries and upon return.

Still the extremely difficult situation on occupied territories and for frontline communities should be outlined separately. According to Impact research (June 2024) main risk factors for child trafficking there are:

- Military activity in the location
- Unstable psychosocial conditions of people in the location
- Worsening financial situation of the households
- Limited supervision of children (incl. due to online schooling)
- Insufficient access to social services

There are evidences that recruitment or kidnapping of children took place in territory occupied territories and in areas where the national government was unable to enforce national prohibitions against the recruitment or use of children in armed conflict.²

An identified by our organization 17 y.o. girl was captured from her home and at gunpoint forced to remove the bodies and corpses of russian soldiers from the truck and carry them to the morgue. She was exploited and violated for several days.³

Children in conflict zones are incredibly vulnerable, reliant on adults' decisions in lawless environments. Despite revealed stories and number of saved children, many others remain at grave risk—separated from families, displaced, and losing hope of reunion. The root causes of such situation are violation by some countries of main UN Statute principles and disrespect of basic human rights.

A united democratic world must prioritize repatriating 19,546 deported Ukrainian children, reuniting them with their families. Caritas calls for support to reintegrate them into Ukrainian society and prosecute war criminals, especially those involved in child trafficking.

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² In the Statement the data of US Trafficking in Persons Report 2024 is used

³ Read the whole story attached

STORY OF ALINA, 17 y.o.

On 25.02.2022, a girl (aged 17) was at home with her brother and two sisters in a private house in Melitopol city, Zaporizhzhia region, (the city was occupied by russians). Persons dressed in the military uniform of the Russian Armed Forces entered the house and began to search the house. They were looking for Ukrainian symbols and other evidence of a pro-Ukrainian position. This lasted for about two hours, during which they took away household appliances, including a video camera, a video recorder, a camera, a computer and a laptop. In Alina's phone, they found a photo of an Ukrainian soldier in her contacts. When they saw this, she was taken out of the house by force, put in a military vehicle and taken to the commandant's office located in the police station. There they began to interrogate the girl. They took her cell phone and checked every contact. When they found a name signed in Ukrainian, they pushed her and hit her in the body and face, threatened her with weapons, pointed a machine gun at her and tried to get information about the Ukrainian military or people who had a pro-Ukrainian position. The interrogation was conducted by two Russian soldiers and lasted about two hours. She was scared, crying. After that, she was transferred to a cell where she spent the night with about ten other detained men and women.

In the morning, they were given water and no food. Then she and several others were loaded into a truck and brought to the city morgue in her town. Near the morgue was a truck with corpses of soldiers dressed in Russian armed forces uniforms. At gunpoint, they were taken out of the truck and forced to remove the bodies from the truck and take them to the morgue. The arrested did all this with their bare hands, without any special clothes. It was very disgusting. The corpses stank and were covered in blood. Some were missing limbs or heads.

The girl almost fainted. Only the machine gun aimed at her kept her on her feet. They worked for several hours until they unloaded everyone. After this work, the arrested people were returned to the commandant's office. Then two other Russian soldiers again interrogated the girl about every suspicious contact in her phone and tried to extract useful information from her. The girl could barely stand up. After that, she was placed back in the cell where she spent the night. During the whole day she was allowed to eat a few pieces of bread. In the morning, she was pushed into a truck again and taken to the morgue. She stayed there for three days. The girl could barely stand up. When they put her back on the truck, she barely understood what was happening to her. On the fourth day, when she got out of the truck near the morgue, she fainted. They tried to revive her, but she could not control herself. Alina could only hear someone asking for the military: "She is just a child. Take pity on her, we'll do everything ourselves." At the people's request, Alina was released. At the age of 17, she was detained for four days and forced to work for the russian army. After some time, Alina's mother raised money (200 USD) for a private carrier to take her out of the occupied territory for Ivano-Frankivsk. Caritas Ivano-Frankivsk provided psychological and material assistance to the girl. Now the girl is trying to forget that terrible situation and move on with her life. She rents a flat in Ivano-Frankivsk, has plans to start her own candle-making business to provide herself with an independent income.

With the help of Caritas Ivano-Frankivsk, the girl found herself and started her own business making scented candles.

Alina: "I am very grateful to Caritas for the help and support I received. I dreamed to start small business. And now with these costs I can produce candles and sell them. Thank you very much! I have started a new life!"