

# Cyber-Trafficking in Mexico

*Rubi A. Corral, Maryam Hussein, and Mehmil Zia*

*Rubi A. Corral graduated in May 2019 with a Master of Arts in Security Policy Studies with concentrations in Cybersecurity and Transnational Security from the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Universidad de las Américas Puebla.*

*Maryam Hussein is a graduate student at the George Washington University, pursuing a Masters of Arts in International Affairs. Professionally, Maryam served four years in the United States Navy as a Mechanical Engineer and left in 2017. Following that, she worked for the U.S. Government as a Language Analyst, and later became an Intelligence Analyst. Maryam obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Translation Studies from Petra University in Amman, Jordan in 2010.*

*Mehmil Zia is a recent graduate of the Elliott School of International Affairs, having received a Master of Arts in Security Policy Studies with concentrations in Cyber Security and Transnational Security Policy. She received a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from the American University in 2015.*

## ABSTRACT

---

Cyber-trafficking is defined as the use of the internet and technology to move humans across borders for sexual or labor exploitation, a phenomenon that has emerged due to the rise of technology and ease of accessibility to the internet.<sup>1</sup> In Mexico, human traffickers exploit social media and Internet platforms to recruit and advertise victims for sexual exploitation. The purpose of this paper is to answer the following questions:

1. How are the Internet and its associated technologies facilitating the crime of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Mexico?
2. How do those conducting the crime of human trafficking for sexual exploitation increase their profitability through the usage of the internet and related technologies?

This paper presents policy recommendations to stakeholders in Mexico, the United States and the technology industry to help combat cyber-trafficking for sexual exploitation in Mexico. The Government of Mexico (GoM) should counter corruption by strengthening the judiciary and the rule of law in the country. To this end, the GoM should collaborate with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop trainings for members of the judiciary, the Attorney General's office and public defenders in order to enhance their capabilities to identify, investigate and prosecute cyber-crime. The United States, in turn,

should curb the demand driving human trafficking by proposing a law inspired by the Nordic Model, which criminalizes the buyers, traffickers and facilitators of sex trafficking, rather than punishing the victims. The tech industry should work individually and with the GoM to create custom tools and resources that help combat cyber-trafficking in Mexico. By establishing a partnership between the public and private sectors, the anti-cyber-trafficking tools can be shaped around the existing policies and laws of the country.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Mexico is a primary source, point of transit, and final destination for human trafficking. According to the 2018 U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report, Mexico does not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking. Since the country is rampant with corruption and impunity, it is challenging to fully eliminate human trafficking in the country, and cyber-trafficking in particular.<sup>2</sup> Cyber-trafficking is a transnational crime that can be difficult for some countries to combat due to challenges in the enforcement of, and compliance with, existing international protocols. Some of the difficulties that these states face include the failure to allocate adequate resources to combating cyber-trafficking, and the complexity of tracking transnational criminals. Moreover, due to the rapid changes in technology, law enforcement agencies are often unable to stay up-to-date with technological developments. These challenges are exacerbated by law enforcement's lack of knowledge, training and research on cyber-trafficking.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to present key findings and policy recommendations to stakeholders in Mexico and the United States that can help combat cyber-trafficking for sexual exploitation. The key questions for this paper are:

- 1. How are the Internet and its associated technologies facilitating the crime of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Mexico?*
- 2. How do those conducting the crime of human trafficking for sexual exploitation increase their profitability through the usage of the internet and related technologies?*

Research for this paper involved review and analysis of topic-related reports, government policies and reporting, and interviews with officials in Mexico and the United States regarding trafficking in persons (TIP) and cyber-trafficking.

## **FINDINGS ON CYBER-TRAFFICKING IN MEXICO**

### *THE ROLE OF LOCAL CULTURE*

Local culture indirectly contributes to human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women in Mexico by placing them in a position of vulnerability. Gender stereotypes that depict women as weak and highly dependent on men to survive are deeply ingrained in the local culture.<sup>4</sup> The general expectation that women should be submissive housewives and bear children creates an environment in which misogyny is heightened. Children grow up observing particular gender roles and very specific definitions of masculinity, which creates a cycle in which women remain repressed. This is further aggravated by the legality of prostitution. Men are permitted to experiment with their sexuality, and as a result normalize prostitution at an early age. These traditional behavioral patterns have led some anthropologists to theorize that there is a link between the perceptions of women and human trafficking in Mexico. On the one hand, the prevalence of sex trafficking in the country adds to these perceptions.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, human traffickers exploit these perceptions to meet the continuous demand for sex.<sup>6</sup>

Human trafficking has infiltrated Mexican society by creating extensive local networks of traffickers. Entire towns are engaged in the trade of sex trafficking.<sup>7</sup> This is the case in Tenancingo, Tlaxcala. Tenancingo is a small municipality in southern Mexico that is often called the sexual exploitation capital of Mexico and the operations hub of human trafficking rings in the country. In this city of fewer than 12,000 people, almost 10% of the population works in the recruitment, sexual exploitation and sale of women.<sup>8</sup> Human trafficking has become so embedded in the popular culture of the city that it has a holiday to celebrate the day of the “trafficker”.<sup>9</sup> Human traffickers in Tenancingo run family-based rings where entire families are involved in trafficking. Many trafficking operations center on Tenancingo. Women travel there, sometimes because they have been manipulated with promises of a different lifestyle and luxurious possessions,<sup>10</sup> and sometimes because they have been threatened with violence against themselves or their friends and family. Once the victims arrive, the traffickers send them to other women, often relatives of the trafficker, who will teach the victim how to become a prostitute.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, traffickers take the victims to Mexico City to exploit them. Although the majority of exploitation occurs in Mexico City, victims are trafficked from other states, including Oaxaca, Baja California, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Puebla.<sup>12</sup>

## *RECRUITMENT*

The Internet and social media have made it easier for human traffickers to identify, recruit and access a larger pool of victims. However, the use of technology in sex trafficking is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1990s, innovative devices like pagers and mobile phones have been used for the recruitment, advertisement and sale of people for sexual exploitation. Traffickers began by using these devices to expand their escort and prostitution businesses and subsequently moved their illicit operations to the online platforms.<sup>13</sup> According to the director of the Global Emancipation Network (GEN), recruitment mostly takes place on the open web and starts on social media websites and applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.<sup>14</sup> Afterward, the communication “moves to encrypted chat apps and tools like Tor” and mobile apps like Kik and WhatsApp<sup>15</sup> to ensure the anonymity of the process.<sup>16</sup>

Although it is challenging to gather reliable data on the Internet regarding cyber-sex trafficking, experts from law enforcement, academia and international organizations concur that technology has increased the reach of human traffickers and assists them in their crimes. The process of finding, grooming, and marketing victims is complex and requires coordination between multiple people.<sup>17</sup> The Internet and smartphone applications allow anonymity and plausible deniability to the criminals, making it easier to communicate and commit crimes without detection by law enforcement.<sup>18</sup> Organized crime groups have utilized cyber-trafficking to generate vast profits while staying under the radar of law enforcement.<sup>19</sup>

Cyber-traffickers use public profiles and accounts on social media to prey on vulnerable women who are young, drug addicts, mentally unstable or disabled, or who do not have many friends or who have expressed discontent with their families.<sup>20</sup> There are two types of recruitment: voluntary and involuntary.<sup>21</sup> Voluntary recruitment is often perceived as prostitution rather than trafficking, as women are lured into a romantic relationship or with promises of material possessions, luxuries, and/or wealth.<sup>22</sup> In involuntary recruitment, a victim might be lured into sexual slavery with a job offer in another city or foreign country.<sup>23</sup> Online grooming and solicitation are profitable for criminals as it allows them to target and easily recruit more victims, especially when they are targeting minors.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of Mexico, Facebook is the most commonly used platform for recruitment, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp. Facebook, which is used in 80-90% of cases for recruitment,<sup>25</sup> allows the traffickers to boast their luxurious lifestyles, attract susceptible women and build a false romantic relationship with them.<sup>26</sup> However, according to the FBI's Cyber Unit and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) in Mexico City, Facebook cooperates

with law enforcement and international organizations to develop policies to combat trafficking in person and to aid law enforcement in their investigations.

## *MARKETING*

The Internet gives traffickers a larger pool of potential clients for marketing in Mexico since the majority of advertisements for sexual services exist online and are easily accessible for those looking to purchase these services. The anonymity of the Internet also helps traffickers evade law enforcement throughout the marketing process.<sup>27</sup>

In an interview, Rosi Orozco, the president of the anti-trafficking NGO Comisión Unidos Contra La Trata, confirmed that traffickers are using social media applications, and Instagram in particular, to advertise sex services from women and underage girls.<sup>28</sup> Traffickers in Mexico also used ZonaDivas.com, a Mexican website that advertised women in classified ads targeting high-level executives, politicians and artists.<sup>29</sup> The advertisements on ZonaDivas.com included semi-naked photographs, along with the contact information, age and physical description of the victim. It is important to note that these advertisements might not have reflected the victim's true age, in particular in the case of underage girls.<sup>30</sup> The website further provided travel options and a description of the victim's personality and the services on offer. The page even offered a calendar detailing the schedule of escorts, as well as tours in Mexican cities, including Aguascalientes, Cancun, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Pachuca and Puebla.<sup>31</sup> However, not all advertisements involved sexual services, thus avoiding legal action against the website. Instead, other advertisements offered massages or companion services.<sup>32</sup> They would list at least one phone number to call or text and code words to describe the services. For instance, "outcalls" implied that the woman was available to come to the customer's site, whereas "in-calls" indicated that the buyer would have to come to the woman's location. Although ZonaDivas.com was shut down after the arrest of its administrator in 2018, it was reactivated under the name "La Boutique VIP", a portal that operates similarly to its predecessor.<sup>33</sup>

## *OPERATIONS*

In Mexico, human traffickers do not resort to technology as much in the operational phase of trafficking. While recruitment and marketing processes are increasingly moving to online platforms, traffickers continue to use traditional cash-based methods for their operations and financial transactions. Interviews with illicit finance academics and experts revealed that the sale of victims is not occurring through online systems like PayPal, Venmo or BitCoin, but rather through cash-based transactions.<sup>34</sup>

The operations phase is divided into three main stages, in each of which technology plays a different role: (1) establishing control, (2) transportation; and (3) exploitation.

### **1. Establishing Control**

Once the traffickers have successfully lured the victim through an online platform, they use physical and psychological threats to control them. They employ manipulation techniques such as constant humiliation, torture, sleep deprivation, malnutrition, rape and forced consumption of drugs and alcohol.<sup>35</sup> The traffickers isolate the victims by taking them away from their support system and forcing them to avoid contact with their families and friends. They control the victims' schedules, take away and retain identification documents and eliminate forms of communication (such as a cell phones or access to social media).

Many sex trafficking victims do not identify themselves as victims, because, in a lot of cases, they are romantically involved with their captors. This makes it easier for the captor to control the victim. Since prostitution is not a crime in Mexico, these women may be manipulated to believe that they are selling their bodies to help their families.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that once a victim has been exploited for many years and has risen in the trafficking ring's hierarchy, they may become perpetrators themselves, helping to exploit other women in exchange for benefits, such as compensation for each victim they engage, a smaller workload or gifts.<sup>37</sup>

### **2. Transportation**

According to Article 3 of the Palermo Convention, transportation is a fundamental part of the definition of human trafficking, which establishes that "human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer and harboring of persons..."<sup>38</sup> The victims are separated from their families, moved domestically or internationally and then transported to locations where they provide sexual services to the clients. Transportation is usually done by land, avoiding the need to present victims' personal identification to the authorities. When the victim is moved locally, the perpetrators can use Internet-based transportation applications, such as Uber or Cabify, to track the victim until they arrive at the location of the client. Other geolocation applications can also be used to track the location of the victim at all times, like Footprints, Find My Friends or Life 360.

### **3. Exploitation**

Commonly, traffickers send descriptions of their victims to clients through social media applications or websites on which they made the business deal. Once they agree on the price, the location and the method of payment, the trafficker sends the victim to the buyer. The buyer can then transfer the money to the trafficker's account using online banking. However, according to an

expert in illicit financing, the human trafficking business mainly remains as a cash-based activity.<sup>39</sup> For traffickers, mobile phones and the Internet tend to serve as a means of communication with the potential buyer. Clients, in turn, use them to conduct the search for and ultimately the purchase of the service.<sup>40</sup> Perpetrators further exploit new technologies or applications to photograph or film victims. In some cases, the traffickers produce pornographic material of the victims at very little cost and eliminate the risk of detection by only sharing the content with their potential buyers online.<sup>41</sup>

## **POLICY OPTIONS**

### *MEXICO POLICY OPTION #1: COMBAT CORRUPTION*

Corruption in government institutions constitutes a significant obstacle to combating sex trafficking. Corrupt government officials do not flag situations where handlers are blatantly coercing women and children.<sup>42</sup> In fact, they facilitate the transportation of victims within Mexico and across its borders.<sup>43</sup> Traffickers consistently rely on buying the silence of corrupt officials and bribing them to avoid arrest.<sup>44</sup> Transparency International ranks Mexico as a highly corrupt country, placing it at 138 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index (with 180 being the most corrupt).<sup>45</sup> Therefore, we propose an integrated strategy to combat the rampant corruption affecting cyber-related sex trafficking in the country by (a) strengthening Mexico's rule of law and judiciary by providing specialized training for judges, police forces and prosecutors to help them identify, investigate and prosecute cybercrime; and (b) granting investigative authority to the police.

#### **a. Strengthen the Rule of Law and Judiciary**

The lack of cyber-crime related training for state prosecutors, judges, and lawyers that are in charge of investigating, prosecuting and defending the victims is a limitation in the fight against cyber-trafficking in Mexico. The team proposes that the Government of Mexico (GoM) team up with other entities dedicated to combating human trafficking such as local and international non-governmental organizations, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) and leading activists, lawyers and academics to plan and develop training for members of the judiciary, the Attorney General's Office and public defenders to enhance their ability to address cyber-crime. We propose that the GoM also allocate more resources to set up a larger cyber investigations section that includes a specialized anti-cyber-trafficking unit comprising the aforementioned trained personnel.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** One of the main advantages of this proposed coordinated effort between the Mexican government and activists,

lawyers and academics is the expertise the latter bring to the fight against sex trafficking. They can advise law enforcement and state prosecutors on how to identify victims and traffickers, as well as on how to create an adequate support system for victims. Another benefit of having cyber-crime-related training for law enforcement and prosecutors is that investigations and prosecutions can be expedited if the personnel handling the procedures are better versed in the technicalities of cyber-crime. This proposal will also prevent human traffickers from taking advantage of the inability of law enforcement officials and prosecutors to act against them. A disadvantage of this option is that funding for such training might be challenging to come by since the government is now focusing its efforts on other security issues in the country, such as drug-related violence. Human trafficking is not a top priority of this new administration and uncertainty about the new functions of the Federal Police, which has been integrated into the newly formed National Guard, poses a major challenge to the creation of a specialized cyber-trafficking unit.<sup>46</sup> Another disadvantage is that key actors in anti-human trafficking efforts might be reluctant to cooperate with each other and to share information, which would be a limitation for the working groups proposed here.

#### **b. Provide Investigative Authority to the Police**

The Mexican police currently do not possess investigative authority. Mexico recently transitioned from an inquisitive system to an accusatory judicial system. The intention of this transition was to combat the outdatedness of the old system and to comply with the international treaties that Mexico had ratified, which require a strict enforcement of human rights legal frameworks.<sup>47</sup> Under this new system, judges will process all criminal cases in public trials. The federal or local public prosecutor's office (PPO) is the only entity authorized to exercise criminal action in representation of the state of Mexico. The PPO initiates and manages all criminal investigations and the police act as an assistant to those investigations.<sup>48</sup> As such, the Mexican police do not have the authority to act without instructions from the PPO. This cripples the police's ability to react when they find any signs of TIP online. While the police can send leads to the federal or local PPOs of suspicious online activity relating to TIP, it is the PPO's responsibility to open an investigation. This limits the ability of law enforcement to respond to cyber-trafficking, which demands a prompt response in order to apprehend the criminals and bring justice to the victims.

We propose giving investigative authority to the police, so they can immediately open an investigation when they find indications of human trafficking rings operating online, without the need for a report issued by the PPO. Once they gather enough evidence, they should deliver a detailed investigative report to the PPO, which should take swift administrative



action and issue a court order to arrest and prosecute the criminals concerned. However, the PPO only has limited human and financial resources to manage investigations, which results in many cases receiving insufficient attention. We recommend that once it grants the police investigative authority, the GoM should allocate more funding to fight cybercrime, expand the Federal Police's Cyber Investigation Unit and create a focused section of the Cyber Investigation Unit that identifies and investigates cyber-trafficking criminals. Such a section should partner with companies such as Microsoft (Digital Crimes Unit), Thorn (Spotlight), the Global Emancipation Network (GEN), TellFinder and Domain-specific Insight Graphs (DIG).

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** The commitment of President Lopez Obrador to fighting government corruption increases the potential for the creation of a specialized unit with the goal of strengthening the country's rule of law. In addition, the fact that the administration is restructuring the country's security forces means there is space to grant investigative authority to the police as a means of reducing crime across the country. One of the main challenges to this option is the legal obstacles that changing police authority might face. It would require a constitutional amendment, which may not be a priority for the current Congress. Although partnering with high-tech companies and employing their tools could be highly beneficial to the Government of Mexico in fighting human trafficking online, it is currently unknown whether Mexico's digital infrastructure would be able to fully utilize them.

## *MEXICO POLICY OPTION #2: UTILIZE TECHNOLOGY*

Some of the best means of combating cyber-trafficking are the Internet and technology itself. The GoM should partner with social media giants and online companies, particularly those whose platforms are used for human trafficking. Uber, for example, has a working relation with the Mexican authorities to prevent women and girls from being transported via their platform, while also helping to build cases against drivers complicit in human trafficking.<sup>49</sup> Per the Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas (FEVIMTRA), Facebook also works with the Mexican government and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to "strengthen their safety measures" and remove pornographic content, especially child pornography.<sup>50</sup> The company provides solutions for authorities to better fight cyber-trafficking that other online platforms could implement to combat cyber-trafficking and build closer relationships with law enforcement.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** One of the advantages of the GoM's collaboration with social media applications and websites is that the government can take advantage of their platforms to conduct online anti-human trafficking campaigns. For instance, the pages could help warn young people about human

traffickers and their tactics, while educating them on signs that someone might be a victim. Since social media is the primary means of communication among youth as well as a prevalent recruitment tool, warnings about human trafficking would be an effective way to reach a younger audience. Another advantage of partnering with tech companies is that the GoM can learn other innovative ways to reach people through the Internet and employ targeted anti-trafficking campaigns.

This policy option might be difficult to implement due to taboos surrounding sex education. Social media users may be uncomfortable with anti-human trafficking campaigns lining their online feeds. Another challenge is that the government as well as the relevant companies might be reluctant to collaborate. Social media sites may be concerned with perceptions that they are giving personal data to the state, while the state may be worried about intervening in the private lives of the people of Mexico or engaging in censorship.

### *MEXICO POLICY OPTION #3: CONDUCT EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS*

One of the first steps in preventing human trafficking should be conducting educational campaigns at the local level. The Mexican government should begin educational campaigns early, starting in elementary school, where young children should be taught about the dangers of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. School curricula should include teaching students about work options outside of the sex trade. This would work to ensure that human trafficking and sexual exploitation is not normalized. In addition, it is the responsibility of the GoM to put measures into place to alleviate poverty, which in turn would reduce dependence on illegitimate or dangerous sources of income.

The government should include sexual education in the public school curriculum, despite the likely pushback from conservative groups in Mexico, who believe that parents should teach their children about sex.<sup>51</sup> Finally, educational campaigns should promote a system of reporting. In many communities, victims and bystanders may suffer or witness abuse and exploitation but feel that they should not and cannot report the crimes to the police. This is often because the abuser, trafficker or criminal is a friend or family member. However, the importance of recognizing a crime and flagging it with law enforcement should be encouraged by reinforcing the importance of reporting. Mexico may benefit from a campaign similar to the “if you see something, say something” campaigns conducted at major transportation hubs in the United States.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** Education campaigns would reduce the susceptibility of women and girls to online recruitment and deception by human traffickers, since they would be better equipped to recognise attempts

at recruitment. Another benefit is that a comprehensive sex education program would be an effective way to reach a larger population, and of youth in particular. The onus is on the government to work with NGOs to promote and conduct campaigns in vulnerable communities to discuss and dispel taboos surrounding gender roles and sexuality. Finally, promoting a culture of reporting in the country could lead to more numerous arrests and more successful prosecutions of traffickers.

The main disadvantage of grassroots campaigns is that they only work if they are implemented in conjunction with other policies, such as the strengthening of the judiciary system. Another disadvantage is that vulnerable populations are difficult to reach since impoverished communities may be isolated and difficult to access. The GoM may have to allocate additional funding and resources to be able to reach these vulnerable populations, which could create resistance to such campaigns.

### *MEXICO POLICY RECOMMENDATION*

The GoM should develop an integrated strategy to enhance Mexico's rule of law and strengthen its judiciary system. The strategy's main goal would be to provide specialized training to judges, police forces and prosecutors to enhance their capabilities to identify, investigate and prosecute cybercrime more efficiently. The government should team up with local and international NGOs and the private sector in order to shape a robust anti-cyber-trafficking policy that can eventually result in more prosecutions and fewer victims. This will help form skillful professionals who in turn are better equipped to face the challenges new technologies pose for anti-human trafficking institutions.

**Implementation:** The GoM should form partnerships with local and international NGOs as well as the private sector to develop training strategies for judges, police forces and prosecutors to enhance their capabilities to identify, investigate and prosecute cybercrime criminals more effectively. The government should also encourage universities that teach about human trafficking cases to include a technological component. This would enable future law enforcement agents and lawyers to have a better understanding of cyber-crime-related issues.

The GoM has to be consistent about providing training to law enforcement. Cyber-crime is an issue that is always changing. Law enforcement officials need to have current awareness about the best practices and tools to combat cyber-trafficking. The GoM should create a multi-level training program that is updated on a regular basis and which adapts to the specific needs of the police. This will make law enforcement personnel better prepared to assist the prosecutor's office with prosecutions and to decrease cyber-based human trafficking.

## *U.S. POLICY OPTION #1: TARGET DEMAND*

One of the more effective solutions for tackling the problem of sex trafficking is the eradication of demand using the Nordic Model. This model was first introduced in Sweden in 1999, and involves legislation that criminalizes the purchase of sexual services and legalizes prostitution. A 2010 Swedish government report offers proof of the effectiveness of this model, indicating a 50% to 70% reduction in prostitution when the focus was on reducing the demand of sex services.<sup>52</sup>

The sex trafficking market is driven by the increased demand for sex services, incentivizing the traffickers to continue supplying as long as there is demand. While the United States is continuously working to combat sex trafficking by criminalizing prostitution, the problem has proven to lie with the demand (buyers) and not the supply (victims of sex trafficking).<sup>53</sup>

The laws concerning prostitution in the United States are mostly state-based. According to the 10th Amendment of the United States Constitution, it is the states' domain to permit, prohibit or regulate commercial sex. As for federal laws, Section 108 of the 2015 Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act suggests equal prosecution of both buyers and traffickers.<sup>54</sup> In a small number of cases, buyers have been specifically targeted for purchasing sex services, such as in the case of child sex trafficking.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the U.S. Federal Government should introduce a policy or law inspired by the Nordic Model that criminalizes the buyers, traffickers and facilitators of sex trafficking and other sex services, while decriminalizing the victims of prostitution.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** Research shows that by criminalizing the buyers and traffickers, the demand for prostitution has decreased in some places like Florida and Utah. Financially, the implementation of this model will save the government significant funds allocated to combating sex exploitation, which instead could be used for victim recovery programs.<sup>56</sup>

However, the implementation of this model may face certain challenges. Major opponents of this model, such as Amnesty International and sex workers, have called to ban the Nordic Model. They argue that the prohibition of sex purchasing has created social and economic problems, as many of the foreign sex workers in Sweden were displaced, deported or exposed to harassment and stigmatization.<sup>57</sup>

## *U.S. POLICY OPTION #2: CREATE A NEW BILATERAL AGREEMENT*

The cooperation between the United States and Mexico has proven successful in tackling human trafficking as seen by the outcomes of the Bilateral Human Trafficking Enforcement Initiative. The United States has prosecuted over 170 and Mexico over 30 defendants, while together the two states have rescued 200

trafficked victims, including 20 minors.<sup>58</sup>

However, since TIP has moved to online platforms, the United States should consider a new bilateral initiative that would include the cyber component. The U.S. government should help strengthen Mexican capabilities to fight cyber-crimes and boost the relationship between American and Mexican information and communication technology companies and government agencies.<sup>59</sup>

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** A bilateral initiative to promote Mexico's cyber capabilities and National Cyber Security Strategy can help the United States reduce the rate of human trafficking crimes across the borders, as it will allow both countries to better track down traffickers and identify a larger number of victims. However, the U.S. Congress may be skeptical about establishing such initiatives, due to the funds and resources required and concerns regarding sovereignty.<sup>60</sup>

### *U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATION*

The most effective means of preventing and combating sex trafficking is adopting a policy that targets the demand of sex services, rather than those who supply them. While the Nordic Model suggests decriminalizing prostitution and penalizing the buyers and traffickers, the United States should selectively adopt this model, by creating an anti-trafficking policy that targets the demand.

**Implementation:** An effective anti-cyber trafficking policy that targets the demand for sex services can be achieved by: (1) developing technology and tools to identify frequent buyers and gather information on their behaviors, (2) expanding the capabilities of federal agencies to monitor international online sex trafficking, (3) investing in programs that will help victims of prostitution who are seeking a better lifestyle; and (4) establishing laws that address online sex trafficking, by penalizing the buyers and the administrators of the Internet platforms that publish sexual advertisements.

### *PRIVATE/TECH INDUSTRY POLICY OPTION #1: REPLICATE TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS*

The private sector should work with federal governments where there is a need for cyber-trafficking technological tools that align with local laws, policies and customs. The private industry and tech companies have advanced technology and abilities to develop tools for the betterment of the society. However, sometimes these tools are only known or available in the United States. They should be made more readily available to countries where local legislation allows, such as Mexico.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** This option is relatively straightforward, since it requires a simple replication of pre-existing tools in Mexico. The

cooperation between tech companies and the Mexican government will ensure that all technology used to combat cyber-trafficking adheres to Mexican legislation. As such, tech companies should not suffer from significant backlash or lawsuits from the Mexican people due to violations of rights or freedoms.

The main disadvantage of this policy option is that it requires political and financial support from both the tech industry and governments. If the issue of cyber-trafficking is not a priority issue for the GoM, it would not be in the interest of the private sector to commission this type of project.

### *PRIVATE/TECH INDUSTRY POLICY OPTION #2: COLLABORATE WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR*

The key to successful anti-human trafficking policies is cooperation between the public and private sectors and NGOs. Those private companies whose platforms are exploited for the purpose of human trafficking have an obligation to work with governments, as well as international organizations, to combat cyber-crimes. For example, they could sponsor informational sessions, workshops and trainings on cyber-crime and human trafficking in order to better educate individuals in the public sector who may not be familiar with the connection between cyberspace and human trafficking. In addition, tech and social media companies should work closely with law enforcement to bring them up to date on the latest developments in cyber-trafficking so that the latter are better equipped to combat it.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** One big advantage to such initiatives is the potential for information-sharing across sectors. Currently, misinformation and unreliable data on cyber-trafficking is rife in Mexico. A closer partnership between NGOs and the public and private sectors would diminish this challenge. This would open up a forum for public discourse on cyber-trafficking and sexual exploitation in Mexico, which would contribute to projects intended to counter taboos surrounding sexual education.

A disadvantage of this policy option is that tech companies, NGOs and governments might have competing priorities, and as such struggle to reach a consensus on how to tackle cyber-trafficking. Due to competition among different tech companies, it is possible that they would be reluctant to share all the information and data at their disposal.

### *PRIVATE/TECH INDUSTRY POLICY RECOMMENDATION*

Tech companies should work with the GoM to create custom tools and resources that align with the existing policies and laws of the country and that can be shaped to combat cyber-trafficking methods in Mexico specifically. This would also allow the private sector to assist law enforcement in updating the

technology currently used to counter cyber-crime while building a relationship with key stakeholders in Mexico.

**Implementation:** The private sector would need to hire or consult lawyers and law enforcement officials from all over Mexico. The technical development of the tools would not be a great burden since the software of interest, such as DIG and TellFinder, already exists. It would also be crucial for tech companies to build relationships of trust among each other in order to more confidently share information. Without the cooperation of local governments and NGOs, it would be difficult to implement this project. Thus, the tech industry should propose this project to the newly elected government as soon as possible in order to prime their interest and increase the chances of implementation.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of the Internet and related technologies has increased the reach of human traffickers in Mexico by granting them access to larger numbers of potential victims and buyers. It has facilitated cyber-trafficking by making recruitment, marketing and operational processes easier and more readily available. Due to a culture that contributes to sex trafficking and a lack of technical expertise and capabilities on behalf of the government, online perpetrators remain mainly anonymous and out of the hands of the law. The GoM and the United States, alongside the non-governmental and private sectors, must make combating cyber-trafficking a priority and make policy changes to more efficiently and effectively apprehend and convict these criminals.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, “Comportamiento de los Indicadores de los Mercados Regulados 2018,” *IFT*, 2018, <http://www.ift.org.mx/sites/default/files/contenidogeneral/transparencia/indicadores2018vacc.pdf>
- 2 U.S. Department of State, “2018 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mexico,” *Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons*, accessed on October 5, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-trafficking-in-persons-report/>, 105.
- 3 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “International Framework for Action to Implement the Trafficking in Persons Protocol,” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, 2009, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Framework\\_for\\_Action\\_TIP.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Framework_for_Action_TIP.pdf), 12.
- 4 Veronica Caporal, “Cyber-trafficking in Mexico,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 12, 2019.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Official at the Attorney General Office in Mexico (FGR), “Cyber-Trafficking” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 8 Ignacio De los Reyes, “Viaje a Tenancingo, la capital de la esclavitud sexual en México,” *Animal Político*, May 23, 2012, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2012/05/viaje-a-tenancingo-la-capital-de-la-esclavitud-sexual-en-mexico/>

- 9 Official at the Attorney General Office in Mexico (FGR), “Cyber-Trafficking” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 10 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations Unit in Mexico City (ICE/HSI/Mexico), “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 8, 2019.
- 11 Former Human Trafficker -Comisión Unidos contra la Trata, Interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 12 Officials at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 13, 2019.
- 13 Melissa Farley, Kenneth Franzblau, and M. Alexis Kennedy, “Online Prostitution and Trafficking,” *Albany Law Review* 77, no. 3 (August 2014): 1061.
- 14 Sherrie Caltagirone, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 1, 2019.
- 15 Selena Larson, “Anti-Human Trafficking Group Uses Data to Track Criminals,” *CNNMoney*, August 17, 2017, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/08/17/technology/business/human-trafficking-data-global-emancipation-network/index.html>
- 16 Sherrie Caltagirone, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 1, 2019.
- 17 “Technology and Human Trafficking,” UN GIFT, February 2008, 3. <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2008/BP017TechnologyandHumanTrafficking.pdf>
- 18 Ibid, 3
- 19 Ibid, 5
- 20 Department of Justice Lawyer, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Washington DC, March 1, 2019.
- 21 Mayank Kejriwal, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, March 12, 2019.
- 22 Herbert B. Dixon, Jr., “Human Trafficking and the Internet,” *The Judges’ Journal* 52, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 36-39, [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/judges\\_journal/vol52no1-jj2013-tech.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/judges_journal/vol52no1-jj2013-tech.pdf)
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Angela Hawke and Alison Raphael, “Offenders on the Move: Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism,” ECPAT-USA, May 2016, 43, <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/offenders-on-the-move-global-study-on-sexual-exploitation-of-children-in-travel-and-tourism-2016>
- 25 Official at the Attorney General Office in Mexico (FGR), “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 26 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations Unit in Mexico City (ICE/HSI/Mexico), “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 8, 2019.
- 27 Lydia Cacho, *Slavery Inc: The Untold Story of International Sex Trafficking* (London: Portobello Books, 2010), 256.
- 28 Rosi Orozco - Comisión Unidos contra la Trata, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 29 Cacho, *Slavery Inc: The Untold Story of International Sex Trafficking*, 256.
- 30 “Common Sex Trafficking Language,” Shared Hope International, accessed on April 18, 2019, <https://sharedhope.org/the-problem/trafficking-terms/>
- 31 Newsbeezzer, “Zona Divas, the escort site claiming to be against human trafficking,” *Newsbeezzer*, 18 April 2018, <https://newsbeezzer.com/mexicoeng/zona-divas-the-escort-site-claiming-to-be-against-human-trafficking/>
- 32 Ibid, 37.
- 33 Rodrigo Gutiérrez González, ““La Boutique” el nuevo portal ligado a “Zona Divas,”” *La Silla Rota*, <https://lasillarota.com/denuncian-nuevo-portal-zona-divas-boutique-vip/239813>
- 34 Jill Jermano, “Cyber-trafficking,” interview by authors, Washington DC, February 28, 2019.
- 35 Siddhartha Sarkar, “Use of technology in human trafficking networks and sexual exploitation: A



- cross-sectional multi-country study,” *A Social Work Journal* 5, (January 2015): 55-68. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21931674.2014.991184?src=recsys>
- 36 Official at the Attorney General Office in Mexico (FGR), “Cyber-Trafficking.”
- 37 Former Human Trafficker - Comisión Unidos contra la Trata, interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019
- 38 Sabine Witting, “Cyber’ Trafficking? An Interpretation of the Palermo Protocol in the Digital Era,” *Völkerrechtsblog*, 28 June 2017, doi: 10.17176/20170629-162348
- 39 Jermano, Jill. “Cyber-trafficking.” Interview by authors, Washington DC, February 28, 2019.
- 40 Sarkar, “Use of technology in human trafficking networks and sexual exploitation: A cross-sectional multi-country study.” 55-68.
- 41 “Mexico Corruption Perceptions Index,” Transparency International, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.transparency.org/country/MEX#>
- 42 Monique Villa, “Money, Corruption and Slavery,” *Huffington Post*, December 18, 2012 [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/monique-villa/the-most-profitable-commo\\_b\\_1974075.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/monique-villa/the-most-profitable-commo_b_1974075.html)
- 43 “Explotación sexual infantil,” UNICEF, accessed March 24, 2018, [https://www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/17045\\_17519.html](https://www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/17045_17519.html)
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 “Mexico Corruption Perceptions Index,” Transparency International, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.transparency.org/country/MEX#>
- 46 EFE, “El Gobierno de AMLO prepara un nuevo plan para combatir la trata de personas,” *Economía hoy*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.economiahoy.mx/internacional-eAm-mexico/noticias/9777109/03/19/El-Gobierno-de-AMLO-prepara-un-nuevo-plan-para-combatir-la-trata-de-personas-.html>
- 47 “¿Cuáles son las funciones del Ministerio Público?,” *Proyecto Justicia*, May 6, 2015, <http://proyectojusticia.org/funciones-del-ministerio-publico/>
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Official at the Attorney General Office (PGR) in Mexico, “Cyber-Trafficking,” interview by authors, Mexico City, March 11, 2019.
- 50 The Special Prosecutor's Office for Violence Against Women and Trafficking in Persons in Mexico, “Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.
- 51 Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli et al., “Evolution and Resistance to Sexuality Education in Mexico,” *Global Health: Science and Practice* 6, no. 1 (March 21, 2018).
- 52 Michael Shively et al., “A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts, Final Report,” *The National Institute of Justice*, June 2012, vi, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238796.pdf>.
- 53 Michael Shively et al., “A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts, Final Report,” *The National Institute of Justice*, June 2012, 79. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238796.pdf>.
- 54 Cornyn, John. “S.178 - 114th Congress (2015-2016): Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015.” *Congress.gov*, 29 May 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/178>.
- 55 “Prostitution.” *Findlaw*, <https://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-charges/prostitution.html>.
- 56 Michael Shively et al., “A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts, Final Report,” 65.
- 57 Melissa Gira Grant, “Amnesty International Calls for an End to the 'Nordic Model' of Criminalizing Sex Workers,” *The Nation*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/amnesty-international-calls-for-an-end-to-the-nordic-model-of-criminalizing-sex-worker>
- 58 “Special Initiatives,” *The United States Department of Justice*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking/special-initiatives#bilateral>.
- 59 Stacia Lee, “Cybersecurity Strategy Advice for the Trump Administration: US-Mexico Relations,”

*The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies*, May 23, 2017, <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/cybersecurity-strategy-advice-trump-administration-us-mexico-relations/>

- 60 Forrest Hare, "Borders in Cyberspace: Can Sovereignty Adapt to the Challenges of Cyber Security?," *School of Public Policy, George Mason University*, June 10, 2018, [https://cdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/06\\_HARE\\_Borders-in-Cyberspace.pdf](https://cdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/06_HARE_Borders-in-Cyberspace.pdf)