



Danish Authority of
Social Services and Housing

Technology-facilitated
trafficking | Red flags

DANISH CENTRE **AGAINST** HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Content

Introduction	3
Red flags – indicators of trafficking	4
Cases	8
Background	11
Human trafficking - A global and local phenomenon	11
Technology-facilitated trafficking	11



Introduction

This leaflet is made as part of an initiative focusing on combatting technology-facilitated trafficking coordinated by the Danish Centre against Human Trafficking (hereinafter referred to as the “CMM”)¹.

As part of the initiative, a range of meetings has been held in a network of experts from financial institutions, the cyber police, tax authorities, social media and the tech industry. The network has discussed how private actors as well as authorities can cooperate to disrupt trafficking facilitated by technology. This includes the recruitment, coercion or exploitation of victims by traffickers.

The leaflet includes indicators – or red flags – of trafficking that have become apparent in our knowledge sharing between private and public actors.

The target group of the leaflet is actors who encounter either misuse of their platforms to exploit people or who might be able to disrupt recruitment or exploitation as part of their work. This includes persons who work with fighting cybercrime or with platforms such as social media, apps and the financial sector just to name a few.

The aim of this leaflet is to disseminate knowledge to the relevant actors who might encounter the above-mentioned technology-facilitated trafficking. Therefore, it includes indicators of online recruitment, indicators of exploitation online as well as the modus operandi employed by traffickers – for instance threats or surveillance of victims or suspicious financial flows. Criminal networks constantly seek new and creative ways of operating, which makes the list of indicators non-exhaustive. Therefore, the leaflet will be continuously updated as new trends occur and others become less prevalent.

The CMM has listed red flags that can be indicators of trafficking in the left column and examples of how they might be identified in the middle column. They are separated into three categories:

- » behavioural indicators mainly targeted at frontline personnel in financial institutes and public officers,
- » financial indicators and know-your-customer-indicators, mainly targeted at financial institutes and payment services and the police,
- » recruitment, coercion and surveillance indicators mainly aimed at social media platforms, the police, etc.

The red flags are sorted into whether they primarily apply to identify victims, traffickers or both in the right column. However, it is important to mention that this might be difficult to distinguish in practice, as traffickers might operate through their victims by using their identities.

The indicators have been developed in consultation with a network consisting of private and public organisations. The indicators are also inspired, for instance, by the OSCE’s handbook ‘Follow the Money’ and other organisations’ publications, but this tool attempts to be a short version to ensure that professionals are able to use it as a rapid tool in their day-to-day work².

Red flags – indicators of trafficking

It is important to state that no single red flag is a clear indicator of human trafficking. Nevertheless, if several indicators are present, it is important to be alert. This list is not exhaustive – trafficking is a very dynamic field due to the inherent nature of the crime. It is not possible to profile traffickers nor victims exactly, but by looking at data from across the EU, this might reveal some current patterns. In the EU, from 2019 to 2020, some of the most prevalent nationalities for victims were Nigerian, Chinese, Moldovan, Pakistani, Romanian, Bulgarian and Moroccan. Traffickers, who were convicted during the same period, were primarily citizens in France, Romania, Nigeria, Germany, and China³.

Indicator	Example or comment	Identifies victims/traffickers/both
Behavioural indicators		
Someone speaks on a person's behalf or the person looks at a third party for verification before answering questions	<i>This might be the case when trying to open an account, applying for residence or during other meetings with either authorities or financial institutes</i>	<i>Both</i>
The demeanour and appearance of a person raises suspicion	<i>This can be both poor clothing or personal hygiene and/or seeming malnourished</i>	<i>Victim</i>
Little or no local language skills	<i>Not knowing the language makes it easier for traffickers to speak on a victim's behalf or to deceive them about their rights etc.</i>	<i>Victim</i>
Financial and know-your-customer-indicators		
Transactions that occur outside the time of known business operations or from unexpected types of customers	<i>For instance, a cleaning company that receives similar payment/amounts at odd hours or a beauty clinic that receives payments from only men at late hours</i>	<i>Trafficker</i>
Frequent payment for ads on escort websites	<i>This could imply that a person is making money from prostituting another person</i>	<i>Trafficker</i>
The person's email or phone number corresponds to online ads on websites where sexual services are posted	<i>This information is often easy to search for online. Often the person behind the contact information is the person organising the sexual services and not the victim</i>	<i>Both</i>

Indicator	Example or comment	Identifies victims/traffickers/both
Transactions to one MobilePay number from several phone numbers at similar amounts	<i>Often prices of prostitution services range between DKK 500 and DKK 1,000, but may vary according to the area and services provided</i>	<i>Both</i>
Money transfers from different regions to the same persons in countries known to be at higher risk for trafficking operations	<i>It is important to maintain an awareness of the rapid changes in the location that traffickers use to hide their business model</i>	<i>Traffickers</i>
Cross-border transfers of funds might be inconsistent with the stated business purpose of the account holder and/or between unexplained patterns of cross-border transactions	<i>This applies, for instance, to known trafficking routes or areas where there is a higher risk of trafficking</i>	<i>Traffickers</i>
Suspiciously low transactions and cash deposits	<i>Only low amounts of money are transferred from a person's account, yet the number of transactions over time is high. This is done to cover up the high amount it adds up to in total. Cash deposits often deposited at several branches or ATMs are just under the reporting threshold.</i>	<i>Both</i>
Salary is put into the worker's account, but the amount (or large parts of the amount) is shortly thereafter transferred back to the employer's account or a different account (or withdrawn in cash)	<i>This is, for instance, seen in cases where foreign workers are hired through The Danish Pay Limit Scheme⁴</i>	<i>Both</i>
Many transactions where money transfer services are used (e.g. Western Union, MoneyGram) and not by the customers' primary bank accounts	<i>E.g. traffickers offer to use their IDs' to transfer money to a victim's family. This can both be a way of recruiting victims without identity papers or as a way of maintaining the victim in an exploitative situation</i>	<i>Traffickers</i>
Cash deposits conducted at different cities across the country	<i>This could, for instance, be a sign of a victim of trafficking in prostitution who is often moved around the country</i>	<i>Both</i>

Indicator	Example or comment	Identifies victims/traffickers/both
A lot of payments to foreign airlines and travel agencies, recurring payments to foreign embassies, etc.	<i>Traffickers often arrange the travelling documents for the people they intend to exploit</i>	<i>Traffickers</i>
Rate of pay for each pay period is identical in jobs wherein it would normally vary	<i>Often changing working hours in businesses such as construction, hospitality and cleaning would be expected and, therefore, salaries change every month in case of overtime, holiday and sick leave</i>	<i>Victims</i>
Discrepancy between the number of registered workers and the taxes paid by a company	<i>Traffickers might register fewer workers in order to hide the exploitation from the authorities and as a way to commit tax evasion</i>	<i>Traffickers</i>
Living arrangements: many workers connected to the same address	<i>The address can be the same as the employer or arranged by the employer. Often seen in cases of forced labour in the construction sector, restaurants, etc.</i>	<i>Both</i>
A high number of accounts connected to the same person are opened and closed simultaneously	<i>Traffickers might use the identity of victims for tax or financial fraud</i>	<i>Both</i>
Use of straw persons in commercial accounts	<i>Workers' identity and accounts can be misused to start a business, which can be a set-up for money laundering</i>	<i>Both</i>
Small money transfers to victims on, for example, WeChat and other platforms	<i>This is done to cover the actual income, which can then be transferred to the victim's account, which they do not have control over. Victims might deposit the salary back to the employer's account, and in return the employer transfers a small amount on WeChat to cover the minimal living expenses and/or remittances to the victim's family.</i>	<i>Both</i>
Recruitment, coercion, and surveillance		
Surveillance of victims by the trafficker. If a GPS-function is installed on the phone, some apps and/or phones will allow a person to share their location with another user	<i>Smartphones and social media apps can purposely be used to surveil and track victims' whereabouts</i>	<i>Victims</i>

Indicator	Example or comment	Identifies victims/traffickers/both
The same phone numbers or email addresses connect to sex ads on escort websites and dating apps	<i>This could be 'escortguide', 'annoncelight', Tinder and the like (these ads are often explained by a profile using a '\$' on social media)</i>	Both
Rental webpages or apps such as Airbnb, booking.com, etc. can be used as short-term addresses for the purpose of prostitution	<i>This modus operandi used by traffickers ensures that they can rapidly move the victims between different addresses</i>	Both
Traffickers sometimes use apps with end-to-end encryption	<i>If the police arrives, the communication between the trafficker and victim can be deleted remotely on apps such as Telegram or other services</i>	Traffickers
Different designated groups on social media platforms and apps are used to apply for work and victims can be recruited through these by traffickers	<i>This applies to Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, etc. This does not apply to all jobs advertised on social media, but in cases of concern, the ads might be promising a lot more than what is expected or they might try to direct communication onto other platforms where communication is encrypted to hide their real purpose</i>	Both
Groups on social media targeted at different nationality groups in the country of exploitation – for instance groups for Ukrainian, Polish, Chinese or other nationals in Denmark – can be used to recruit victims	<i>Traffickers might advertise for jobs or marriage in groups on social media or apps – see also the above-mentioned examples</i>	Both
Traffickers often use a large number of phones and/or have a number of top-up cards without a contract	<i>Sometimes traffickers contact their victims from several phone numbers even with different country codes to keep under the radar from the authorities</i>	Traffickers
Traffickers might threaten to publish compromising photos of victims as a means of pressure thereby maintaining them in the exploitation	<i>In cases of young North African boys, the traffickers film sexual abuse and threaten them with sharing it or as a way of showing them the consequences if they do not comply</i>	Both

Cases

The Danish Centre against Human Trafficking has collected three anonymised cases where some of the indicators from the lists hereinabove have been present. These cases are included to exemplify how technology is used in various ways in the trafficking process.

Yousef

Yousef is from Morocco. He had to leave school to look for jobs and earn money by begging to help provide for his family. When he was 15 years old, Yousef encountered some men who offered him a job as an auto mechanic. **Instead, Yousef was tasked through Messenger with carrying bags to and from Nador and Melilla, the Spanish enclave in Morocco.** He never dared to look inside the bags, but Yousef was sure that they contained drugs and, sometimes, even weapons. One day, he managed to escape from the men. He found his way to the harbour and hid in a truck boarding a ferry to Spain. In Spain, Yousef got in contact with a group of Moroccan boys. He resided with them for some time, and managed to survive by begging, stealing food and selling drugs. A few months later, he followed some of the boys to Paris, where he lived with them in Barbes in the outskirts of Paris. He was forced to work for the local mafia⁵ by stealing, selling and transporting drugs.

After a year, the mafia told Yousef to travel to Copenhagen. At the border crossing between Germany and Denmark, Yousef was stopped by the police. The mafia had instructed him to seek asylum if he was arrested. He was sent to Sandholm, the reception centre for all asylum seekers entering Denmark. The day after he arrived, he followed some of the other Moroccan minors to Nørrebro in Copenhagen.

A man asked Yousef for his contact details

on Snapchat. Yousef did not have Snapchat, so he gave his contact details on Facebook so they could communicate through Messenger. Yousef was instructed to steal and was told where the good places to steal were. The gang that Yousef was now working for in Copenhagen was dangerous, and it would mean repercussions if he did not follow their instructions. At the same time, Yousef felt that they looked after him and the other boys and helped them by providing marihuana. One day, Yousef was sent to an apartment where he got a key and was told that he could stay. He was scared and left to go back to Sandholm. Before he could get on the train, members of the gang stabbed him because he tried to escape. After this attack, Yousef left Denmark and stayed in France with some friends.

After a couple of months, Yousef received messages on Messenger by the gang who asked Yousef how it was going in France and if he felt safe there. He got frightened and felt like he was being tracked. Therefore, he decided to return to Denmark. He continued stealing and selling drugs for the gang in Denmark. One day, the police arrested Yousef after stealing a mobile phone and a watch. Allerød Municipality got involved in the case, as Yousef was under 18 years of age. They were worried about Yousef and contacted the Danish Centre against Human Trafficking. He was officially identified as a victim of human trafficking.

Svetlana

Svetlana from Ukraine had lost her husband in an accident and now had to feed three children by herself. **When she saw ads on Telegram for jobs in Europe, she thought this could be the solution to her poor financial situation.** The ads stated that she could earn 7,000 euros if she would sell sex in Denmark for a certain period. When she accepted the offer, the man who posted the ad told her exactly how to book tickets to Copenhagen and how to get to a massage parlour in Jutland. She had to take a loan from a loan shark to pay for the ticket. From the airport on her way to Jutland, **Svetlana received a message on Telegram with 30 specific rules she had to follow** or else there would be repercussions. The rules were never included in the initial communication with the man before she left Ukraine. **One of the rules stated that she could not leave the parlour without letting the man know on Telegram.** If she did, she would be punished.

The parlour was under surveillance by cameras. The man who – without her consent – had posted pictures of her on websites for sexual services sent all his clients to Svetlana. Another rule was that she had to accept all the sexual services that the clients wanted – or she would be punished. **Some customers paid her for services through**

mobile payment services directly to the man from Telegram, and if she received cash, she had to leave the money in an open window and someone would pick up 50% of the payment. She had to leave the room while the money was picked up. She did not know exactly what kind of punishment she would receive if she did not adhere to the rules, but she was scared even though she had never met the man.

On Telegram, the man sent her an address that she had to go to instead after 14 days in Jutland. This happened several times during her stay in Denmark, which lasted 3 months. One day, the police arrived and knocked on the door. Svetlana was scared and texted the man about the police raid. **They immediately blocked her phone and deleted all the communication remotely.** The police referred Svetlana to the Danish Centre against Human Trafficking. She was officially identified as a victim of human trafficking.

Chen Ying

Chen Ying is from the Hubei province of China. He had problems with providing for his family due to a lack of stable job opportunities. **One day, he was contacted on WeChat, where a Chinese agent offered him a job at a restaurant in Denmark.** Chen Ying was told he could earn a lot of money in Denmark.

The Chinese agent offered to plan the trip to Denmark and arranged for Chen Ying to work there legally. **He was hired through the Pay Limit scheme, where the pay has to be above DKK 436,000 a year.** However, the Chinese agent demanded DKK 80,000 to do the paperwork and organise the permits. It was a lot of money for Chen Ying, but he accepted with the hope of sending money from Denmark back to his family in China. He signed various documents in Danish which he was not able to understand.

In Denmark, Chen Ying lived in a basement room at the restaurant owner's place for DKK 3,000 a month. Chen Ying worked 11 hours a day, 7 days a week. **Through WeChat, he had to report to the owner every time he started and finished his work.** The high salary that he had been promised before arriving in Denmark was paid to a Danish bank account. Chen Ying did not have access to the account. **When his salary was paid out, the owner took Chen**

Ying to an ATM and he was instructed to withdraw the money. He had to hand over DKK 12,000 to the owner. This was repeated every month. Sometimes the owner transferred DKK 7,000 on WeChat for Chen Ying to live on and pay rent as well as to send some money to his family.

He sent as much as possible home to his wife every month through WeChat, but he was surprised by how expensive it was to live in Denmark. Han did not yet have the opportunity to pay off his debt to the Chinese agent. **The agent started contacting him on WeChat because he wanted Chen Ying to pay off his debt.** Chen Ying tried to convince his employer to get a copy of his work permit and a contract as well as access to his own account. The employer refused. He said that if Chen Ying went to the police, he would fire him, and he was only here legally due to his work in Denmark. Chen Ying was under pressure and very frustrated with the situation.

One day, the Tax Department showed up for an inspection. They suspected that Chen Ying was under pressure and approached the Danish Centre against Human Trafficking. Later, Chen Ying was officially identified as a victim of human trafficking.

Background

Human trafficking – a global and local phenomenon

Human Trafficking is a serious crime defined in the UN Palermo Protocol from 2000⁶. All across the world, women, men and children are recruited, transported, harboured or received through the use of force, coercion or deception with the aim of exploiting them. This can be, for example, forced labour, prostitution or criminal activities – most often for profit. Victims of human trafficking are reluctant to seek help and support. Sometimes because they do not realise that they are victims of a crime, but also due to the fear of the traffickers, who can be ‘little fish’, relatives or large criminal networks operating across borders. The fact that victims of trafficking rarely seek help from authorities or other organisations are among some of the challenges authorities and social organisations face when they try to locate victims.

Technology-facilitated trafficking

In recent years, it has become evident that trafficking in human beings is increasingly taking place online or with the use of technology in one way or another. This applies not only to recruitment but also to the exploitation and coercion of people. When victims of trafficking are recruited and/or exploited using technology in various forms, it constitutes a challenge for the CMM as well as many other organisations working against trafficking. Historically, victims have been identified through outreach and inspections in the physical world. Thus, it requires an expansion of the methods of finding victims and traffickers. When traffickers change their ways of recruiting, coercing and exploiting victims, it is essential that the relevant actors in the field adjust to these changes. To reduce the risk of potential victims being overlooked – and, importantly, to make sure that the potential victims are reached and can be offered the necessary and eligible support – it is vital for the CMM and other relevant actors to keep up to date with the methods used by traffickers.



1 The Danish Centre against Human Trafficking is a governmental body, which is a part of the Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing. The Centre is responsible for identifying victims of human trafficking and offers assistance, support and counselling to the potential victims of human trafficking. Furthermore, the Centre trains relevant actors and is responsible for disseminating knowledge on human trafficking.

2 E.g. OSCE report on financial investigation: Office of the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, ‘Following the Money: Compendium of Resources and Synthesized Step-by-Step Guide to Financial Investigations related to Trafficking in Human Beings’ (Vienna 2019).

3 From the European Commission: ‘Statistics and trends in trafficking in human beings in the European Union in 2019-2020’ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022SCO429&from=EN>

4 Read more about the scheme here: <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/Applying/Work/Pay%20limit%20scheme>

5 The young men mostly refer to these groups as ‘the mafia’.

6 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf>