

THE DIGITAL CHAINS OF MODERN SLAVERY: A STUDY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN CENTRAL EUROPE



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Abstract

This comprehensive analysis explores the multifaceted issue of human trafficking in the digital era, with a special focus on Hungary and Poland. The article examines how traffickers exploit vulnerable groups, including economic migrants and ethnic minorities, by harnessing the power of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media. It contrasts the approaches of Hungary, which tends to prioritise criminal groups, with Poland's struggles with systemic inefficiencies in victim identification and prosecution. The article further delves into the sophisticated use of digital platforms and AI by traffickers to manipulate and control victims, and the challenges law enforcement faces in adapting to these new technological advancements. Emphasizing the need for international cooperation and a proactive approach, the article highlights the significance of educating the younger generation on the risks associated with social media and AI, underscoring the importance of cybersecurity awareness in combatting human trafficking.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Digital Era, Hungary, Poland, Artificial Intelligence, Social Media

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1. Introduction: Framing Modern Slavery in the Digital Age and Central European Context

As of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the prevalence of modern slavery, which includes forced labour and forced marriage, is disconcertingly pervasive in contemporary society and violates the fundamental rights and dignity of human beings. Based on the alarming data from the 2021 Global Estimates, over 50 million persons worldwide are affected by these circumstances, equating to almost one in every 150 people.¹ This high figure highlights the enduring and widespread nature of contemporary slavery, a grave issue that frequently results in long-term (if not permanent) enslavement rather than a temporary condition. The digital era has reshaped the landscape of human trafficking, introducing new methods of exploitation. The internet and social media platforms have emerged as double-edged swords: while they offer unprecedented connectivity and opportunities, they also provide a fertile ground for traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals. The transition from physical chains to digital ones represents a significant shift in the modalities of slavery, rendering it increasingly concealed and, ironically, more widespread. In recent years, a succession of crises has emerged, adding to the complexity of this environment. Prolonged armed conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the intensification of climate change concerns have collectively resulted in substantial disturbances to education and employment, substantial increases in pervasive extreme poverty, and forced and perilous migration. Alongside these difficulties, there have been more reports of gender-based violence, which increases the likelihood of becoming a victim of modern slavery in one way or another.

Considering the dynamic nature of the modern world, this article does not aim to analyze the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of international law. Rather, its purpose is to highlight that slavery, too, evolves with changing times and demands a shift in perspective. While this paper does not question the importance of creating new regulations to prevent all forms of sexual exploitation of women, human trafficking, and forced labour – as these initiatives are undoubtedly commendable – it emphasises the need for redefining the international community's approach towards cyberspace. A critical aspect of this redefined focus is understanding how platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, traditionally viewed as tools for social interaction, are increasingly being exploited by human traffickers. As will be demonstrated in the third section of this article, the primary victims of this exploitation are individuals belonging to the Millennials and Generation Z. To counteract this, proactive measures are essential. This includes actions from social media platform providers, law enforcement agencies, and the users themselves. The issues described here are similar to performing open-heart surgery – they are complex, constantly evolving,

1 International Labour Organisation, 2022.

and require swift responses. This results in limited scientific source materials and reactive law-making. Although the theme of contemporary slavery will be discussed in a broader context, the fifth section of this article will be dedicated to a comparative analysis of the situations in Poland and Hungary, highlighting the unique challenges and responses observed in these two Central European countries.

2. Global Perspectives and Legal Frameworks: Defining Modern Slavery in the Context of the ECHR

It may seem unthinkable in the 21st century, but modern slavery exists worldwide, in every country, irrespective of its economic or political status. The forms and intensity of this threat vary across regions, but it is undeniably a global issue. It encompasses a wide range of practices, such as forced labour, human trafficking, child labour, forced marriages and sexual exploitation. Notably, these practices often overlap, complicating both the efforts to combat them and the identification of victims. Contrary to historical slavery, contemporary slavery often makes use of less obvious methods of control over its victims, such as debt manipulation, threats of violence, or coercion into forced labour under the guise of legitimate employment contracts. A common characteristic across all these scenarios is that the individual is unable to escape or refuse the exploitative circumstances due to various coercive tactics, including threats, assault, deceit and abuse of power. This backdrop sets the stage for understanding the role of social media in modern slavery, as these platforms have become a new battlefield in the fight against these heinous practices. The advent of digital communication has added a layer of complexity to the already intricate web of modern slavery, requiring new strategies and approaches to address its ever-evolving nature.

While every kind of slavery deserves careful examination, our primary emphasis will be put on forced labour and human trafficking, which manifest in different ways according to European nations' examples. The concept of forced labour, as outlined in the Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, is central to this discussion.² It is defined as any work or service that is exacted from a person under the threat of penalty and without their voluntary consent.³ Forced labor is characterised by the use of compulsion to make someone work against their will, regardless of the nature or industry of the employment. For a situation to be recognised as forced labour, both legally and statistically, it must include coercion into doing work against

- 2 Article 4 of the Convention – Prohibition of slavery and forced labour: 1. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude. 2. No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour, European Court of Human Rights, 1950. European Convention on Human Rights.
- 3 Guidelines concerning the measurement of forced labour, 2018.

one's choice, along with the threat of punishment.⁴ Coercion refers to the imposition of work without voluntary consent and can manifest in two ways: directly – by means of verbal threats that detail particular aspects of coercion, or indirectly – by means of the coercion exerted over others. It may occur either in pre-employment, when candidates are coerced into accepting a position, or during their employment, when they are prevented from abandoning their job or are required to perform duties that were not initially included in their contract.⁵

It should be explained here that although Article 4 does not explicitly refer to human trafficking, it is necessary to analyze this phenomenon as it is an inherent element of modern slavery. According to the European Court of Human Rights, human trafficking is defined by three fundamental aspects with the following characteristics:

- 1) Action (recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receiving of persons): This refers to the act of traffickers physically moving or controlling victims in some way. The persons who fall victim to trafficking are recruited through a variety of methods, including bogus job advertising or love connections. Subsequently, they are transported to regions where they are exploited. The fact that this migration may take place either inside a country or internationally highlights the fact that human trafficking is a worldwide phenomenon.⁶
- 2) Mechanisms (including coercion, threat or use of force, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability): Traffickers make use of various strategies to exert control over their victims. Physical aggression, psychological manipulation, deception, and the exploitation of victims' weaknesses, such as their socio-economic situations, lack of information, or legal position, are all examples of this type of violence. Abuse of power or a position of vulnerability is especially crucial since it frequently involves taking advantage of the victims' disadvantageous situation in order to force them into exploitative circumstances. This is a particularly significant aspect of the abuse of power.⁷
- 3) Exploitative Purpose (including the exploitation of prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, practicing acts that are similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs): The ultimate purpose of human trafficking is exploitation, which can take many different forms. Men are predominantly exploited in sectors like construction, agriculture and manufacturing.⁸ On the other hand, the most common sectors where women are exploited are in the domestic service industry and the wider service sector.⁹ Victims of

4 Guide on Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights: Prohibition of Slavery and Forced Labour, 2022.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 6.

7 Ibid.

8 International Labour Organisation, 2022, p. 30.

9 Ibid.

exploitation often find themselves trapped in circumstances that offer little chance for escaping, and they risk terrible consequences if they attempt to break free.¹⁰

The development of new international agreements is a vital stride in the ongoing fight against human trafficking. Nevertheless, the difficulty does not stem from a shortage of definitions or the creation of norms, but rather from the successful implementation of these rules. International human rights laws prohibit numerous modern techniques of human trafficking. However, the swift advancement of information and communication technologies has made certain international solutions outdated. The global community faces a huge difficulty in speaking with one voice across numerous dimensions, including collaboration between States and social media platform providers. To effectively combat human trafficking and address the rapid improvements in technology, it is crucial to adopt a proactive and collaborative strategy in updating legal frameworks to keep up with the changing reality.

3. The Role of Social Media in Modern Slavery

Within the contemporary context of modern slavery, social media platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, have emerged as critical instruments in the human traffickers' arsenal. These platforms have transformed from simple means of social interaction to sophisticated channels through which vulnerable individuals can be exploited and manipulated. The starting point to understand why social media have become a tool to facilitate modern slavery is to notice the social changes that have taken place in the last decade, in particular regarding the professional aspirations of people from Generation Z (born in 1997–2012). According to the annual Wearesocial.com study from 2023, 4.76 billion people (59.4% of the entire population of our planet) use social media, most of whom are people under 30 years of age.¹¹ Data from both developed and developing countries show that almost half of girls (48%) aged 10–15 consider running their own channel on social media, such as YouTube, Instagram or TikTok, as an attractive professional activity, in which they see themselves in the future.¹²

It should come as no surprise that teenagers are increasingly drawn to the idea of becoming influencers, a trend driven by a complex interplay of psychological and social factors. At the heart of this aspiration lies the adolescent need for identity formation and a sense of belonging, where social media platforms extend the realm

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹ We are social, 2023.

¹² Lajnef, 2023.

of influence beyond family and friends to include online personalities.¹³ This digital landscape offers a unique space for self-expression and comparison, crucial for teens in establishing their identities and sense of normalcy within their peer groups.¹⁴ Additionally, the role of social media in enhancing self-esteem cannot be understated. Through both upward and downward comparisons with influencers, teenagers navigate their self-worth and competence, finding validation in likes, comments, and online engagement.¹⁵ Moreover, the digital realm serves as a major source of entertainment and distraction, with platforms like Instagram and TikTok offering an escape from the mundane aspects of everyday life.¹⁶ Another important factor is the appeal of mimicry and difference. Teenagers try to both look like and be different from influential people, combining the need to fit in with the need to stand out. Influencers also live ideal lives and have success stories that motivate and inspire young people to follow similar paths to fame and success. This makes becoming an influencer an appealing and seemingly possible goal. Because of this, many of them are unable to differentiate between the actual and virtual worlds, and social media platforms serve as the primary portal through which they may access the world as well as the primary source of information on it.

3.1. Analyzing Traffickers' Tactics in the Social Media Landscape

Because of their broad outreach and accessibility, social media platforms have become essential instruments for human traffickers. This is largely due to the fact that they provide criminals with access to millions of prospective victims all over the world at their disposal. Due to the inherent anonymity of these platforms, criminals find it simpler to create bogus profiles, enabling them to hide their identities and aims. By exploiting personal information shared on these platforms, it is now much simpler to target vulnerable individuals who may display indications of loneliness or who are in severe need of work. In order to successfully seduce and control their targets in a covert manner, traffickers make use of the direct and private contact channels provided by social media. It is also possible to take advantage of the quick diffusion of information on these platforms in order to distribute false information about employment or travel prospects, which can serve as fronts for those who engage in trafficking. The use of social media for trafficking operations is an enticing choice for criminals since, in comparison to traditional techniques, it is both efficient and inexpensive. Moreover, the challenge of monitoring and regulating the vast amount of information present on social media platforms causes the authorities' struggle to effectively resist and control potential trafficking activities. This emphasises the need for more watchfulness and stricter regulatory measures.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Weinstein, 2020.

16 Ibid.

It is uncontested that the increasing use of social media for job seeking and its growing reputation as a reliable information source have opened up new possibilities for exploitation. Traffickers and fraudulent recruiters target potential victims through social media business pages, recruitment ads, and direct outreach. Investigations reveal that some video-sharing platforms host unverified accounts posing as legitimate recruitment agencies, which significantly heightens the risk of trafficking.¹⁷ These online frauds play a crucial role in enabling human trafficking and use a variety of deceitful strategies to trap victims. The deployed strategies are diverse and misleading, specifically created to take advantage of weaknesses and manipulate persons into exploitative circumstances:

- 1) False job advertisements: These ads offer attractive, often international job opportunities, which appear to be perfect for those seeking a better life. They can be especially alluring to persons facing severe economic circumstances, thus taking advantage of their need for better living conditions and financial security. Tech assistance, customer service agent and beauty salon technician are just a few of the many fields covered by the programmes.¹⁸ Applicants are given enticing incentives, paid travel, accommodation and salary packages that are hard to beat. The listed location for the post is often changed throughout the process. Criminal actors seize passports and travel documents, threaten or use violence against job seekers and engage in various forms of coercion to convince them to participate in bitcoin scams when they arrive in the foreign country.¹⁹
- 2) Promises of high earnings: Scammers may lure victims with the prospect of high income for minimal work. The deception follows this pattern: a young lady who is actively seeking a career in modeling or acting receives an Instagram message. The sender, posing as a talent scout or agent, compliments her appearance and ability while proposing an exciting chance in the modeling or acting fields.²⁰ This offer includes glamorous photoshoots, travel opportunities, and the promise of exposure to influential personalities in the industry. Initially, the chat appears professional, with the fraudster expertly establishing contact and trust. To look respectable, they may even provide a fabricated portfolio of their work or statements from alleged previous clients. As the chat proceeds, the fraudster invites the lady to an in-person meeting or audition, which is often held in a different city or country. However, the truth behind this tempting offer is dangerous. The scammer is a trafficker attempting to persuade her into sexual exploitation. Once the woman arrives at the supposed meeting or audition location, she finds herself in a dangerous

¹⁷ Uren, 2022.

¹⁸ Homeland Security Today, 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Stop the traffic, 2020.

situation, far from home and without support. The promised job options do not present, and instead she is pressured or coerced into sex labour.

- 3) Romantic deception: Scammers construct false profiles on dating platforms (Tinder) and social media (Instagram, Facebook) in this instance. A male individual establishes contact with a female under the guise of a successful, benevolent person seeking a committed romantic relationship. He creates a profound emotional connection with her through the exchange of intimate stories and his continued curiosity about her life. Over the course of their virtual correspondence, he progressively earns her confidence and affection. The fraudster proceeds to construct a storyline in which the woman is confronted with a personal or financial dilemma, skillfully exploiting her emotions in order to elicit empathy and help.²¹ To take their relationship to the next level, he may propose a face-to-face meeting or may request funds to cover an unexpected expense. As soon as the woman agrees to meet, nevertheless, the circumstance rapidly deteriorates. Her expectation of a romantic encounter ends when she is captured by human traffickers. The emotional connection, carefully cultivated over time, was a ruse to manipulate and control her, ultimately leading her into a trap of sexual exploitation. This scenario illustrates a prevalent strategy employed by traffickers, referred to as “love bombing”, wherein they establish a profound emotional connection with their victims in order to exert control and influence over them, ultimately luring them into circumstances involving sexual exploitation and human trafficking.
- 4) Educational frauds: In the given situation, a youthful individual, driven by a desire to further their education, encounters an online advertisement (e.g. on LinkedIn) that presents a prestigious scholarship for enrollment in a programme at an international university. The advertisement, which includes testimonials and a website with a professional appearance, guarantees a full scholarship that includes funding for tuition, housing, and a stipend to assist with daily expenses. Motivated by this prospect, the person submits an application via the online form that is made available to them, along with the requested nominal application fee and personal information. They subsequently receive a letter of acceptance accompanied by official-looking documents and travel instructions to the host country for the programme. But what one discovers upon arrival is an entirely different reality. No educational programme is available. Conversely, the person is encountered by traffickers who forcibly extract physical labour in exchange for their passport. The individual becomes ensnared in a trafficking scheme, which is concealed behind the promise of an academic opportunity. Threats, the seizure of their passport and the lack of a support system in a foreign country prevent them from escaping.
- 5) Travel-related frauds: A person from a country afflicted by poverty or violence encounters an online company that promises to provide help in

21 Geldenhuys, 2019.

acquiring travel documents and visas. By presenting itself as genuine and compassionate in light of the individual's critical situation requiring evacuation from a hazardous zone, this service offers a simplified way to obtain these documents in exchange for a payment or further support. Motivated by the desire for a better quality of life, the individual consents to the terms and makes the mandatory payments, potentially by contracting a loan or by committing to provide services upon arrival at the chosen location. The assistance and documentation that have been pledged seem to be an important lifeline, offering a chance to avoid risks or difficulties. However, upon entering the foreign country, the somber reality becomes evident. The individual is confronted by traffickers who reveal that the entire visa service was fraudulent, as opposed to encountering helpful agents. Following this, the criminals manipulate the victim into participating in either sexual or physical labour. The victim, left in a foreign country without legal papers and sometimes lacking the necessary language competence to seek assistance, ends up trapped in miserable conditions, being in a far cry from a comfortable life they had wanted to achieve.

Once recruiting is completed, social media continues to play a part in the trafficking operation. It is used to track and manage the movements of victims, as well as to record, market and spread information about forced commercial sexual exploitation. Furthermore, criminals regularly influence victims into transferring to platforms with end-to-end encryption, such as WhatsApp, complicating law enforcement operations in terms of monitoring and evidence collecting owing to considerable legal and technological barriers.²²

3.2. Common Characteristics of Social Media Trafficking Victims

Victims of human trafficking scams often find themselves caught in a web of manipulation and vulnerability. Usually, these individuals are attracted by the prospect of quick and substantial profits, which is particularly enticing to those in desperate financial situations. They may also be blinded by the hope of a better life, failing to see the risks due to their aspirations. A critical factor in their entrapment is the lack of awareness about the cunning strategies used by traffickers, coupled with the trust they place in these criminals, who are skilled at forging seemingly authentic relationships. The profiles of those most at risk vary but share common threads of perceived vulnerability. Young adults and late adolescents are particularly vulnerable, often lacking the experience and judgment to spot these scams. Economic struggles also play a significant role, making individuals desperate for financial relief more likely to fall for lucrative but risky propositions. Migrants, in pursuit of improved job

²² Anthony, 2018.

prospects or living conditions, are also prime targets for traffickers who exploit their desire for stability, trapping them in exploitative situations far from home.

In the realm of labour exploitation, sectors such as construction, agriculture, and manufacturing disproportionately affect men. Around 22% of male individuals engaged in forced labour can be observed in the construction sector, frequently including migrant workers who are trapped in deceitful recruiting practices or subjected to high recruitment charges.²³ Within the agricultural sector, which comprises around 13% of cases of male forced labour exploitation, men often participate in farming and commercial agriculture, with seasonal migrant workers being particularly susceptible to abuse.²⁴ In contrast, women are predominantly subjected to exploitation in domestic work and the entire services industry. Female domestic workers, who experience isolation and power imbalances, are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, contributing to 17% of women's forced labour.²⁵ The services industry, excluding domestic employment, is a substantial contributor to the exploitation of adult women through forced labour. Women are significantly impacted in this sector, which includes many activities such as trade, transportation, hospitality and social services.

4. Artificial Intelligence: A Double-Edged Sword in Human Trafficking

Artificial intelligence (AI) is at the vanguard of a revolution in combating the complicated issues of human trafficking, forced labour and other kinds of contemporary slavery. AI, with its ability to discover patterns, discern correlations, process large databases and use machine learning, provides a strong weapon in the fight against these crimes. However, this same technology can also be harnessed by those perpetrating similar illegal activities, making AI a double-edged sword in the fight against contemporary forms of slavery.

In this section, we will look at numerous applications of artificial intelligence in the context of modern slavery. The capacity of AI to filter through enormous amounts of data can be beneficial to law enforcement and groups attempting to stop human trafficking. It can help to reveal hidden networks, anticipate trafficking hotspots, and identify possible victims using online activity and digital traces. Conversely, traffickers may also use AI to improve their ways of targeting and abusing vulnerable people, such as generating convincing fake identities and deploying confusing digital traps. It is important to note that the methods and examples described

²³ International Labour Organisation, 2022, p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

below represent the author's original predictions based on discussions with law enforcement agencies specialised in cybercrime. Given that the subject matter involves emerging technologies and a lack of extensive data, the examples provided should be considered as likely scenarios in the near future. This approach allows us to anticipate potential developments in the field, even as we acknowledge the limitations and evolving nature of our understanding.

Social media profile tracking and targeting

Method: Traffickers can use AI-driven software to analyze social media profiles. These tools can sift through vast amounts of data to identify potential victims based on specific criteria, such as age, location or certain vulnerabilities like financial hardship or emotional distress.

Example: A prospective model often shares her photoshoots on Instagram, hoping to gain recognition in the profession. Unknown to her, a trafficker utilizing the AI algorithm recognises her profile as a possible victim based on her distinct postings and interactions that reveal her ambitions and vulnerability. The criminal, assuming the role of a talent scout, contacts her with a captivating proposition for an international modeling opportunity. Unaware of the trap set by advanced social media profiling, the woman reacts, placing her trust in the offer.

Creation of false identities using advanced imaging and voice technologies

Method: Traffickers may use AI to create a synthetic image of a non-existent person for a social media profile. Coupled with voice alteration technology, they may engage in seemingly real-time conversations with potential victims, luring them into a false sense of security and trust.

Example: A young man from a non-English-speaking country is searching for a job abroad. He comes upon a profile on an employment platform for a man named "John" that was produced using "Midjourney". "John" speaks his language effectively owing to "HeyGen" and offers him a position at his firm in the United Kingdom. The man accepts to fly to the UK after being impressed by the realistic visual and native language contact. When he arrives, he discovers that not only is the job non-existent, but he has also been recruited into a trafficking network.

Manipulation through AI-enhanced video filters and overlays during video calls

Method: AI-driven filters and overlays are commonly used on video communication platforms. During a video conference, traffickers may use AI-powered filters to change their look or the background, posing as respectable employers or partners. This may lead victims to believe they are communicating with a legitimate person or organisation.

Example: A woman searches for remote work options and comes across a job posting that appears to be ideal. Throughout the Skype interview, the employer uses an "xpression camera" to seem as a new person each time, yet the scene is always

a busy, modern workplace. The victim, convinced that the position is legitimate, complies with certain basic demands, such as providing personal information and paying a nominal fee for training materials. Later on, she realises that there is no employment and that her personal information has been used for criminal purposes.

Criminals frequently implement novel technologies in a prompt and inventive manner, exploiting them for unlawful purposes prior to the effective response of law enforcement. The technological ability exhibited by traffickers stands in stark contrast to the methodical and frequently resource-limited approach adopted by law enforcement agencies. Regrettably, without sufficient financial resources, law enforcement agencies, including the police, will perpetually lag behind the perpetrators. Nevertheless, they can employ analogous techniques, but with the intention of aiding the victims.

- 1) Data analysis and machine learning in trafficking detection: To expose human trafficking networks, data analysis and ML are essential. Algorithms powered by artificial intelligence can spot signs of human trafficking that are often hard for humans to notice by compiling massive amounts of data from many sources. By utilizing predictive analytics, these algorithms are very skilled at anticipatorily recognizing potentially dangerous situations, enabling proactive measures to be taken. A practical implementation entails the use of natural language processing to extract unique phrases from digital content, thereby generating advertisement templates that can be matched across numerous websites. This method rates the likelihood of ad links to trafficking and finds networks involved in trafficking. By mapping out these networks, a single ad can lead to the discovery of an entire trafficking operation.
- 2) Monitoring social media with AI to fight against human trafficking: Because of the high potential for human trafficking recruitment on social media platforms, constant vigilance is required. Social media content is analyzed by AI tools that are outfitted with natural language processing in order to identify any indications of human trafficking. A combination of these technologies and picture recognition software can assist in identifying potentially exploitative chats and posts. This kind of AI monitoring makes it easier for authorities and assistance groups to step in at the right time, which could stop trafficking before it does any harm.
- 3) Using victim identification through facial recognition technology: The advancements in facial recognition technology offer a substantial asset in identifying and locating human trafficking victims. By comparing images from various sources, including public databases and law enforcement networks, this technology aids in matching potential victims' images, aiding in their identification and rescue. Moreover, real-time surveillance footage analysis using facial recognition can lead to the prompt action of authorities upon spotting a victim or suspect, significantly enhancing response times in critical situations.

Understanding the dual sides of artificial intelligence in modern slavery is essential for developing successful tactics to stay ahead of traffickers. Although the above-mentioned approaches constitute only a small number of the potential uses of AI in this subject, they deserve thoughtful consideration. By looking into these applications, we may acquire insight into both the possibilities and dangers posed by AI, allowing us to better predict and resist the traffickers' developing methods in the digital world. While the use of AI in human trafficking remains a largely theoretical consideration, the application of other digital technologies by traffickers is a tangible and escalating threat. According to Europol, human traffickers and smugglers are increasingly utilizing digital technologies to facilitate their illegal activities.²⁶ The shift of human trafficking into the digital realm is significant, as criminals adapt and evolve their methods to exploit changing technologies. The internet plays a critical role in this transformation, eliminating traditional geographical and physical barriers and allowing criminals easier access to a broader pool of potential victims. In the following section, we will focus on Poland and Hungary, two Central European countries where the incidence of this crime has intensified since 2020.²⁷

5. Country-Specific Analysis: Human Trafficking Trends in Poland and Hungary

In Europe and Central Asia, the grim reality of 4.1 million people entrapped in forced labour spans across various sectors and affects both adults and children.²⁸ This includes domestic servitude, agricultural work, construction and commercial sexual exploitation. The region faces a large influx of migrant workers, both from within and beyond its borders, who are particularly vulnerable to debt bondage and exploitation. Factors such as conflict-driven displacement, climate change, political or economic instability contribute to the prevalence of forced labour.²⁹ Addiction, homelessness, unemployment, bad health and average IQ are common symptoms of the victim's powerlessness. Despite the fact that many of the victims are males from outside the country, research conducted in countries like Poland and Hungary has shown that no one nationality is more likely to be subjected to forced labour than any other.³⁰ On the other hand, individual conditions, such as personal vulnerabilities

²⁶ Europol, 2022.

²⁷ See: Wieczorek, 2016; MSWiA, 2022.

²⁸ Walk Free, 2023.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dąbrowski, 2012.

and thenature of the work, have a significant influence, with dangers increasing in tandem with the amount of illegal immigration.



Figure 1. Prevelance of Modern Slavery in Selected European Countries³¹

The prevalence of modern slavery in Europe displays significant variation, with a stark contrast particularly noticeable between Eastern and Central European nations. Ukraine, although geographically situated in Eastern Europe, exemplifies the upper extreme with an estimated prevalence of 12.8 victims per 1,000 inhabitants. This figure serves as a benchmark for the severity of modern slavery impacts in the region. Turning our focus to Central Europe, particularly Poland and Hungary, the prevalence rates, while lower than in Ukraine, still underscore significant societal challenges. Poland's rate of approximately 5.5 per 1,000 translates into about 209,000

31 Source: own elaboration based on data by Walk Free, 2023.

individuals affected by modern slavery. To contextualise this magnitude, one might envision a population equivalent to that of Lublin, encapsulating the entire demographic in the grips of this grievous condition. Similarly, Hungary, with a prevalence rate of 6.6 per 1,000, sees around 63,000 individuals suffering under conditions of modern slavery, a number comparable to the population of Székesfehérvár. While the statistics provided are indeed striking, it is crucial to recognise that they do not fully capture the entire magnitude of human trafficking and forced labour, which together constitute modern slavery. The data, primarily sourced from non-governmental organisations, police and border security services, reflect only detected cases of these crimes. However, these figures do not necessarily represent the full scale of the issue due to the inherently covert nature of these crimes. In criminology, this discrepancy is known as the “dark figure” of crime, which refers to the significant number of offences that go undetected, unreported or unrecorded. The dark figure is particularly pronounced in cases of human trafficking and forced labour because these activities are often hidden and victims may be reluctant to come forward due to a fear of retribution, mistrust in authorities or a lack of awareness of their rights. This underreporting underscores the challenges in obtaining accurate measurements of the true scope of contemporary slavery and emphasises the need for more robust detection and reporting mechanisms to better understand and combat these grievous violations of human rights. However, regardless of the numbers, it is valuable to present the characteristic similarities and differences between these phenomena in Poland and Hungary.

5.1. Characteristics of the situation in Hungary

In Hungary, human trafficking is a significant issue, encompassing both domestic exploitation and the trafficking of Hungarians abroad. This problem touches diverse groups, including the extremely poor, undereducated young people, single mothers, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ community, homeless men and particularly the Roma, Hungary’s largest ethnic minority, representing a substantial part of trafficking victims.³² Traffickers, typically operating in small groups often based on familial ties or shared interests, have been seen to target girls from their own families.³³ A common method used is the “lover-boy” approach, where young girls are romanced, isolated from society, and ultimately coerced into commercial sex. In recent years, the internet and social media have become increasingly vital tools for traffickers, used both to recruit victims and to advertise children for sex trafficking. Children in State-run institutions, especially girls, including those with moderate intellectual disabilities or special needs, are extremely vulnerable to sex trafficking. Of the approximately 23,000 Hungarian children in State childcare, those with certain conditions, such as behavioral disorders or substance abuse issues,

32 Migration and Home Affairs, 2023.

33 Trafficking in Persons Report: Hungary, 2023.

are at the highest risk.³⁴ While the majority of identified trafficking victims are female and involved in sex trafficking, there is a growing recognition of Hungarian victims, including women, boys and girls, being exploited for both sex and labour trafficking within Hungary and across Europe.³⁵ Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK have been primary destinations, with a recent trend indicating a shift towards the Nordic countries.³⁶ In 2022, it was noted that nearly half of all trafficking cases involving Hungarians took place abroad.³⁷ Sex trafficking remains the most common form of trafficking in Hungary, but labour trafficking instances, involving exploitation in agriculture, construction, hospitality and factory work, are on the rise. This complex situation highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to combat human trafficking, considering the varied and evolving nature of this global issue.

5.2. Characteristics of the situation in Poland

In Poland, similarly to Hungary, human trafficking is a significant concern, with both domestic and foreign victims being exploited. Polish victims, including women and children, are subjected to sex trafficking within the country and across other European countries, particularly France and Germany. Additionally, Polish men and women are subjected to forced labour primarily in Western and Northern Europe, notably Germany, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.³⁸ One notable difference from Hungary is the origin of foreign victims trafficked into Poland. Women and children from South America and Eastern Europe, especially from Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine, are victimised in sex trafficking within Poland.³⁹ Labour trafficking is the predominant form of trafficking in Poland, with traffickers increasingly relying on coercion and fraud, rather than physical violence or threats. Victims come from various regions, including Europe, Asia, Africa and increasingly from Central and South America, with Colombia, Guatemala and Venezuela being particularly noted.⁴⁰ Another distinct aspect in Poland is the exploitation of migrants in forced labour, especially among the growing Ukrainian, Belarusian, Filipino and Vietnamese communities. This exploitation is prevalent in sectors like agriculture, restaurants, construction, domestic work and the garment and fish processing industries.⁴¹ Over eight million people transiting Poland from Ukraine, including more than 1.5 million refugees predominantly comprising women and children, are

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Trafficking in Persons Report: Poland, 2023.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

registered for temporary protection and are highly vulnerable to trafficking.⁴² While there are similarities with Hungary in terms of the types of trafficking and the exploitation of domestic populations, the notable differences lie in the countries of origin of the victims trafficked into Poland, the higher prevalence of labour trafficking and specific targeting of certain migrant populations and vulnerable groups.

5.3. Final remarks

In Hungary, law enforcement generally prioritises the elimination of crime and criminal groups while dealing with human trafficking, placing less emphasis on providing help to the victims.⁴³ This preference for punitive measures over victim-centered solutions emphasises the need for more research, particularly on the treatment of victims in trafficking cases and other criminal processes involving underprivileged women. This approach suggests a potential lack of sensitivity to concerns such as violence against women, and points to a more system-oriented, rather than individual-centered, approach to dealing with these instances.⁴⁴

In contrast, the situation in Poland regarding human trafficking presents different challenges. The fundamental issue is inefficiency in victim identification and criminal prosecution, indicating a systemic challenge with tackling the entire spectrum of human trafficking. This inefficiency is compounded by a social predisposition to ignore the problem. While sexual trafficking is acknowledged, forced labour, notably the vast exploitation of foreigners by Polish enterprises, is a far more serious and pervasive problem. This aspect of trafficking in Poland demonstrates a different dimension of the problem, where governmental efficiency in addressing forced labour trafficking is notably worse than in dealing with sex trafficking. Both Hungary and Poland have significant obstacles in fighting against human trafficking. However, whereas Hungary focuses on illegal activity with minimal victim support, Poland has systemic inefficiencies in discovering and prosecuting trafficking cases, particularly those involving forced labour.

Nevertheless, this chapter only briefly mentions the challenges Poland and Hungary are facing. The goal here was not to analyze legislation or the effectiveness of domestic policies, but to signal the ongoing changes happening right in front of our eyes. Perpetrators are already leveraging digital tools to deceive their victims, and the potential inclusion of AI could further escalate the scale of these phenomena. This chapter aimed to highlight both preventive measures and the vast potential that the use of AI by law enforcement agencies may offer. As we observe the increasing digitalisation of crime, it is crucial to keep pace with technological advancements, ensuring that preventive strategies and law enforcement capabilities evolve to effectively counteract these threats.

42 Ibid.

43 Katona, 2019.

44 Ibid.

6. Conclusions: Synthesizing Insights and Proposing Future Directions

As we conclude our examination of the intricate landscape of human trafficking, it becomes evident that the challenges within this sector are as varied and complex as a labyrinth. Human trafficking is an ever-evolving phenomenon, shifting and adapting like a chameleon in response to changing environments. This evolution is propelled by the exploitation of vulnerable groups, the sophisticated deployment of artificial intelligence, and the clandestine use of internet platforms by traffickers. Each country, from Hungary with its issues of victim identification and a focus on criminal groups over victim support, to Poland grappling with an upsurge in labour trafficking that paints a grim picture of modern slavery, faces unique challenges. The addition of digital technologies introduces a further layer of complexity to this already intricate issue. Traffickers expertly manipulate social media and AI to weave deceptive narratives that ensnare victims with false promises, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the young and desperate. This digital exploitation demands urgent and robust countermeasures, underscoring the dual role of AI as both a tool for and against trafficking activities. Based on these observations, it is suggested that future endeavours should adopt a comprehensive strategy:

- 1) Enhanced international collaboration and standardisation: Given the transnational nature of human trafficking, strengthening international cooperation is crucial. This involves harmonizing legal frameworks, sharing intelligence, and aligning strategies to combat trafficking. The European Commission's proposal for a forced labour ban is a step in this direction.⁴⁵ This legislation, once enacted, would prohibit products made with forced labour from entering the EU market, regardless of where they are produced or intended for sale. This comprehensive approach, applying to all sectors and stages of production, underscores the need for a unified, risk-based enforcement strategy across the EU.
- 2) Adoption of advanced technologies and training: With traffickers increasingly using digital platforms and AI, law enforcement and anti-trafficking agencies must keep pace. This includes adopting AI and machine learning for data analysis, social media monitoring, and the use of facial recognition technologies. Concurrently, there should be a focus on providing training to law enforcement and judiciary personnel in handling digital evidence and understanding the nuances of cyber trafficking.
- 3) Focus on victim support and rehabilitation: Prioritizing victim support is crucial. This includes not only providing immediate care and protection but also addressing long-term needs such as legal assistance, psychological counselling and reintegration support. Efforts should be made to understand and

⁴⁵ Itineris, 2022.

address the specific needs of various vulnerable groups, including women, children, migrants and ethnic minorities.

- 4) Educating young people on cybersecurity and AI awareness: It is crucial to instruct young persons about the perils present in the online realm in today's era of digital technology. Comprehending the mechanics of artificial intelligence, engaging in thoughtful use of social media, and validating sources of information are fundamental components of this educational endeavour. Young people should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to recognise and avoid potential threats online, including those posed by sophisticated AI tools used in human trafficking. By fostering digital literacy and critical thinking, we can empower the younger generation to navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly. This education must cover understanding the subtleties of online interactions, recognizing deceptive tactics used by traffickers, and being aware of the data privacy implications of their online activities.

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