

## **COVID-19 and sexual exploitation: the virtual world as an intermediary and impunity as the new normality**



*Reuters/ F.Bensch*

The COVID-19 pandemic, that kept us locked in our homes for several months, has left us with a “new normality” globally, characterized by the displacement from the physical to the virtual world of most of our daily activities, either work, learning or even socialization. However, organized crime also knows how to adapt to the circumstances, and it is for this reason that human trafficking – focusing on trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes contained in article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children, of the United Nations General Assembly – is also adjusting to this “new normality” by operating mainly through online exploitation and *cybersex*.

However, what are the direct consequences of the transfer to the Internet world of these exploitation networks?

On the one hand, the fact of operating online has provided these networks with a bigger secrecy, where the detection of these crimes is more difficult, not only because of the impunity that the Internet offers due to

its easy access and difficult tracking, but also by reason of the delay – due to restrictions and the re-allocation of funds by the States to fight against the virus – of the police services’ actions and the judicial response. On the other hand, this “new normality” has also increased the clandestinity of the victims, making it difficult to identify them, forcing them to spend the lockdown with their traffickers, reducing the number of public services aimed at helping them and making it difficult for them to access justice, among other reasons, for the lack of translation and interpretation services.

### ***The impact on women: poverty as a weapon***

Globally, poverty has a woman's face. According to the United Nations, 7 out of 10 poor people are women. Furthermore, one out of five girls in the world lives in extreme poverty, which means that at home they survive on less than \$ 1.90 a day. The pandemic has only worsened the precarious situation already suffered by them, due to the overload of care-work and the consequences at the level of conciliation, the mental burden, the invisibility of the unregulated

economy, and the increase in domestic violence, which has registered a rise of 60% during confinement. Unemployment – and the reduction of income that it entails – has impacted, in the first place, the informal sectors, which has significantly increased the insecurity of people who were already vulnerable. On the other hand, women are the ones who have been more likely to lose their jobs, since the most affected economic sectors – such as tourism and hospitality – are largely feminized. As a consequence, an estimation of 47 million women and girls will fall below the poverty line.

Despite the fact that, in many cases, sexual exploitation through prostitution did not stop during the quarantine, in many others it simply moved to the virtual world. With the pandemic, we could see how pornography mass-streaming platforms, such as Pornhub, opened its doors for the free consumption of all the Premium content by their users. For this reason, during the months of lockdown, the views of the aforementioned site exponentially increased in Spain to values of around 60%. In a complementary way, we could find the other side of the coin: during the lockdown, the increase in applicants to work as a sexcam models skyrocketed by 300% and, according to the magistrate María Gavilán, expert in gender violence, the form of exploitation linked to online sex also increased.

In countries such as Colombia, female poverty too often fuels trafficking networks. This country is in the top 3 of the main states that provide online sex services, and cybersex trafficking platforms have become a real and pressing problem, fueled by precarious wages, lack of educational or job opportunities, the lack of optimization in the management of resources by the Government during the pandemic, the enormous unemployment rates in people under 30 years old, and the Venezuelan migration crisis. On a global scale, within the world of pornography, the sexcam, which consists of live pornography where users can make requests to the women making the transmission, is the one that has had the biggest boom during the quarantine and, consequently, where more are the mafias operating and where the money is moving, having had to dismantle different exploitation networks during these months.

### ***The problem of minors: consumers and victims***

According to a report presented by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, children have – due to the closure of schools during quarantine – a high risk of exploitation, since not only their access to education has been hindered, but they have also lost a source of shelter and food.

Moreover, the fact of starting to take classes virtually has translated into an increase of the time they spend on the networks, making them vulnerable to possible pedophile sexual predators, a latent problem throughout the world. In 2012, the activist group Anonymous launched an operation that shut down around 100 websites dedicated to pedophilia, and publicly exposed more than a thousand people involved in it. However, the problem has not stopped growing, and has also been impacted by the lockdown: child pornography, according to data from BBC Mundo, increased by almost 25% from March 24<sup>th</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup> compared to the previous week, counting more than 21,000 streams of pedophile content. Consequently, the lockdown has increased the demand via the Internet to access contacts and images of children, as well as the harassment known with the Anglicism *grooming*. Indeed, the executive director of the European Police Office (Europol), stated in early April 2020 her concerns about the increase in online child abuse in the countries most affected by the pandemic.

On the other side, the access of minors to the online world has also opened them the door to be active consumers of pornography, a phenomenon that creates addicts, especially among the youngest. Currently, the age of the first contact with pornography has dropped to 8 years old, as warned last year by the vice-president of the Spanish Federation of Sexology Societies, who also expressed his concerns about the fact that many boys reach adolescence being addicts, a problem that should be alleviated by means of a good sexual education and that, by not providing it, entails that those minors grow up normalizing violent and degrading sexual roles. In fact, according to the researcher Mónica Alario Gavilán, the most streamed video that she has found during her five years of research, with 225 million visits, is the one of a group rape of a woman who tries to escape. The direct

consequence of this is the spread of the rape culture, tripping any possibility of real gender equality.

In conclusion, the pandemic has led to a precariousness of women's jobs, formal and informal, aggravating a global situation of vulnerability and precariousness of female work. At the same time that we were all veering towards the virtual world, the trafficking and sexual exploitation networks found the perfect market niches: a combination of necessity and clandestinity and a platform that opened the doors and welcomed them with new clients and consumers.

All women and girls have the fundamental right to a life free of violence but, nevertheless, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 79% of victims of human trafficking are for the purpose of sexual exploitation, women representing the 66% of the victims of this crime and girls the 13%. The number of women rises to 95% of the victims if we consider only those who end up in networks of sexual exploitation and pornography.

It is urgent, therefore, that an effort from all countries is made – either individually and jointly – not to leave people in vulnerable situations helpless while the COVID-19 pandemic is managed healthily and economically. Therefore, all services provided for the care, detection and prevention of human trafficking should be treated as a priority, as well as guaranteeing access to justice and protection systems for all victims. On the other hand, at the social level, as UN Women states, two of the necessary steps to end the rape culture that is spreading through the internet consist of denouncing its root causes and showing zero tolerance. After all, combating trafficking and sexual exploitation in the digital world also means being aware of where the money is moving and for what reasons, what values are hidden behind everything we consume and what can we do to change these behaviors and reverse these trends of abuse, violence and mistreatment, from society and governments.

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