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Episode 8: Human Trafficking Unveiled: Insights from the Frontlines | A dialogue with Tatiana Kotlyarenko Expert on Human trafficking

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Hisham Allam

Hello everyone, and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues, our new project exploring the heart of humanitarian aid's most critical topics. Today we are joined by Tatiana Kotlyarenko, the leading voice in the fight against human trafficking and gender-based violence. I'm your host Hisham Allam. Hello Tatiana, it is a pleasure to have you on our podcast.

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Thank you so much for the invitation.

Hisham Allam

Tatiana, your dedication to combating human trafficking has had a profound impact on countless lives around the world. Could you share with us what inspired you to devote your career to this cause and why it is so crucial?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

There are a number of different reasons, but I'll start, I guess, with the historical one. My family came as refugees to U. S. and I have seen, firsthand the vulnerabilities that refugees, have in terms of being vulnerable to human trafficking, as well as populations on the move, as well as those that are displaced. So, for me, that was one of the key prioritizations for this particular topic, but the other part of also seen, targeting of women and children for sexual exploitation.

So, I was born in Moldova. Many Moldovan girls were trafficked on in the 90s and are still trafficked and I've seen this as some of the worst human rights violations combined into 1. Where you're talking about freedom. You're talking about safety. You're talking about the very basics of human rights that are taken away from men, women and children. And I wanted to make sure that being that I've had the chance to grow up in the States to have the education that I did that I could give back and see how to support creation of systems and protections in terms of human trafficking.



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Hisham Allam

And do you think that you can succeed to do this.

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

I think I have created a somewhat of a difference in the paradigm and I will tell you why. I worked on the establishment of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council while I was at the organization for security and cooperation in Europe, as well as the creation of the update of the National Referral Mechanism Handbook, which creates the framework on all anti trafficking work in terms of the rights of victims and survivors of trafficking.

Both of these have been picked up all across the world and are used as an example and model to follow. So, the other part that I've been very, very vocal on is addressing demand for, trafficking, for both labor and sexual exploitation, but particularly sexual exploitation as it constitutes two thirds of all the profits globally and the victims are primarily and for the most part, women and children.

Hisham Allam

Building on that, human trafficking is often deeply intertwined with other forms of exploitation, as you said, gender-based violence and forced labor. How do you approach addressing these interconnected issues within your work?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Well, human trafficking is interlinked with a lot of different issues, whether it is terrorism, whether it is conflict related sexual violence, wherever there's vulnerability. Traffickers, tend to exploit that vulnerability and are usually able to get away with it. There's less than 1%, of prosecutions of the trafficking crime globally and the profits are, upwards of 150 billion a year. US dollars.

Hisham Allam

Your work focuses on helping trafficking survivors in a way that understands and respects the trauma they have experienced. Can you explain what this means and why it is so important in giving survivors the help they need?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

There have been a lot of talk about the trauma informed approach all across without the true understanding of what that means when we're talking about a trauma informed approach in terms of victims and survivors of trafficking, it takes into account the psychological and physical impact of the crime on them, it takes into account communication, cultural sensitivity, gender sensitivities and such in terms of any interactions or any actions with regards to their wellbeing and it also clearly understands the psychological impact of the trafficking crime in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder, disassociation, and a variety of other psychological impact.

And when there's any work that, with victims or survivors of trafficking, all those considerations need to be, taken into account, whether it is from the first interview. Right, whether it is a police station or social worker, or in the emergency



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room and throughout the process, there are particular triggers and fears that are in place trauma also prevents, for example, the chronological remembrance of what has happened to them. So, all of those considerations need to be in place and all services need to take into account their very specific needs and be tailored to them.

Hisham Allam

You learned how to handle different kinds of traumas or it came by experience?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

For me, it came by experience. So, I worked all across the world where oftentimes you cannot find clinical psychologists at the same time, as I said, the trauma that victims and survivors of trafficking have are, it is very, very complex. I've also learned from top experts who have contributed in the development of the National Referral Mechanism Handbook, and as well as specifically looking at the health needs of victims and survivors of trafficking.

So this has been a joint piece of work, from experts, all across the world who contributed to the better understanding of what those needs are for victims and survivors and, primarily, actually, it also came from survivor leaders who are able to tell us the exact needs, and the exact impact in terms of trauma on victims and survivors of trafficking and how best to address them because they are the people who have lived experience and expertise to ensure that we actually have the right approaches because so far we haven't gotten it, you know, just right.

Hisham Allam

Is there any different way of dealing with traumatized, survivors of human trafficking, whether they are children or adults?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Well, there are definitely different approaches to, victims and survivors of trafficking who are children, because children have very specific needs because of their age, their development levels, et cetera, and adults. Now, trauma is not the same and is not experienced in the same way by every individual, which means that when we're looking at someone, we need to make sure that we have a proper assessment of their needs.

And whereas one person may be able to overcome their experiences in months, for other people, it's a lifetime journey. There's also a difference in terms of the type of trafficking. So, for example, trafficking for sexual exploitation versus trafficking for labor exploitation will have a very different impact on the victims and survivors in general. And once again, this is generalized a lot of times, these types of trafficking, crimes are also interlinked or overlapping and that's something that also needs to be recognized.



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Hisham Allam

You have said that they need kind of a proper assessment for the needs, what kind of needs, the common needs for, survivors.

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Each victim and survivor will have their very individual needs. And this is why I talk about the tailored approaches. We cannot have a cookie cutter approach to everybody, whereas some people may not need, for example, safe accommodations, others will, whereas some people may need, access to psychological support in a more permanent fashion, others will not need it, you know, at all, or will need it in a limited way, whereas, for example, some forms of trafficking do not carry the same levels of social stigma and repercussions others do. So, for example, once again, I will take it back to sexual trafficking for sexual exploitation, which may result in honor killings, which may result in social exclusion and, families, not wanting to have any interaction with the victim it may also result in, inability for the young women or men, or, you know, anyone in general who experienced sexual exploitation, being able to find partners, get married, et cetera.

So there, there are a lot of different repercussions many will also have, criminal records, which will actually talk about them being in prostitution or committing other crimes and they may not be able to access, for example, education, particular jobs. So, the impact of trafficking may travel with an individual without tailored approaches for the rest of their life and have also direct impact on their family members.

Hisham Allam

So, what are the specific rights that are essential for these individuals? How can we ensure that they are not just protected, but empowered to reclaim agency and rebuild their lives?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Well, this is very much a question for survivor leaders who have gone through that path and didn't just survive but thrived. So, we look at the example of what that looks like the thriving piece, the empowerment piece and for survivor leaders I see it as for some, it's about getting justice. But also getting access to proper trauma care and opportunities for education, for example, and employment that help them reintegrate into society and.

You know, in a more holistic way, for others, it may be different, different other things. You know, seeing their trafficker, for example, prosecuted, and not fearing for their lives on a daily basis or compensation, for example, for the harm they have suffered that actually also helps many survivors on get access to rehabilitation and reintegration for the years lost.

For example, the health damages and mental health damage has suffered for you know, others, it may be the ability to serve in positions of leadership, for example, like becoming a survivor leader, addressing these issues on a more global policy level, and having an equal seat at the table but it all comes down to one basic fact in my view, it's also about dignity. It's about reinstating the feeling of dignity for individuals who have been exploited and abused.



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Hisham Allam

Is this what we call ethical survivor inclusion?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

No, so ethical survivor inclusion, is a rather new concept developed over, I would say, the last five to 10 years and what it talks about is actually treating survivors as experts by experience. Meaning, once again, compensating them for their work because many survivor leaders are lawyers and doctors and journalists and leading NGOs, et cetera. So, they are professionals. Like any one of us, but they also have to live to experience so they need to be compensated for their work. They cannot be tokenized or be just about the story that they could tell because oftentimes survivors are just pushed to tell their story over and over and over again.

And it's not their story that is relevant. It's what they have learned through the process. In the aftermath and the journey, they traveled afterwards, you know, towards social inclusion, towards changing their victimhood into survivor hood and then becoming a survivor leader and, from what I have seen, there's a seat at the table for them, as I said, to tell their story over and over and over again, but generally not for anything else. I've seen survivors paid with, gift cards, food vouchers, et cetera. Can you imagine being paid and food vouchers for your work? For example, here's a gift certificate to McDonald's for, you know, \$20 or whatever else.

It diminishes them in very particular ways, or here's your travel card, you know, for the train or whatever it is. It actually becomes exploited over and over again. They're also used to fundraise for issues or raise awareness and issues, but as I said, not as an equal and here they're beyond equal here they are leaders on the subject. They know more than anyone else what it actually means to be trafficked and what that experience looks afterwards as well and the vulnerabilities that exist, the methods of traffickers, what would work to connect with victims and survivors and help them to exit the situations of severe exploitation and abuse as well.

Hisham Allam

Yeah, I got the point. So, survivor inclusion is so cornerstone for ethical anti trafficking efforts, right?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

It absolutely is.

Hisham Allam

Now I need to understand how survivor perspectives are shaping our understanding and response to human trafficking.

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

In the development, for example, of the update of the National Reform Mechanism Handbook, survivors were engaged throughout the process. So, as we were developing standards, for implementation of very specific things, for example,



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how soon or what type of accommodation to do specific victims and survivors need, you know, what, approaches to children need in terms of protection, support assistance, criminal justice processes, communications, et cetera.

Survivors play a key role because they can actually tell us what is necessary. They could tell us what actually works. And what is actually needed. So, a lot of those lessons come from there. You know, when there's new policy of legislation drafted, they should be sitting at the table because they actually know for them that knowledge is not theoretical. It's actually very practical knowledge on that. The best thing you know, bureaucrats, and subject matter experts, by or through academics or through, you know, work in offices and such across the world will just not know.

Hisham Allam

Do you have a story in your mind from your experience of a survivor who succeeded to do this or to play this role?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

I do actually, I have a story of an incredible survivor leader, who was the chair of the first International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council, and who actually suggested the launch of the first International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council. She was also part of the U. S. Presidential Advisory Council and lauded all across the world. She actually is very demonstrative of the power of survivor inclusion when it's done in an ethical way. And she insisted that the whole world sits up and actually hears what survivor leaders have to share, but not just hear, but also feel. Try to put it into practice, and we have seen how it has worked you know, under her leadership as well. The code of practice, outlined a by survivor leaders was passed. I know that the U. N. Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons is now actually finalizing should finalized the issue brief on ethical survivor inclusion. We have seen change in policies. We have seen countries now, because of this example as well, start their own survivors of trafficking advisory councils, which sit on par with politicians and other subject matter experts in creating responses to trafficking.

Hisham Allam

What are the most recent countries?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

So U.S definitely leads on this with its United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking started under president Obama It has had tremendous impact and created a lot of inspiration around the world there are a number of other countries that are looking to set this up now. But for example, Albania has a Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council. So, there are movements and changes in that perspective and a clear realization that if you're to do this work right, if we actually want to eradicate trafficking, not reduce it or address it or deal with it, we need survivor leaders. Partners in this.



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Hisham Allam

This is great. How can we effectively address the nexus between conflict related sexual violence and human trafficking to protect the most vulnerable populations?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

There is a very clear linkage between human trafficking and sexual violence and conflict. Those that experience sexual violence and conflict are particularly vulnerable to further exploitation and oftentimes by traffickers many are excluded from their societies. Many feel ashamed many don't have access to their basic needs and the displacement and already the trauma experienced creates a very, very fertile ground from traffickers to pounce on and exploit. So, for example, you know, when we talk about the war in Ukraine, what we have seen is a lot of women fleeing with children and what we have seen are trafficking gangs at the border trying to, exploit them and do so rather successfully.

A lot of times we don't see the conclusion of this right at the beginning. Right, because there was, there were a lot of reports of Ukrainian women are likely to be trafficked, then report that this is not happening, which is not the case because we know that there's a huge level of demand for this, right?

Reuters did a survey or at the beginning of the war, which looked at the online searches for Ukrainian women sex slaves, Ukrainian women, you know for sex, you know, et cetera, pornography of abuse of Ukrainian women. And that wound up 200 to 600%, in terms of searches. So, we know there's clear demand.

The problem is, is that when one becomes a victim, one doesn't necessarily, or doesn't necessarily have the ability to run away from the situation immediately. Investigations also take time so you have, the perfect storm that traffickers can exploit in these situations. We have seen this also in Rwanda, Uganda. You've seen this with the Rohingya. We have seen this all across actually. Vulnerable populations due to conflict who have experienced sexual violence, who then become, primary targets for traffickers because they're easy ones

Hisham Allam

Back to the example of the situation in Ukraine. What have you done to help those women?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

So, when I was working at the OSCE. We did actually a number of different things one of the things that we did is train, first responders from over 42 countries who created an informal, coordination and response hub, to prevent but also address situations of trafficking of Ukrainian women and children in addition, we conducted a number of assessment visits in bordering countries or destination countries, prime destination countries for refugees, specifically women and children, and provided recommendations for those. So those pieces of work were done, while I was at the OSCE. We also looked at and conducted a survey on safety and security of Ukrainian refugee women and their children.

And those were, quite illuminating because many, if they're approached, are you going to be trafficked? Are you worried about trafficking? Are you in a situation of trafficking will back away because there's already a lot of fear and instability? But if you talk about safety and security, a lot of vulnerable populations will respond to this and we have seen the



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approaches for sexual exploitation, surrogacy, production of pornography, et cetera, uh, women and also children being targeted for production, even, child sexual abuse materials.

Hisham Allam

Sorry for interruption, but do you think just efforts are enough?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

No, I don't believe they're enough. I was just providing an example. I think there needs to be a very cohesive organized approach that recognizes the level of demand for Ukrainian women and children, specifically for sexual exploitation, but also other forms of trafficking.

And there need to be cohesive responses that don't just provide basics to begin with and create a lot of vulnerability to continue. But really look at this in a holistic way and a more sustainable long-term way. Because women may have crossed the border on their own, but what happens once they do and, you know, what happens in terms of vetting of accommodation, which wasn't done, and we have seen a number of different situations where women were sexually abused in their accommodation

I mean, I know of one story where, a vulnerable young Ukrainian woman was brought in place for housing because of a lack of bedding, with convicted traffickers, for example in other situations, men were looking for a temporary, houseworker and sex slave, essentially. And, you know, we're opening their doors to Ukrainian women or Ukrainian women with children when they wanted also access to children.

But we don't see any of this yet, because it's still early days, because we think it's two years on, but it's still really early days, because if we know anything about exploitation and abuse and trauma, it takes time. Most victims do not run into police stations, screaming, I'm a victim of trafficking help me they're not perfect victims and I think the real width and breadth of this issue will be realized in time. Not, not just yet.

Hisham Allam

But with time the numbers of victims are doubling, increasing rapidly, right?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

It is true because a lot of vulnerability gets compounded by a number of different factors for example, people run out of their savings the unaddressed trauma gets exacerbated and there's also the sense and loss of community of loved ones of community displacement of pressure, of search for companionship, even because you have the lover boy technique that is that is hugely at play. So, yes, I'm, I'm very, very concerned about what's going to happen to, in the case of Ukrainian women, Ukrainian women and children specifically, because even prior to the war, Ukrainian women and children were heavily targeted by traffickers and those that are worse, we're seeking to exploit them so with this level of vulnerability now I think this is just continuing, but we have not taken the right approaches to actually prevent it and address it to date.



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Hisham Allam

Your work spans across various regions from West Africa to Eastern Europe. What are some common challenges you have encountered in combating home trafficking and how do you differ across different contexts?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

There's one common challenge and I've mentioned it earlier on, in our conversation, which is demand the huge level of demand for trafficking for sexual exploitation, but also for cheap goods, you know, that that cuts across what that creates actually, and you mentioned specifically West Africa, as well as Eastern Europe is a particular target for particularly vulnerable populations or those that are seeking economic stability and we see this replay over and over and over again, the sending countries receiving countries, et cetera, and the benefits of go to generally receiving countries and to very little small degree to or to to some degree to the sending communities as well, which creates also push factor. I would say this would be one thing. The other thing that I've seen that cuts across this lack of proper services and protections corruption as well corruption is a major issue when it comes to traffic.

Hisham Allam

What kind of corruption?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

There's been corruption protecting traffickers and trafficking networks, there's been corruption, even in police forces in terms of trafficking, victims of trafficking. So, you know, or using the services of a victim of trafficking, so you have many different layers of this.

Hisham Allam

Let's talk about your role that you have played for evacuating trust individuals from Afghanistan. This is an interesting point to discuss. Can you share more about this experience and its significance to you personally

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

I believe, as I said, from the beginning the rights of any individual need to be protected, especially in conflict zones. So, I did so in a volunteer capacity and I did so with incredible women human rights leaders across the globe as well, where we teamed up together, we were able to fundraise money in order to charter planes and then lead, women judges, women, prosecutors, women, human rights, defenders and such, across Afghanistan to board flights to other safer locations.

And I think that's an important piece because as we have seen now in Afghanistan, we have gender apartheid. There's no other place on earth where the rights of women and girls are so limited or actually nonexistent.



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Hisham Allam

Do you have in mind an inspiring story from Afghanistan that you would like to share with our listeners?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Although there's so many, actually, I'm just thinking of where to start because there are many inspiring stories of people, you know, young women escaping. I'll give you one. Actually, there's an incredible young woman. Actually, somebody contacted me about and I remember being on the phone with her I'm trying to get her into the airport in Kabul. And she was separated from her mother, and her grandmother, she was with her father and some of her siblings. And I remember being on the phone. She says, no, no, no, I cannot go on. You know, I can't make it. And we just talking her through it, getting her on the flight, then eventually also helping her mother and her grandmother, evacuate and now I know she's gotten massive scholarships. And she's doing exceptionally well. And it's it seems like a simple story, but at those times, those stories were not simple at all. And we have seen major successes as well, as well as many challenges for a lot of the women arriving all across the world but this particular story, just, you know, almost giving up and then making it and getting such incredible academic recognition and having such a brilliant future due to talent, due to commitment to education is you know I think is a shining example.

Hisham Allam

What are some common misconceptions or myths about human trafficking that you frequently encounter in work and how do you address them?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Oh, there are many. I think many people think or, you know, that human trafficking is a woman tied to a bed or radiator with a metal handcuff doesn't work like this anymore, frankly and that it requires movement across borders from particular countries. I'm American there's quite a bit of trafficking in U. S. as well, and it's domestic trafficking. So, there is a lack of understanding of domestic trafficking, especially in the West. And we are very, very prone to it, and there's a major issue that needs to be addressed on the domestic level, for example, but also how we see human trafficking, because a lot of human trafficking now happens through abuse of power or vulnerability.

It doesn't necessarily have to require significant physical force and a lot of it has now actually also moved online people are or different elements of trafficking. If not the whole process and online piece is not really well understood. You know, what we call cyber trafficking, because women can be trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, sitting locked up in a room, web camming, performing different sex acts as their order to do and children as well for that matter.

And we have seen the explosion of this, especially during COVID times. So, COVID changed a lot of things. Brought us all on zoom and telecommuting and such, but it brought a lot of the trafficking and exploitation online as well from grooming to actual advertisement of victims of trafficking, et cetera and even control of victims of trafficking happens online.



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Hisham Allam

As a father, how can I protect my kids from online?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

It's really not easy for parents out there pretend to be a 10- or 12-year-old create a profile and see what happens. There are, there have been some stories. Actually, I believe there's one in New York Times that where a mother did this and she was approached by multiple predators, you know, on a daily basis.

They're lurking everywhere because our children now have their whole lives online so they could figure out what the child likes. If the child is struggling, if the child had a fight with, you know, his or her mother or father where the child maybe is not popular and they're different approaches for different ages and such as well. So, part of it is education as parents. And actually, being in control of what actually what your child does online being very cognizant of it and participatory also educating the child that they can come to you with absolutely anything because the children are not the ones responsible for being exploited and abused and believing children when they come to you as well.

Schools also play a very important role. It's also about watching for behavioral changes, because if your child acts in a particular way and all of a sudden, your child changes, that also says something, because right now traffickers and pedophile networks can exploit your child sitting in your home next to you.

Hisham Allam

Can we use technology as a counterattack to be a tool to fight and compete human trafficking?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

Well, absolutely, and there are many such tools, frankly speaking, that are being used. There is a rack net project out of Canada, which, scours the web for pictures of child sexual abuse.

Images of children through hashtags and removes them. There's also thorn, which was started by Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore that also helps to protect children online and identify children in situations of trafficking. So, there are a variety of different tools because there's tech for bad but there's also tech for good and I think part of it is also about investing into tech for good.

Hisham Allam

I have to admit I envy you a little your educational background includes the studies at prestigious institutions like Columbia University and the University of Oxford. How have this experience shaped your approach to tackling complex and sensitive human rights issues.



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Tatiana Kotlyarenko

They gave me the educational academic background and exposure to a lot of issues, but they also made me understand that a lot of the work needs to be learned frontline. So that's where, after graduating Columbia University, I went to Ghana and started an NGO because I wanted to learn the practical aspects of the work itself. And I think that's very important because a lot of times, you go from Ivy League schools directly to very prestigious organizations, United Nations, other international organizations without having the true practical experience that is needed to provide recommendations to countries to develop a realistic and impactful policy.

So, I think that education has been a gift, you know, for a refugee girl from Brooklyn. But at the same time, it has to be combined with practical skills. That's how we can create realistic human rights responses to issues that are experienced by real people in dire circumstances.

Hisham Allam

Yeah, I totally agree. Thank you, Tatiana, for sharing your profound insights and expertise on this critical topic. As we conclude our discussion, what final thoughts or advice would you offer to our listeners who are passionate about combating human trafficking and promoting human rights?

Tatiana Kotlyarenko

I would like to leave, actually, with the following message. International organizations have a very significant role to play. But those international organizations cannot be legitimate if they do not actually protect the rights uh, those are working within those organizations. If they're racked by situations of sexual harassment, abusive staff and such. So, in order to ensure that people who actually are at the front line of protecting, the most vulnerable populations from human rights abuses are able to do their work and do so with full legitimacy. Those organizations need to create the environments for that work to be done. Not toxic environments, but productive environments. And then I think we can make much more headway as well. But, you know, and just on human trafficking itself, we need to start thinking about eradication.

We have worked on different crimes before. This is not human trafficking is not a social issue. It is a crime. And frankly speaking, law enforcement knows how to address this crime. We just need the political commitment and the resources to address this.

Hisham Allam

Yeah, as you have said, human trafficking is not just a social problem it is a crime. Thank you, Tatiana again. Today we have had the privilege of speaking with Tatiana Kaltyarenko, a tireless advocate in the fight against human trafficking.

Stay tuned for another enlightening conversation on DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Until next time, this is your host, Hisham Allam, signing off.