



## DISABILITY AS A RISK FACTOR

This Report includes recent reports of the abuse of deaf domestic workers in the United Kingdom, addicts forced to labor in fields in the United States, people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities enslaved in Chinese kilns, and persons with developmental disabilities forced to work as peddlers on the streets of India. Persons with disabilities remain one of the groups most at risk of being trafficked. Due to disability-based discrimination and exclusion common in many places, however, governments often ignore this risk factor or fail to make provisions for persons with disabilities as part of anti-trafficking efforts.

The stigma and marginalization of a person with disabilities creates a particular vulnerability. For example, parents who see no hope of jobs or marriage for their disabled children may place those children in exploitative situations with the intent of shedding a “burden” or seeking income. Where schools fail to accommodate students with disabilities, high drop-out rates leave them on the streets and at much higher risk of being trafficked in forced begging or other criminal activities. The commonly held view that persons with disabilities are not sexually active increases the risk of sex trafficking for persons with disabilities, especially disabled women and girls. For example, a Global HIV/AIDS survey conducted by the World Bank and Yale University showed that women and girls with disabilities were assumed to be virgins and thus targeted for forced sex, including by HIV-positive individuals who believed that having sex with a virgin would cure them.

Societal barriers limit the access of persons with disabilities to systems of justice. Lack of training of police, prosecutors, and judges on how to accommodate persons with disabilities (through, for example, sign language interpreters, plain language, and physical access) can leave victims with disabilities unable to provide effective statements and report the abuse they have endured. Laws expressly prohibiting people with disabilities from being witnesses, especially those who are blind, deaf, or have mental or developmental disabilities, leave such victims excluded

from processes that should provide them with redress. Even when the justice system is not to blame, societal prejudices that devalue or discount the experiences of persons with disabilities can mean that their evidence is given less weight, and that sentences given to perpetrators may be lower than comparable cases where non-disabled people are the victims. This exclusion of persons with disabilities from the justice system in turn contributes to their being targeted by traffickers, who might assume that such victims will be less likely to raise an alarm or seek help.

Even in instances in which victims of trafficking do not have disabilities, the experience of being trafficked substantially increases the risk of victims acquiring disabilities as a result of physical and psychological trauma. It is thus essential that victim service programs include resources for those with a wide range of physical, sensory, learning, mental, and developmental disabilities.

