

SIREN report

STRATEGIC INFORMATION RESPONSE NETWORK

United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP): Phase III

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WHY VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING DECLINE ASSISTANCE¹

FEEDBACK FROM EUROPEAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

KEYWORD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Location: Europe (Albania, Moldova, Serbia)▪ Topic: Trafficking of women and children; victim protection; impact▪ Analysis type: Interviews with victims of trafficking				
Purpose	<i>To analyze the situations of trafficking victims and their opinions about the protection services they were or were not offered, for the purpose of identifying potential improvements in victim protection.</i>				
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SCENARIO

"Ms. A" migrates from her rural border town to a city in the neighboring country, in the hopes of finding decent work and a better standard of living. She meets a woman who offers to assist her with both, promising that she will take Ms. A to a nice place to stay and will help her find work. Ms. A does not understand the local language very well, but she agrees - only to be sold into exploitative labor.

Police eventually raid the establishment, removing the women, including Ms. A, and pass her onto another woman. The woman tells Ms. A that she can assist her with a place to stay and some decent work, if Ms. A will go with her. Ms. A does not understand the woman well since she still knows little of the local language... Although the woman is a social worker from a local shelter, Ms. A fears that she is another trafficker.

How can we improve victim protection and the ways in which it is offered to victims, so that they do not resemble the trafficking process itself? How can we minimize distress, fear, and mistrust? Most importantly, how can we improve what we are offering and how we offer it, so that it is appealing to victims and able to address their real needs in an individualized way? A study was done in Europe to seek the answers to these important questions.

¹ This SIREN report summarizes: Brunovskis, A. & R. Surtees (2007) *Leaving the past behind? When victims of trafficking decline assistance*. Fafo AIS (Oslo) and NEXUS Institute (Vienna). The report can be downloaded at: <http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/20040/20040.pdf>.

Why do some trafficking victims decline assistance, and under what circumstances? Some lessons and methods from Europe

While many victims of trafficking are never offered assistance, many of those who are offered assistance chose to forego the help available to them. Why? The starting point for this study was that if women and girls declined assistance because they did not need it, then this was fine and they should be left alone. However, if they declined assistance for other reasons but would benefit from some form of help, then the issue needs to be urgently addressed. Our research, conducted in three South-Eastern European countries in April-November 2006, aims to contribute to a discussion of how victim protection is organised and what could potentially be done to better meet the needs of the diverse population who fall within the category of ‘trafficking victim.’

Why disseminate the results of a European study in Asia, given the many socio-cultural and geopolitical differences between the two regions? There are three key reasons:

1. The methods and analytical framework have yielded findings that are very useful for improving victim protection not only in Europe but also more broadly.
2. The research highlights the importance of understanding the needs and decisions of trafficked persons, and the adoption of similar methods and analyses could be useful for victim protection efforts globally. Standardizing methodologies would also allow for inter-country comparative analyses.
3. While the needs, wishes, and circumstances of trafficking victims in SE Asia may be different from those in Europe, fear, lack of awareness, obligations to family, and desire for a better life, are universal themes, and it is important to appreciate how these factors can affect the decision-making of trafficking victims.

FIELD SITES AND INTERVIEW SAMPLE AT-A-GLANCE

- ▶ **Field sites:** Albania and Moldova (source countries); Serbia (transit/destination/source country) – interviews in capitals, plus selected towns and villages. Each country was visited twice for visits of one week; second visits involved re-interviewing respondents, and visiting new respondents and new locations learned about during the first visit.
- ▶ **Interview sample:** 52 trafficked and at-risk women; 90 government and non-government persons working in assistance programs.

Number of trafficking victims interviewed	39
Number of persons interviewed in street prostitution; trafficking status not definitively determined	13
<i>Number of trafficking victims and prostitutes interviewed twice</i>	7
<i>Number who had accepted assistance at the time of interview</i>	30
<i>Number never identified as trafficked and never offered assistance</i>	7
<i>Number identified as trafficked but who declined all assistance</i>	2
Number of social workers, psychologists, medical personnel, lawyers, and police interviewed	90
<i>Number of social workers, police, and others working in assistance programs interviewed at least twice</i>	11

Methodology

Step 1: Interviews with key informants in assistance organizations and other actors involved in the anti-trafficking field: 35 organizations in three countries, with a wide variety of experiences in trafficking victim assistance.

Step 2: Recruitment of trafficking victims as respondents through ten assistance organizations. There was a conscious choice not to recruit respondents outside of these channels - for instance through social service centers, community groups or other local actors – which might have exposed individuals as having been trafficked to their community, which may result in stigmatization and other problems.

Step 3: Interviews with trafficking victims, with ethical safeguards. To ensure informed consent, written information about the research project was provided in local languages to potential respondents. The information was repeated verbally as an introduction to each interview, and time was also set aside at the end of each interview for any questions the respondent might have and to explain how we could be contacted later if any concerns arose as a result of the interview or research.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND SAMPLE BIAS WHILE RECRUITING TRAFFICKING VICTIMS FOR INTERVIEWS

There were substantial differences between different organizations in terms of their willingness to ask beneficiaries whether they wanted to participate in research, as well as in their willingness to speak openly about their work and experiences of victims declining services. Perhaps not surprisingly, organizations that were less transparent about their work were also less willing to share information about the research project with their beneficiaries, and effectively decided on behalf of their beneficiaries rather than allow them to choose for themselves. It is difficult to say whether our data would have been significantly different had access to respondents been more evenly distributed among different organizations and models of care. Nevertheless, the unequal access to respondents depending on which organizations assist them should be kept in mind in trafficking studies in general.

It also raises the issue: to what extent should an organization be able to control and determine the interaction of its beneficiaries with the outside world, including participation in research?

Key findings: There were a wide range of reasons for declining assistance, falling into 3 categories: (1) personal circumstances; (2) difficulties in the victim protection system; and (3) the social context and personal experiences as obstacles to assistance

Personal circumstances leading victims to decline assistance

Accepting assistance would stand in the way of further migration. Trafficked women return to their home countries under different circumstances. In most cases their original migration (which then resulted in trafficking) was a strategy to make money or, in some cases, escape poor conditions at home. Very often, neither conditions at home nor the desire for a better life will have changed: the individual will still want to migrate. This may particularly be the case where debt incurred as a result of trafficking exacerbates an already difficult situation at home. Further, trafficking victims will not necessarily be free from trafficking simply because they have been identified. They may still be expected to provide income for the trafficker, sometimes

with even greater debts due to the additional costs of re-trafficking/re-migration. Also, in many cases, trafficked women are less controlled by physical obstacles and more by psychological hindrances, often in the form of threats. Being deported will not generally have changed her situation vis-a-vis the trafficker and she will feel no freer to accept assistance or break with the trafficker even though technically she may appear to have been freed.

Interactions with family may lead to declining assistance. The family plays an important role in decisions about assistance, sometimes passively influencing the decision, sometimes actively making the decision for the victim. In several cases we found families actively discouraging victims from accepting assistance. Declining assistance in order to return to the family is sometimes declining by default, because accepting assistance comes at too high a cost. These costs can be *emotional costs* in that the victim wants to be comforted by her own family. They may also be *social costs*, for instance when service providers require that the beneficiary limits contact with family (at least during the shelter stay) and can only meet them in a controlled environment, for instance at a police station. There may also be *financial consequences*, as accepting assistance often means that the victim is not able to earn an income, at least when initially receiving support. These costs may make it virtually impossible for some trafficking victims to accept assistance.

Further, victims often want to return to their family immediately but may find that relationships have changed, or that they face problems at home which require some intervention. In such cases, women may initially decline but later accept assistance, making it imperative that they have information to seek out appropriate services at later stages. In many cases, when a trafficking victim returns, the family will have little or no idea why she has been gone and what she has experienced. Victims find it very difficult to tell their families what has happened, which can cause tensions and misunderstandings and the family will not realize the woman needs help.

Victims do not need assistance. One reason that victims may not accept assistance is that they (and/or their families) have decided that they do not need the assistance being offered. In some cases, assistance is not required/wanted and the woman wishes to deal with the problems herself and get on with her life. In other cases, while the victim may need assistance, she is able to access alternative sources of support and does not require the formalized services offered by counter-trafficking actors. This might be family-based help, support from the social network, community based assistance, or non-trafficking related services. In fact, it was generally agreed that where alternative options were available, victims preferred to pursue these. Assistance that is not trafficking-specific but aimed at the general population was particularly valued.

Difficulties in the victim protection system leading to declining assistance

Problems of information and communication. Not understanding the services offered appears to be a relatively common reason for some victims to decline assistance. Even victims who accepted assistance, or had little real choice but to accept assistance due to their status as irregular migrants, described a high level of confusion when first offered services. The trafficked women surveyed had different ideas of what a shelter would be: “a house full of people, children and girls and also full of cameras”; “a cellar with bars”, “a fraud” or “a home with a lot of people.” Others were unsure of where they were being taken when they agreed to assistance, not sure that they could trust the service providers or police and even worried that they were being trafficked again. This confusion results partly from insufficient or confusing information. Generally, assistance was explained verbally in broad terms

and very few victims received written information outlining their assistance options. There were also issues linked to the situation of individual victims: their psychological state, their capacity to comprehend, language obstacles, and their lack of knowledge and experience of assistance.

Organization of the assistance. The experiences and background of trafficked women and girls are very diverse. Our respondents varied in age, economic situation, educational background, family relations, trafficking experiences and so on. Given this diversity it is not difficult to see that *one size does not fit all* in terms of assistance needs, posing a challenge for service providers working with trafficking victims. Many trafficking victims decline assistance because they are not able or willing to accept assistance in the form that it is offered. This may be because a victim's specific needs are not addressed by the program. It may also be less about the nature and contents of the assistance and more because of the way that it is organized and offered: in shelter-based programs; in capital cities and away from families; and involving time-comitments, which victims cannot afford because of the need to work and support their families.

Paradoxically, the situations in which victims are offered assistance sometimes resemble the trafficking process, and can cause considerable distress and fear. Similar promises of help are made, victims are transported and assistance toward a better life is offered. A number of respondents feared that they were being trafficked again when they were taken to a shelter or police station. In other cases, the assistance does not adequately take into account their fear of the trafficker. Victims are often afraid that accepting assistance will be seen by traffickers as collaborating with the authorities and that, as a result, traffickers will carry out reprisals against them or their families.

Interplay between service providers and beneficiaries. In some situations our research found that it may not always be trafficking victims who are declining assistance but that service providers in effect decline them. In some cases, victims were excluded from assistance after intentionally breaking rules, this being interpreted by social workers as a *de facto* rejection of the services and the assistance framework, but which may also represent tensions and differing expectations between service providers and beneficiaries. Some women reported problematic behavior on the part of program staff, including biases and insensitivities against victims as "prostitutes", "foreigners" and "undesirables." In other cases, beneficiaries left voluntarily, but only because they found the program conditions untenable. Many shelters have very strict rules and restrictions, such as "closed" type shelters, restricted freedom of movement, restricted access to telephones, and limited contact with persons outside of the program, which were generally justified as necessary for protection against possible threats and reprisals. Nevertheless, restrictions seem excessive in many cases, and several assisted victims reported finding these restrictions difficult and stressful. Further, the fact that other shelters were able to assist victims without restricting their freedom and did not report any security problems raises the question of when and whether these kinds of measures are necessary and appropriate. Some service providers also explained that they were sometimes obliged to decline beneficiaries as their resources were limited and they had to focus on only those who showed the most potential for change.

Social context and personal experience that can be obstacles to assistance

Trust. The issue of trust underpins all of our findings, as it is pivotal in decisions about whether or not to accept assistance. Trust is at the foundation of the work that assistance organizations do, when asking trafficking victims to enter into unknown

programs or relocating to shelters they have never been to before. Two particular aspects of trust were issues in and of themselves: suspicion of assistance and lack of trust because of previous assistance experiences.

In terms of suspicion, many victims (and often their families) expressed at least some suspicion and insecurity about the different types of intervention and assistance. Some were suspicious of certain forms of assistance – such as psychological assistance – which may not be valued or have negative associations in the society. Others were suspicious that services were “free” but would somehow cost them later on. Even if there is sufficient trust in a particular case, it often only applies to a specific individual or organization, which complicates referrals to other organizations. Past negative experiences of assistance, both within the trafficking framework and more generally, also influenced declining patterns. It is worth considering the degree to which negative experiences in the past are linked to other factors. It may be, for instance, that negative experiences are more common among people who belong to marginalized groups, like ethnic minorities or people who have been or are in prostitution, and that, therefore, people from already marginalized groups who fall victim to trafficking may be more likely to decline assistance.

Stigma and exclusion. Receiving assistance – whether shelter-based or community-based (from anti-trafficking organizations) – can identify women as victims of trafficking and lead to stigmatization. Moreover, this stigma affects not only the individual but can spread to the family as a whole and also the local community. While the most obvious source of stigma for trafficking victims is prostitution, another is failed migration, particularly in countries where there are so many “successful” migration stories. Strikingly, stigma can also occur for what a woman is *perceived* to have done, rather than what she *has* done. In many environments, to leave the village or town under certain circumstances may be sufficiently “deviant” to merit stigma, as she will have moved outside the boundaries for what is acceptable behavior for women. Leaving the village in itself may cause speculation that she has been a prostitute even when there is no other indication of this. Receiving services and support which others in the community may want (and need) may also lead to jealousy and resentment, which can amplify stigma. This highlights the need for less conspicuous interventions, such as assisting socially vulnerable groups rather than trafficking victims, as well as the strategic advantage of helping the community at large (for instance, with education, food security or awareness-raising) rather than targeting only one individual or family.

Identification with the victim role. Accepting assistance in many cases fundamentally changes a victim’s view of herself. Interestingly, sometimes opposite constructions were used to justify the same choices; one woman justified accepting assistance by underlining that normally she managed on her own, saying “I am not the kind of person who just receives”; while another justified accepting by saying “I am not the kind of person who says no to anything”, indicating that she would not foolishly waste an opportunity to improve her life. Many also spoke of a change in how they viewed themselves after having accepted assistance – for instance, that they had grown more confident, that they knew that they deserved better than the abuse they had suffered, that they had no longer felt guilty or inferior.

However, for others, the picture was more complex and not always unequivocally positive. Accepting trafficking-specific assistance means to accept the role and identity of trafficking victim. This role is multifaceted and holds seemingly contradictory elements. On the one hand, trafficking victims are often stigmatized, while, on the other hand, the rhetoric surrounding the issue sometimes involves a near glorification of victims. It is, therefore, not an easy role for women to assume. In

addition, to accept assistance also, at some level, involves acknowledging the gravity of what has happened, which, in itself, may be a difficult hurdle to overcome given that a very natural defense mechanism for traumatic experiences is repression and denial. Problems in relating to the role of trafficking victim have both to do with the trafficking term itself *and* that of being a victim in general and a recipient of assistance.

Conclusion

Victims who decline assistance are in different situations and hold different characteristics from victims who accept. We found that most victims only accepted assistance when they were in very desperate situations and had no alternatives. Conversely, we also found that people who had alternatives or some sort of security net declined trafficking-specific assistance and sought it in other places. This could mean that some of the characteristics associated with trafficking victims may be more representative of *assisted trafficking victims* than of trafficking victims generally. For example, the assumption that most victims come from dysfunctional families may be because trafficking victims who have good family relationships will return home rather than enter into assistance and thus their experiences are not represented.

The differences between assisted and unassisted victims have implications both for research and policy. There is a great need for proper evaluations of trafficking assistance efforts, to see what works and what does not. However, these evaluation efforts must not only look at the effect on assisted victims, but also include the question; who is NOT assisted, and why? What happens to them in the longer term? Are there systematic differences between victims who are assisted and those who are not? Do victims who are not assisted need different types of assistance from what is available? This report suggests recommendations for improvements to ensure that victims of trafficking can access the assistance they need and want.

Some recommendations

Provide written and verbal information in appropriate languages, and demonstrate reliability by attending to victims' immediate concerns. First contact with victims often happens under relatively chaotic conditions and involves substantial confusion about what is happening, as well as who the prospective helpers actually are. Success in offering assistance depends on the ability to provide information and build trust at a time when victims may be in a confused and traumatized state, with limited capacity to process the consequences of accepting and declining assistance. Written materials should be provided that are age, language, and educationally appropriate, explaining what is available, the different actors in the process, and about victims' rights. Written materials can be accessed at a later and hopefully more stable stage of the victim's post-trafficking experience, even if she has initially declined assistance. In terms of building trust, one step would be to identify and solve a victim's immediate concerns, for instance documents, nutrition, or health problems, thereby demonstrating that the assistance is not only real but also efficient. The point at which many of our respondents received the first concrete and specific assistance was when they decided to trust service providers, this being substantially more convincing than any number of words assuring good intentions.

Consider rules and restrictions from the victim's perspective. Any use of restrictions on victims must be guided by a clear rationale for their use, strict supervision and guidelines for appropriate use, ensuring individuals' rights and ethical treatment, and that no violations of victims' rights occur. Such guidelines are

not in place today. Further, there should be a serious discussion as to whether and when these types of interventions are appropriate for trafficking victims, what therapeutic effect is intended and their efficiency in attaining this goal. If restrictions of this type are to be used at all, there should also be formal bodies where complaints can be directed and to which organizations and individuals can be held accountable in cases of abuse or problems.

Need for monitoring, accountability and quality assurance. The victim protection sector is largely run by NGOs and IOs who are often not held accountable to anyone but their donors, who may or may not choose to make conditions for further funding. There are few systems for licensing service providers in this sector, little monitoring of the work, and few formalized mechanisms for complaint in the case of maltreatment. This, combined with the fact that many victims seem to believe that assistance is mandatory, creates a worrying picture as to whether victims' rights are respected and creates the potential in some cases for assistance to be a second form of victimization, as was the case for some respondents and which caused others to decline.

Allocate adequate resources and consider broader assistance needs. Including victims' families in assistance could assuage patterns of declining assistance, given that one reason to decline is that trafficking victims must return home and attend to these family needs. This could also help alleviate families' distrust and skepticism of the assistance and service providers. Allowing parents to bring their children into assistance programs is similarly important, although careful thought is needed to how this is done. However, as many service providers struggle with a shortage of financial resources - often victim's needs (as well as the number of victims) exceeds available resources - this requires appropriate funds be allocated.

Develop programs that are non-identifying and non-stigmatizing. Assistance to trafficking victims could potentially be less stigmatizing if integrated within social services, in order that assistance can be received on the grounds of social vulnerability rather than being a trafficking victim. Providing opportunities for assistance that does not involve leaving the community and staying in a centralized shelter may be a good alternative for the numerous victims who feel unable to leave parents or children behind, or who cannot afford to forego income while receiving assistance.

For more details on the work of the Fafo Institute in Norway or the NEXUS Institute in Austria, contact the respective senior researchers (Anette Brunovskis and Rebecca Surtees) at the addresses on the front page. For information about UNIAP's SIREN project, contact Paul Buckley at paul.buckley@undp.org.

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