

Gender-Neutral Integration Policies Fail Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

Conclusions from the COALESCE Project in Cyprus and beyond

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- **Executive Summary**

Migrant women victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation face a myriad of complex problems as they transition into European societies. Research—including by the COALESCE project—finds that, to be effective, integration efforts require a gender-specific lens and methodology and benefit from specialist knowledge and intersectional competence. Pulling from the COALESCE results in six countries, but especially Cyprus, this Policy Brief suggests ways to improve outcomes through gender-aware rather than gender-blind approaches.

● Introduction

A highly gendered crime, sex trafficking has severe and long-term consequences on the well-being of women and girls. While recognized as a major form of exploitation in Europe, many victims remain unidentified and their needs unaddressed. This is true across the European Union (EU). Female victims of trafficking (VoTs) face complex medical and psychological needs that are often further complicated by their immigration status, varying degrees of access to integration services, cultural and linguistic differences, and racism and xenophobia. To meet this particular challenge, governments must implement gender-specific integration policies that focus on the economic, legal, and psycho-social needs of female VoTs specifically.

With support through the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the COALESCE project examined the effectiveness of integration policies for female VoTs for sexual exploitation in six different countries—Cyprus, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia and Lithuania. Results were compiled in country-specific reports that have been used to identify and examine the complex issues at play, advocate on behalf of this particular group of European residents, and improve policies based on specific national examples as well as on international lessons learned. Sharing a focus on the forces that influence the movement of people to and the integration of migrants within Europe, PERCEPTIONS and the COALESCE project found common purpose in that both worked to develop informed and actionable policy recommendations. Key findings from the COALESCE project are thus elaborated upon here.

In summary, the COALESCE project's "Mind the Gap" reports found that in all six case studies—likely indicative of most other countries of Europe—the integration and rehabilitation of female VoTs for sexual exploitation is lacking in three main areas—the economic, the legal, and the psycho-social. In addition, provision of adequate medical and psychological support is limited and, overall, there is a reluctance to identify women as VoTs, something that would facilitate access to proper channels of support. It is a reality that access to some of the critical support available to VoTs is dependent on a referral.

● "Mind the Gap" Overview

The "Mind the Gap" reports concluded that a lack of gender-specific policies in most, if not all, of the countries examined hampered transition and integration. Germany provides various types of support at both the national and local levels but few processes or services are gender sensitive, resulting in gaps that disproportionately affect women. The Italian "Mind the Gap" report found that consistent psychological support is not guaranteed during the initial

Key Issues:

- *Sex trafficking is a highly gendered crime*
- *Gender-specific integration policies are needed to address the economic, legal and psycho-social needs of female victims of trafficking specifically*

Key Findings:

- *There is a lack of gender-specific policies; this gap*

arrival period in the country. Instead, it is dependent on the handling of the case by the anti-trafficking center which can miss nuances. The report thus finds a need for culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate psychological support as part of the health care system with special attention paid to women. In Latvia, the report found that the police may be unwilling to refer migrant women who are prostitutes to support services. As a result, potential (likely) trafficking crimes go undetected and victims unaided. Meanwhile, VoTs in Ireland receive different rights based on whether they have applied for international protection or were formally recognized through Ireland's National Referral Mechanism, creating possible imbalances in access to services.

● “Minding the Gap” in Cyprus

Looking at the particular case of Cyprus—an EU front-line state that has witnessed a dramatic and unprecedented increase in the number of migrants in the last few years—the “Mind the Gap” report found that while identification of vulnerable asylum-seekers has improved, the process is neither systematic nor gender-specific. An outcome of this is that the needs of some female VoTs go unmet as many cases simply go unidentified. Women also face challenges with accessing information about their rights and navigating the wider asylum system. A lack of communication from Social Welfare Services as well as language barriers limit the services that asylum seekers (and potential VoTs within that status group) have access to once they leave the reception centers.

When it comes to addressing the specific needs of VoTs, the government falls short by not providing free legal aid to victims during criminal proceedings. These proceedings usually take at least two years, prolonging a process that can be emotionally and psychologically painful for victims and which does not usually result in a conviction. Issues also arise when it comes to accessing adequate health care. The report found no evidence of specialized care being provided to VoTs. There is also a lack of resources and information about sexual health, with women receiving no gender-specific counseling.

Employment practices in Cyprus also present a significant challenge to female VoTs. Apart from the racism and xenophobia regularly experienced by most asylum seekers looking for jobs, many VoTs must also deal with the challenges presented by rampant sexual harassment and, more critically, motherhood. A lack of childcare and additional layers of bureaucracy make it difficult to take advantage of educational or training opportunities and language classes (when they exist) and to make it to job interviews.

disproportionally affects women

- *There is a need for culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate psychological support for women*
- *Potential trafficking victims sometimes go undetected*

Key Findings:

- *The process of identifying vulnerable asylum-seekers is not gender specific and the needs of many female VoTs go unmet*
- *Lack of communication and language barriers limit access to information*
- *VoTs are not provided with legal aid during criminal proceedings*
- *No gender-specific counselling*

The “Mind the Gap” report’s findings in Cyprus are summarized in the following excerpt from a “Brief” released on the occasion of International Migrants Day 2021.

“The lack of a solid and ongoing national integration plan in Cyprus has left female third-country-national VOTs for sexual exploitation struggling to find gainful employment, while also exposing them to much higher rates of homelessness and potential of exploitation. The women in Cyprus targeted by COALESCE face multiple forms of discrimination, significantly fewer opportunities to integrate into their host societies, and a higher risk of experiencing violence. The national “Mind the Gap” report for Cyprus reveals that, in addition to issues stemming from their status as migrants, the women VoTs face challenges that are gender-specific. These include: sexual violence, sexism and childcare responsibilities. At the same time, traditional gender roles and institutionalized gender stereotypes pose additional barriers to the integration of women victims of trafficking in Cyprus.”

● Recommendations from Cyprus

Based on the “Mind the Gap” report’s findings, the following policy recommendations were outlined for Cyprus but are instructive for most contexts in which the needs of female VOTs for sexual exploitation must be addressed:

- Gender equality should be mainstreamed across integration policies in order to ensure that migrant women and men are benefiting equally and that the protection and integration needs of women migrants are met with statutory funding;
- Gender-specific support should be provided through specialized counselling centers, with sufficient long-term funding (personnel and material costs);
- Shelters (including those run or supported by the government) should extend services to VOTs and have sustained funding for psycho-social, legal and integration support;
- Nurseries should be established and maintained in order to provide affordable childcare;
- Gender-specific interpretation and cultural mediation services should be provided;
- Anti-racism and anti-sexism programs should be designed and funded to effectively raise awareness in Cypriot society (through national campaigns and educational programs);
- Research looking at gender-segregated data on the integration of VoTs, displaced migrants as well as on violence against refugee women should be supported;

Key recommendations:

- *Mainstreaming gender equality across integration policies*
- *Gender-specific support through specialised counselling centers and services*
- *Funding for psycho-social, legal and integration support*
- *Affordable childcare is essential*
- *Support gender-focused research to inform policy*
- *Ensure participation of migrant women*

- Reservation on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention should be lifted immediately;
- Recommendations made by the Ombudsman and other entities that monitor and evaluate anti-trafficking policies and efforts should be implemented; and
- Migrant women should be encouraged to contribute to their own social empowerment, hastening a power shift that would allow women to advocate effectively for their rights.

● Solutions for Elsewhere, Everywhere

Across countries and contexts, and based on the COALESCE project's findings, to best address the needs of female victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, solutions should respond to victims' needs. Some of the ways of doing this include:

- Establishing early, centralized identification and referral mechanisms for migrant women VOTs;
- Ensuring access to information on rights, entitlements, protections, services and opportunities for women VOTs;
- Enhancing access of female VOTs to women-specific healthcare (focused for example on gynecological issues such as female genital mutilation and sex education);
- Involving healthcare workers in the identification process (including by creating safe spaces and equipping nurses with the right knowledge, skills and resources);
- Providing access to affordable or subsidized childcare to female VOTs to help facilitate their active participation in social-integration opportunities and the job market;
- Developing long-term funding opportunities to buttress social and linguistic integration programming for women VOTs in particular.

Key recommendation:

- *Be responsive to victim's expressed and assessed needs*

● References

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