

Anette Brunovskis and Rebecca Surtees

Leaving the past behind? When victims of trafficking decline assistance

Summary report

A research cooperation between Fafo AIS (Oslo) and
NEXUS Institute (Washington)



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Preface

This study was conceived because, in our previous research, we found that some victims declined assistance offered and available to them. Not only was this an issue in its own right, but a better understanding of this behaviour could highlight the conditions and challenges that women and girls face after trafficking, including what could ease the transition from trafficking. We are grateful that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed and funded our project. We also found that this topic resonated with many service providers. We appreciate their generous sharing of information, including discussing the challenges and obstacles they face with great candour. We also thank them for their time and effort in facilitating access to a wide range of trafficked persons whose experiences form the foundation of this study. We have not individually listed these organisations because we do not wish for our findings to be unduly associated with any one programme, organisation or country. Our findings are reflective of the overall situation and the organisations that assisted us should be commended both for their transparency and their commitment to addressing this issue. We would also like to thank the trafficked women and girls and persons in street prostitution who were willing to share details of their experiences in an effort to improve conditions and opportunities for other trafficked persons. Without their courageous and generous participation, this research would not be possible. We hope to have fairly represented their views and experiences.

We have also benefited from the assistance of colleagues. Laura Mitchell was central in data collection, conducting fieldwork in Serbia and Albania. Guri Tyldum was central in the design of the project. In Serbia, the Anti Trafficking Centre's team of outreach workers – Jelena Milic, Borislav Djurkovic, Stefan Dimitrijevic and Suzana Vukoje – worked as field assistants, interviewing 20 women, girls and transgender persons in street prostitution in Belgrade, information we would not have been able to collect without their competent assistance. We also want to extend our gratitude to Slavica Stojkovic, Valbona Lenja and Stella Rotaru from the IOM missions in Serbia, Albania and Moldova who went out of their way in helping us organise our fieldwork. Further, we have had indispensable support from our team of highly competent translators – Milena Markovic, Daniela Hasa, Aljona Thaci, Julian Hasa and Alina Legcobit

Finally, we would like to thank May-Len Skilbrei of Fafo, Institute for Applied International Studies and Stephen Warnath of NEXUS Institute for their on-going support for the project and their careful review of and inputs into the study.

Anette Brunovskis and Rebecca Surtees,
Fafo (Oslo) and NEXUS (Washington), 2012

Part I: Introduction

1. Focus of the summary report

This research explores why some trafficking victims decline assistance and under which circumstances. At the same time, it is also about the very diverse circumstances trafficked women and girls face when they come into contact with assistance systems both at home and abroad. The reasons victims of trafficking decline assistance reveals a great deal about the constraints and challenges faced by those who choose to accept. Therefore, this report is intended to contribute to the knowledge about the conditions and needs of victims of trafficking in general. We have observed that while many victims are never offered assistance, some trafficked persons who *are* offered assistance choose to forego the help available to them. Based on this, the main questions for our research were the following:

- What are the reasons behind these decisions to decline assistance?
- What happens as a result of declining assistance?
- Are there reasons for declining that can be addressed so that more victims, and perhaps other groups of victims, will also benefit from assistance?

Our aim was not to evaluate the efforts and competence of any particular organisation or individuals who work in this challenging field but rather to describe the challenges both service providers and trafficked women and girls face in their post-trafficking lives, including the interplay between them. Our report is intended to contribute to a discussion of how assistance for trafficking victims is organised and provide some ideas for what could be done to better meet the needs of the diverse population who fall within the category of trafficking victim.

This is a summary of the main findings and conclusions of the report *Leaving the past behind? When victims of trafficking decline assistance*.¹ The intention of this abridged report is to summarise the main factors that contributed to trafficking victims' decisions to decline assistance and to provide some practical recommendations which can be operationalised by anti-trafficking professionals and service providers.

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

2. Methodology

We approached the issue through a qualitative research design, collecting data from victims of trafficking and key informants working in the anti-trafficking field. The fieldwork was conducted between April and November 2006. The field sites were in Albania and Moldova (source countries); Serbia (transit/destination/source country). Interviews were conducted in the capitals, plus selected villages and towns. Each country was visited twice for one week; the second fieldwork involved re-interviewing respondents and accessing respondents and new locations identified during the first visit.

Interview sample: 52 trafficked and at-risk women and girls; 90 government and non-government persons working in assistance programmes	
Number of trafficking victims interviewed	39
Persons in street prostitution, unknown trafficking status	13
Number of trafficking victims interviewed twice	7
Had accepted assistance at the time of the interview	30
Never identified, never offered assistance	7
Identified and offered assistance, but declined all	2
Key informants in the AT field	90
Key informants interviewed at least twice	11

Respondent recruitment and interviews:
<p>Step 1: Interviews with key informants in assistance organisations and other actors involved in anti-trafficking work: 35 organisations in the three countries, with a wide variety of experience in victim assistance</p> <p>Step 2: Recruitment of trafficking victims as respondents through ten assistance organisations. We made a conscious choice not to recruit respondents outside of these channels (such as through social service centres, community groups or other local actors) due to the risk of exposing victims as trafficked in their community.</p> <p>Step 3: Interviews with victims, with ethical safeguards. To ensure informed consent, written information about the project was provided in local languages to potential respondents. The information was repeated verbally as an introduction to each interview, and time was set aside at the end of each interview for any questions the respondent might have and to explain how we could be reached, should the respondent have any concerns at a later stage.</p>

There were substantial differences between different organisations 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, organisations that were less transparent about their work were also less willing to pass on information about the research project to beneficiaries, effectively deciding on behalf of beneficiaries rather than allowing 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 organisations and models of care. Nevertheless, this type of unequal access to respondents should be kept in mind in trafficking studies in general. It also raises the issue of to what extent an organisation should reasonably be able to control and determine the interaction of beneficiaries with the outside world, including participation in research.

3. Conceptual categories - accepting and declining assistance

When we started the study we mapped out what, for us, were some categories of “accepting” and “declining” assistance. We were aware that the issue of declining was more nuanced than is often presented – very few victims either wholeheartedly accept assistance or unequivocally decline. So we sought to capture this complexity in our categories.

- “Accepting assistance” refers to trafficked persons who had voluntarily received some form of service. To accept assistance did not imply accepting all assistance offered but also refers to selecting services that met the victim’s needs. A victim may choose to receive a reintegration grant and vocational training but not stay in a shelter because she wants to return home to live.
- “Declining assistance” refers to any situation when a victim who has been offered or knew that she was entitled to services declines these services. Some victims may decline assistance entirely, choosing to be classified as an irregular migrant or a prostitute rather than as a trafficking victim. Victims may also partially decline assistance – for example, accept assistance with document processing or travel but decline further assistance upon return home.

Decisions about accepting and declining assistance are generally not an “either/or” decision, with victims often selecting and declining services from the various options available in the country of destination, transit or origin, over a period of weeks, months and even years. There are gradations; few victims could be categorised as “acceptees” and “declinees”. Victims made different decisions at different stages of their post-trafficking lives, as their individual situation evolved and in response to the level of commitment required by the different forms of assistance. This suggests a far more complex decision-making process than is often presented. As such, when talking about “declining assistance” it is more appropriate to speak about a continuum of decisions along which most victims move. Further, there is great complexity surrounding the decision-making process, the services offered and each victim’s personal interests and needs.

Bearing in mind that decisions of accepting and declining assistance take place along a continuum, we have identified three main categories of reasons for declining assistance:

- Personal circumstances that lead to declining;
- Difficulties in the assistance system; and
- Social context and personal experience as obstacles to assistance.

Each of these categories is discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

Part II: Personal circumstances that lead to declining assistance

Summary: Trafficking victims come from and find themselves in very different circumstances prior to, during and after trafficking, which affects both their need for assistance and their ability to freely accept or decline. Factors such as financial need, local opportunities, family relationships and obligations feed into and shape the circumstances that individuals themselves in. Some victims decline because:

- **Assistance stands in the way of migration:** In some environments, migration is the prevalent economic strategy and options at home are extremely limited. Victims may therefore “revitalise” their original plan for migration, but using different strategies to migrate more safely. . Some went abroad for labour migration, others returned to prostitution to try to make money; still others migrated to be with someone who “rescued” them from trafficking, commonly a client who paid off traffickers or helped her escape. In still other cases, victims declined assistance because they were not free of their traffickers and felt obliged to pay off debts.
- **Interaction with family:** Families influence decisions about on whether or not to accept assistance. Some victims had supportive families and preferred to return home rather than enter an assistance programme. In other cases, it was difficult to accept assistance because the family was mistrustful (of the organisation or the victim) and did not accept her absence from the family. In certain environments there was also a strong expectation that when a victim needed support, this should be provided within the family. Being seen as unsupportive would be stigmatising for the family, for instance if a minor victim was living in an institution.
- **They do not need assistance:** Some victims do not need trafficking specific assistance – either because they don’t have any unmet needs or because they can access support through family, social network or non-trafficking specific community based support.

4. When assistance stands in the way of migration

For many women, declining assistance is linked to a decision (sometimes forced) to go abroad again. What is critical to note is that “going abroad”, while sometimes a euphemism for prostitution, in reality, means different things for different trafficking victims.

Work/labour migration

Some trafficking victims may try to migrate again for work. This may be particularly likely in countries like Albania and Moldova where migration is a normative economic strategy. It may also be more likely when returning victims face not only the same (often dire) conditions that led them to migrate, but also the impact (personal and social) of their negative experiences abroad.

One woman with a very traumatic experience abroad said that she would like to go again, but that she wanted to make sure that the offer was safe this time:

Someone I know went to Norway and stayed for two months but there was not work and he came back. They went to pick strawberries. He wanted to stay for three months but stayed for only two months and did not earn a lot... ut still people go. Because it is almost impossible to live here, it's poor and [difficult to] survive. I would go but I would like to be sure.

Aiming for independent prostitution

Some victims decline assistance for trafficking victims because they intend to migrate again, to work independently in prostitution. For some women, prostitution was part of their original plan to migrate, but they ended up trafficked. Some were in prostitution before leaving their home country. Within this group, some may still opt to re-enter prostitution, in an effort to earn money. In these cases, trafficking specific assistance may not mesh with their plans or self-perception, given that programmes generally require them to leave prostitution. This is a group that is very vulnerable to re-trafficking, as in many contexts, the options for safe migration and independent prostitution are extremely constrained.

Pursuing a relationship with a “rescuer”

Some women were helped by clients to escape their traffickers. Some clients literally bought women from traffickers, keeping them as “wives” or personal servants; some clients were more genuinely interested in rescuing the woman. One man called the help

line in the home country for assistance, passed the information about services to the women and gave them money and plane tickets home.

In a few cases women left assistance programmes to live with these “rescuers”; one woman told us that she frequently thought about uniting a man who had helped her abroad as he had treated her well. Service providers generally worried about victims of trafficking who returned to the place they were trafficked to be with someone who rescued them – e.g. for fear that they would be re-trafficked or exploited/abused by this man.

Whether the women are at risk of being trafficked into prostitution again in these situations is hard to assess. However, they will often be in a very vulnerable position – reliant upon this man, without a support network, perhaps without legal status in the country, etc. Still, there are some success stories with respect to these rescuers, which serve to encourage others to attempt the same.

Continued trafficking and re-trafficking

Some women declined assistance because their trafficking had not ended despite returning home. When victims have been caught in police raids or document controls abroad and been deported, they often still have the burden of the debt hanging over them and the trafficker will generally know where they are.

In situations of debt, victims may be forced to stay in touch with traffickers (or at least not alienate them) because they do not know the implications (for themselves or their families) if they break contact. Because most programmes require women to end contact with traffickers, this may inhibit their ability to accept assistance. Further, traffickers may read accepting assistance as equivalent to cooperation with police, which may lead (or victims may fear will lead) to retribution.

When trafficking victims are emotionally dependent on their traffickers (a common technique of some traffickers) it may be extremely difficult to break away. One woman repeatedly declined the assistance offered to her over a period of several years while trafficked in a western European country. While to an outside eye, her situation was one of exploitation by a criminal network, she saw her relationship with her trafficker as a romantic one. After she had been exploited and abused in several different countries, including as a drug mule, she still felt obliged to pay off the money the man claimed to have spent on her. This meant that she returned to the country where he was exploiting her after having turned down, by most standards, an attractive offer of assistance in a third country. While she was no longer involved with this man at the time of the interview, she was still somewhat ambivalent about the relationship. On the one hand, she said that she could not understand why she did not accept assistance before; on the other hand, she still felt that her trafficker was not to blame because she had consented. Her inability to return home because of a very troubled family situation served to further constrain her options to leave.

Closely related is that some victims are re-trafficked. Given the financial and social situation many trafficking victims face when they return, some see no other option than to go abroad again, even with the same organisers, in the hope of earning at least some

money. Moreover, returning victims may be very visible when they return to their small communities. The combined pressure of financial difficulties and stigma (see also section 11 on different forms of stigma) create a vulnerability that may be even stronger than it was when they were initially trafficked.

5. Interaction with family in deciding on assistance

The family plays an important role in victims' decisions about assistance – sometimes influencing the decision, other times effectively making the decision, especially in the case of minors. The influence of the family also depends on the character of the assistance system, as some victims may receive assistance in their local communities, although local assistance may be less comprehensive.

Time also may play a role, as relationships may change over time, substantially affecting assistance needs and the propensity to accept assistance. Victims often return to their family immediately after return but some find that relationships have changed or that they need outside help to cope with their problems – for instance, psychological assistance. This makes it important that all trafficking victims have the information they need to seek out appropriate services at later stages, if they so chose.

There are several different circumstances under which victims choose to return to their families rather than enrol in an assistance programme. What may, at the surface, appear to be the same pattern – i.e. returning to the family after trafficking – consists of a great number of different motivations and mechanisms.

Returning home for family support

For the majority of women, their first inclination after exiting trafficking was to return home to their families. This seemed to be particularly common among women who have been through very traumatic experiences and it may be that heavily traumatised victims (i.e. those who might benefit most from assistance) are a group that is likely to decline. Many describe great difficulties in trusting strangers; many also wanted to go home and not think about their experiences anymore.

Wanting to go home can reflect a happy and healthy family relationship; many victims who accepted assistance did so because of poor relations in their family and an inability to return home. One woman who returned to her family after an initial shelter stay was beaten by her family and told she was better off dead. The family feared that their reputation would be tainted by her prostitution. She moved back to the shelter. Research on trafficking describes many trafficking victims as coming from what are termed “dysfunctional families”. However, research on this group is usually based on victims who have received assistance and usually victims who have stayed or are staying in a shelter. It is, therefore, likely that there is a considerable bias in this group, as victims with well-functioning families may be more inclined to return home rather than accepting even minimal support.

Several assistance models restrict contact between victims and family, even when the family was not involved in trafficking. This could mean that victims decline because the cost of assistance is too high in terms of losing contact with their families. It may also cause suspicion among, for instance, parents of young trafficking victims who have, in many cases, been deceived by traffickers and perhaps cannot reasonably be expected to trust an (often unknown) service provider with their children.

When the family mistrusts the assistance

In many cases, the family will have little or no idea as to what happened to the victim who often does not tell about their exploitation. It is, therefore, difficult for families to understand whether they need help. The family often will lack information about the assistance – what exactly it is for, what it consists of, and where the shelter accommodation is located – neither will they be able to come to visit the premises. As one police officer put it:

Generally, the family does not want the victim to come to the shelter. This is because she has been away for two years and now she is back. They want her to come home, and we try to explain the situation but they say we are harassing them and they don't see it as help.

Despite good reasons for limited information about shelters, it is understandably confusing and worrying for family members, particularly when the victim was away for a long time and the family didn't know where or what happened. Many victims described the suspicion and worry, particularly by parents, that they were being abused or exploited in the shelters. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that several families actively discouraged victims from accepting assistance.

When the family mistrusts the victim

For several victims, assistance was made difficult because of a husband's jealousy and suspicion that his wife was having an affair or was involved in prostitution rather than in an assistance programme, as one social worker explained:

Sometimes we were called by the husbands who did not believe that the wives were at the [place where we had the programme] and they would call the wives several times a day to assure themselves that she was there.

This illustrates the range of relational difficulties trafficking victims face upon their return. While families are relieved that she is back, other emotions also surface, many of which involve mistrust. This is perhaps most common if the victim is secretive about what happened to her. A social worker explained it like this:

What would I think of my child or my wife if she comes back with a lot of gynaecological problems and she will not tell me what has happened? She is crying all

the time or is very aggressive; something bad has happened but maybe she did something wrong, she came with a deportation, or without documents, she is not answering the phone or leaves the house for several days and I have to look for her, she is not a good person anymore.

Family should take care of their own

Some decisions about declining were linked to the family's concern for its own reputation. That is, there are indications in some settings that accepting assistance can in itself be stigmatising, regardless of the link to trafficking for prostitution. This seems particularly to be the case for parents of minors who, in accepting assistance for their children, may be cast as a family unable or unwilling to help their own child. Accepting assistance that identifies them as unfit parents, as in the case of placing a family member in a shelter, may have negative repercussions in the local community, which, in the last instance, may have a negative impact for the trafficking victim. This may, in part, be addressed through the provision of community-based services that can be accessed while the family still provides the overall framework of care and support, consistent with their value system of taking care of their children.

6. Victims who do not need assistance

In some cases, formal assistance was not required or wanted by the trafficking victim, contradicting the commonly held assumption that all trafficking victims require (and want) some form of assistance or support to recover and reintegrate into society.

Victims who have no unmet assistance needs

Some victims do not need assistance because they can cope on their own. Having survived and escaped trafficking, some victims felt equipped to manage their return and/or reintegration in society. Some accepted emergency intervention – e.g. temporary shelter or medical services – but no further assistance. Still others recovered without any intervention or assistance. One woman who had been abroad for a short period of time declined all forms of assistance upon her return, even changing her phone number to avoid being contacted by service providers. While keeping her experience a secret from her husband was a factor, she was also declining because she was working and studying and had the support of her mother, as she explained:

When I met some women at the shelter [abroad], I saw that they needed help offered for their studies and job. For me I have studies and a job. What help do I need? The women I met needed help because they went abroad to find a job because for them there was no other way out.

Even in situations where victims have few options at home, many do not seek out assistance because they do not perceive their needs in the same way as an outside observer might. One woman had been home for eight months before she sought help, in spite of the acute poverty that she and her children faced. She made a living selling nuts; only when she ran out of nuts did she seek out assistance. Similarly, one woman, referred by her medical doctor to the shelter, was offered a range of assistance options but, after discussing with social assistants, declined them. As she explained, her assistance needs were primarily medical and she was satisfied with this service. Another victim explained that, for her, the most important assistance was the period of rest and reflection in the shelter and did not need more.

Whether one needs assistance, however, does seem to change over time and victims may face a crisis that triggers the need for assistance. One victim declined all assistance until she was threatened by the police who were coercing her to testify against her trafficker. Only then did she seek out the agency that had initially offered assistance. Without this trigger, she would not likely have accepted. As she said, she would have found a way to cope on her own, as she had in the past.

Of note is that some organisations do not seem to easily accept that some victims may not need assistance. One woman received almost a year of reintegration-oriented assistance in the destination country and was returning to a supportive family. While service providers in the destination country assessed she should return directly to her family, partner service providers in the home country insisted that she come first to stay in the shelter in the capital.

Victims with other sources of support

Some victims decline formal assistance because they have access to alternative forms of support:

Family based support

The most common alternative was returning to the family for the assistance and support needed. One victim declined assistance because her mother was insistent that she return home in spite of being pregnant, often a source of tension and even rejection of trafficking victims. As the mother explained:

We couldn't wait to see her when she came back. We were so worried. We were so excited to have her back that we accepted the baby... There is space in the back and maybe we will build a space for the baby to sleep.

Shelter staff asserted that it was those without families or family support who typically accepted assistance: "I expect that there are many cases of trafficking victims that are successful, whose families accept them and they receive assistance but not from trafficking service providers."

While some women think that they will find support from their families, in reality, returning to the family does not always translate into real assistance, nor does it

inevitably translate into a safe and protective environment. As one staff observed, “A victim can be kept inside the house or the family compound for a long time, never able to go out. This is the family ‘protecting’ her but it is not really protection”. Service providers reported many cases in which “declines” had returned for assistance after finding insufficient support within their family network. In some cases, families recognised that they were unable to provide the support needed and contacted the assistance programme for help – for example, when victims needed material and economic assistance, social and psychological support, protection because of security problems or when the victim was facing difficulty and stigma in the family/community.

In returning to their families some victims explain to (some or all) family members what has happened and receive support. Other chose not to. One psychologist explained that women often did not tell their families both for their own and for their family’s protection:

The thing is that only a few girls confess to their families that they have been trafficked. Two reasons: a part of them is afraid that the family will not forgive them and receive them back, and the second part of girls have very good relationship with the family, and they don’t want to hurt anyone or don’t want to spoil their relationship, just want to bear the burden themselves. Just a few girls tell and either to their mothers or their sisters.

Support from social network

Some returning victims find the support they need in their social network. This can be for both interim and longer-term assistance and relations were not always very intimate. Trafficked women were prepared to consider different possibilities and social constellations – friends, colleagues, neighbours and acquaintances. One woman explained how she had considered a range of alternatives before accepting assistance, including staying with an acquaintance in the capital rather than going home.

There are also more complicated cases where victims relied on “lovers”/“husbands” who they met while trafficked. In some cases, these are “real”, healthy and long-term relationships. In other cases, the relationship may be a ruse to re-traffick her. She may also live with a former client or employer, providing sexual and domestic services, a situation akin to trafficking. This can translate into victims declining most or all of the help offered.

Community based support

Some communities have informal mechanisms of assistance for trafficking victims (as well as other socially vulnerable people). Declining assistance may be less pronounced in community-based assistance as victims can return to their families and access different forms of assistance, like job placement or vocational training.

In some communities, religious organisations play a prominent role in providing social assistance. This can be valuable in addressing any potential resistance to or suspicion of assistance from “outside” organisations. However, some religious assistance may be conditional on religious involvement or linked to the organisation’s

ideological position (e.g. on abortion, prostitution and/or marriage) which can have a negative or constraining impact on assistance options.

Non-trafficking related assistance

There were also cases where victims were assisted outside of the trafficking framework in their home region. This was particularly likely to be the case for those from outside capital cities and large towns where anti-trafficking service providers were not present or less known. In some cases, victims may opt for non-trafficking assistance; others may only have this option. One kidnapped girl was only identified as a trafficking victim during court proceedings. Prior to this she received psychological support and assistance as part of the social assistance framework. She and her mother – who was supporting her – declined further (trafficking-specific) assistance because they had already received emergency assistance and said that, beyond this, they could cope on their own. For this girl, family support and the emergency (but not trafficking-specific) services were central in her recovery.

Part III: Difficulties in the assistance system

Summary: Some decisions about declining assistance are directly linked to how the assistance system is arranged. Not all programmes were acceptable and/or accessible to trafficked persons. Reasons for this can be generally broken down as follows: :

- **Problems of information and communication.** Some victims were unable to make a decision about assistance because of often inadequate information-sharing. Information about assistance was often too general and confusing. Successful strategies involved showing victims the premises for assistance and letting other victims describe what they had received. Sometimes, the provision of information was made difficult by victims' inability in processing and comprehending information. This was related to the victim's state of mind when receiving information as well as general levels of comprehension and previous experiences with assistance. In many cases, there had been insufficient provision of information in the victim's own language or a language she could readily understand.
- **The organisation of assistance.** For some victims, how assistance is arranged impacts the ability to accept. In many cases, victims' special needs were not properly addressed - e.g. victims with mental disabilities, families with assistance needs. In other cases, accepting assistance means being unable to earn an income, which many victims cannot afford, particularly when they have dependents. Some victims feared being trafficked again as offers of assistance and a better life was similar to that made by traffickers. In some cases, victims declined assistance because they felt that they and their families would not be sufficiently protected against traffickers.
- **Interactions between service providers and victims:** In some cases, programmes were seen as too restrictive by trafficked persons. This was particularly the case in closed shelters which restricted contact with the outside world.

7. Problems of information and communication

Not understanding what services are offered, by whom and how was a relatively common reason to decline assistance. Even victims who accepted assistance described high levels of confusion when they were first offered services. When asked what they expected of a shelter, trafficked women had different responses: “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 not sure that they could trust the service providers or police and even worried that they were being trafficked again.

Insufficient or confusing information about assistance

Victims often did not fully understand what assistance was being offered, particularly when they were initially identified. One victim, identified abroad by law enforcement and assisted there by government social services welfare, was not told about assistance in her home country or that she would have contact with the police. She said it was a “huge shock and trauma” and felt strongly that social workers abroad should have explained more about what would happen upon arrival. This was quite typical - victims were generally told verbally about assistance in broad terms and given contact details to follow-up if they chose but there was little specific (or written) information about what services entail or the assistance organisations.

At minimum victims should be given written material, tailored to beneficiaries’ age, language and education levels, and available for future reference, particularly as many victims require time to understand and come to decisions about assistance. Some organisations invite victims to visit the facilities and meet with other beneficiaries. Only then are they asked to decide and, if they decline, still given the option to return at a later stage. Said one psychologist, “It is one thing to tell them about assistance, it is another thing to show them”.

Information sharing must take into account the reality of identification and referral processes. Some victims are not open to, or may even be hostile to, the idea of assistance. Further, conditions for information sharing are often not ideal involving any number of (complicated) situations – e.g. at the airport upon arrival (sometimes with family members present), in the presence of law enforcement or during transportation home.

It is not clear whether trafficking victims are being reached by information about assistance directed at the general public. One victim who had been home for many years had never seen any information about assistance options, even though several campaigns had run in the time period. She only understood that she might be eligible for assistance when she talked to an acquaintance in a bar one evening. Equally important is who disseminates information, with possible interlocutors being outreach workers, medical personnel, law enforcement, tourism industry staff, transportation personnel, embassy staff and so on. Trafficked persons should be involved in determining what and how information can be best presented to and shared with trafficked persons.

Some victims were provided with offers of assistance from different (competing) organisations, which they found confusing and uncomfortable. This also allows disgruntled or dissatisfied beneficiaries to play service providers off against one another to get more and different services. Inter-agency cooperation can ensure that services are appropriately, effectively and/or judiciously implemented.

There is also a lack of clear information about services between service providers. A number of service providers in destination countries felt that they did not have adequate information about services in home countries. Similarly, service providers in origin countries felt that in an effort to create stability and reassurance, counterparts in destination countries often over promised services and assistance.

Lack of capacity to understand what is offered

In some cases, being able to understand services on offer is tied to victims' specific capacities – e.g. their psychological state, comprehension capacity, language and experience of assistance.

Psychological state of victims

Many victims come into contact with counter-trafficking personnel shortly after exiting trafficking when they are in shock and even traumatised. As a result, they are not always able to comprehend what is happening, including services being offered. As one service provider explained: “They are scared, tired, exhausted, and hungry and don't know what they want. They have no idea what they can get and we inform them but they don't perceive it. It is a period where she still needs to rest, to recover from the trauma”.

One woman described being able to understand that the assistance organisation was trying to help her, but, at the same time, being unable to fully process or relate to what was happening: “I understood that this person came to my place with good intentions, but on the other hand I couldn't process this information very well. I wasn't able to see what was happening”. Family members may also experience shock and confusion as a result of trafficking, affecting their ability to make decisions. This shock and trauma generally abates over time, providing an opportunity for follow-up at a later stage.

Limited comprehension

Some confusion appears to be associated with beneficiary's capacity to comprehend services which may be linked, in part, to their education, analytical and decision-making skills and/or level of literacy. Limited comprehension within the family (and of parents specifically) may also play a role in not understanding and, therefore, not accepting the assistance offered. This can occur both in the initial phase and at later stages and can inform if/how victims (and families) accept services.

Lack of knowledge and experience of assistance

Some confusion seems to be linked, at least in part, to lack of experience with assistance, making it difficult to understand (and trust) what they are being offered. Many trafficked persons expressed surprise (and, as a consequence, suspicion) that such

services and assistance programmes existed, most never having received assistance in the past from either NGO or government actors. So deep-seated is this suspicion in some cases that one victim, who was offered shelter care, opted for prison because with prison she knew what to expect – they could legally only keep her for a month but the shelter was an unknown entity, a “leap of faith”. Where families are unfamiliar with assistance, this can also be a factor in declining. In some cases, assistance providers found that it helped to ask former beneficiaries meet with victims to show what assistance was about.

Language obstacles

Some lack of understanding is related to language; staff in destination countries did not speak victims’ language. One minor girl was informed about all of the services in the destination country in the local language (which she did not speak) and therapy was provided through translation, raising questions about the quality of care received.

While translation does not sufficiently overcome all language obstacles, it is nevertheless an important measure. And many programmes, particularly those of NGOs and IOs, do employ translators, finances permitting. That being said, translation is not always (or even widely) available. Lack of translation is particularly acute amongst government agencies, which often do not have the resources to hire translators for each interview with foreign victims. This can lead to serious miscommunication, which, in turn, may lead to other issues, including misidentification and victims declining assistance. In terms of service provision, language barriers may be isolating for women, which may translate into dissatisfaction with the services and even dropping out of a programme.

Language issues can also give rise to misunderstandings that undermine the assistance being offered, which may, on the one hand, account for some victims returning home with unrealistic expectations of assistance and, on the other hand, account for victims declining assistance upon their return home.

8. Organisation of assistance as a reason to decline

Given that respondents varied in age, economic situation, educational background, family relations, trafficking experiences and so on, it is not difficult to see that one size does not fit all in terms of assistance. Many trafficking victims decline assistance because they are either not able or willing to accept assistance in the form that it is offered. Sometimes this is because victim’s specific assistance needs are not addressed by the programme. Other times, this may also be about the way that it is organised and offered – typically shelter-based programmes, in capital cities, with limited contact with family and requiring time and commitment that victims often cannot afford. In some cases, conditions of assistance may not be satisfactory, including paralleling, in some ways, their trafficking experience and not adequately taking into account their fear of traffickers.

Services are not suited to victims' needs or situations

Some trafficking victims declined assistance because services were not adequately tailored to their needs – e.g. because their specific assistance needs (individual or family needs) are not addressed by the programme or because of how assistance is organised and offered.

Specific care needs that may not be addressed

Victims' assistance needs are diverse. Trafficking experiences vary greatly and trafficked persons have different starting point in terms of financial and social resources. It is challenging to deal with this diversity under the same programmatic framework and with limited resources.

Some individual needs and circumstances are particularly difficult to navigate. For example, victims with mental disabilities pose a particular challenge, as training and employment options are constrained. Assisting people with serious mental illness within the same system as other victims can be extremely disruptive. Victims who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction are often unable to access appropriate treatment facilities. Victims who come from stigmatised or marginalised groups (like ethnic minority groups) often have a range of limited options.

Family has assistance needs

Many respondents sought work abroad in order to provide for themselves and their families and their financial situation has frequently worsened as a consequence of debt or loans taken to finance their migration. The very limited options to earn money while receiving assistance (particularly in shelter programmes) is a factor in deciding whether to accept assistance. Many women, particularly those in difficult financial situations, chose to return home and assist their family as best they can rather than accept assistance.

The option to bring one's children to shelters was considered an important factor in accepting assistance. Several mothers said that they would never have considered accepting assistance if they could not bring their children. However, whether a shelter setting is suitable for children is another consideration, particularly in the longer term and in light of how this impacts educational opportunities and physical and psychological development. Closed shelters (with little to no freedom of movement), add an additional level of stress, as does residing with other (often traumatised) beneficiaries.

Assistance is a luxury they cannot afford

Assistance programmes often centralise services in the form of a shelter or a day centre. However, not everyone is able to access these forms of assistance because they have other obligations, such as work. One woman, who had enjoyed the support she received, explained that she was unable to afford continued assistance:

It was a very good thing that they came and offered help; it helped me a lot, psychologically. I felt calmer when I came here. Outside, everything felt dark, like

people were saying bad things about me. But after a while I stopped coming here because I had to work.

Insufficient availability of local services

Much anti-trafficking assistance is centralised in capitals and large towns. As public transportation is limited and people with limited financial means often travel by foot, even an organisation in the nearest town may be hard to access. One woman was in a desperate situation – she was clearly in need of psychological assistance, she had two small children to support and was facing the prospect of eviction. She lived in a small village without transportation or a social network to help her and was reliant on humanitarian assistance and food packs that were infrequently delivered to her by a service agency.

When assistance parallels trafficking experiences

Typically, victims trafficked for sexual exploitation were deceived or misled, often by someone they trusted, with false promises of assistance and support in building a new life in a new location. Assistance offers may, in parts, resemble this process in that similar promises are made. When assistance seems to mimic trafficking, it may influence their ability to trust in services and organisations. A number of victims feared that their “assistance” would lead to re-trafficking. One woman was told about the assistance by her sister’s neighbour but remained frightened that it was another trap. It was several months before she finally contacted the organisation and even after receiving some help she was not entirely confident:

I was afraid, but decided to go and see what kind of building it was...There [the social worker] was, and I talked to her, and I was shocked to see a big food pack, I had never seen such a thing before. When she gave that to me I was frightened, but I still took it, because I had nothing at home. After we talked a little she told me in two days I could go to the shelter, I did not believe her but thought something was wrong. My idea was to take the food pack, but not to go back, because they can take me to Turkey again.

For some victims, programme restrictions (e.g. no access to mobile phone, not being allowed to leave the shelter) were experienced as moving from the control of the trafficker to the control of service providers such that the services were not always perceived as “assistance” or even an improvement by the victim. This sense of déjà vu may be particularly the case in closed shelters where restrictions are greatest.

Fear of the trafficker

Victims were often afraid to accept assistance, fearing that it would be seen by traffickers as collaborating with authorities and lead to reprisals against them or their families. Whether this fear is based on concrete threats or not appears to be of lesser

relevance. Even victims who have not experienced direct threats can be deeply affected by this type of fear.

Many victims and their families face safety risks, as illustrated in the case of “Maria” who moved to a flat in a nearby city but whose family stayed on their farm. When Maria testified, her family was threatened. Police provided a guard for her family and the court procedures were accelerated. Nevertheless, the neighbours were threatened and her mother had to hide in the attic on one instance when traffickers came to the village.

Fear of traffickers is linked, at least in part, to corruption within the state apparatus, which impacts the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases. Many victims fear that they will not be protected by corrupt legal and administrative authorities. Traffickers often exploit these fears, telling victims that they cooperate with authorities. Victims from countries where corruption is acute are likely to be particularly fearful.

While risk of retribution is real in many cases, law enforcement and the judiciary may, at times, use fear to press women to accept assistance. For law enforcement, it is often preferable that victims accept assistance as this assures regular and accessible contact, making it more efficient to investigate a case. This also decreases the likelihood that victims will be influenced to change or withdraw statements. This can serve the interest of the law and judicial authorities, but perhaps not always the victim. A generalised sense of fear and risk can negatively impact the recovery of trafficked persons. As concerning must be when real risks are not adequately anticipated in ways that provide sufficient protection.

9. Service providers and victims – who is declining who?

While this research focuses on trafficking victims who decline assistance rather than those who were not given assistance, the line between the two was sometimes blurred. A key issue in reasons for accepting or declining assistance, then, is in the interactions between service providers and beneficiaries. The picture is more complicated than just one party rejecting the other; tension and interplay between service providers and beneficiaries merits careful consideration.

Behaviour that leads to exclusion from the programme

Breaking rules and consequently being excluded from programmes was explained by some services providers as a form of declining assistance; the decision to break rules was seen as a conscious attempt by beneficiaries to be excluded from the programme. The question is whether this behaviour is also open to other interpretations and whether beneficiaries who disregard rules are actually trying to get thrown out.

While in some cases, being excluded from a programme did appear to be a way to decline assistance, in other cases, it was not as clear, as one psychologist who worked with street children at risk of trafficking explained:

[They] push boundaries. Maybe it is a way of testing you, to say: “Will you still accept me if I do this? Or this? Can you really help me? Do you really want to?”

It is understandable that organisations with limited means need to assess how they can best spend their money which, in some cases, may also mean ending assistance to someone who is uncommitted to the programme. At the same time, it remains an open question as to how transparent programme rules are and how clear it is to beneficiaries that there are “offences” for which they can be excluded from assistance. In some cases, victims had been excluded from assistance without fully understanding that choices, for instance to travel abroad while receiving assistance, were in breach of the programme rules. To prevent miscommunication and differential understandings, clear rules and parameters for assistance are needed, including what constitutes a breach.

Also salient is what is expected in terms of beneficiaries’ own efforts and development in an assistance programmes. Many organisations have a clear idea of who beneficiaries should become, raising the issue of which behaviours are sought and privileged – e.g. being a “good girl”, settling down to get married and ending all aspirations of migration. Where victims are obliged to conform to an identity that is at odds with how they see themselves and who they want to be, they may choose to decline. At the same time, some victims may temporarily assume this identity to smooth access to services, which is also not uncomplicated.

Stressful conditions and restrictions

Many shelters have strict rules and restrictions. To some extent this is necessary in environments where often traumatised strangers live together. Some women and girls may also be subject to threats and reprisals and, therefore, need protection. Still, in many cases, restrictions seem excessive and many assisted victims found them difficult and stressful. Often shelters are of the so-called “closed” type, which usually means that the residents have little or no freedom of movement and must be accompanied when they are outside the shelter. Originally this type of shelter was developed to accommodate either foreign beneficiaries (i.e. without legal residence in the country, while emergency assistance was provided and return documents processed) and high-risk cases (i.e. in need of on-going protection). However, the model is used more broadly in origin and destination countries, often with security risks as the explanation.

A victim explained how restrictions were very difficult to handle:

I think the first thing is freedom. For two months and two weeks, I was locked between four walls. I was banging my head against the radiator and I was hitting the walls with my bare fists. I was simply going crazy. When I talked to the director and she told me I was supposed to stay for two or three more months, I was destroyed.

Other restrictions are connected with the use of telephones (personal mobile phones are often banned and calls are made only under supervision of staff), often explained with reference to security concerns. It is understandable that shelters are concerned with security, but it is questionable whether this is the most efficient way of protecting

victims, especially when considering the personal cost of such measures. Further, shelters operating without such restrictions have not reported more problems regarding security than closed shelter models, even when beneficiary profiles and experiences are similar. One social worker at an open shelter also stressed the disadvantages inherent in restrictions: “Here we deal with rehabilitation and reintegration of the person into society. If the victim was behind locked doors when she was trafficked and is locked up again here, what kind of reintegration can we talk about?”

Biases and sensitivities

There is a considerable power differential between beneficiaries and service providers that must be carefully negotiated. Many service providers treat it carefully and consciously. But, in some cases, boundaries are overstepped with women reporting problematic behaviour on the part of programme staff. One young woman told us about her stay at a shelter that she later chose to leave:

[...] I didn't like one of the staff members. We had one bathroom and one girl was ill and we were not informed that a girl was ill and I asked [the social worker] why they did not tell us, because I was afraid that it was contagious.... And [the social worker] said that I didn't [seem to worry about] this illness when I was sleeping with men and so why was I making a fuss now. And I said that she knew how I came into this situation... I felt horrible and judged. They were aware of my problems and I thought that the staff understood.

Such treatment raises serious concerns about attitudes and biases of some service providers. One problem may be that trafficking victim assistance, in many cases, is run by NGOs who are not necessarily monitored in terms of programme implementation; are not required to adhere to set standards of care; and are not generally accountable to any institution regarding the quality of services. This means that victim assistance takes on the character of charity, which is shaped according to the ideas of the “benevolent giver”. This does not mean that organisations routinely abuse their power by rejecting victims they do not like or who are challenging to assist. Nevertheless, that assistance to trafficking victims is still mainly the domain of NGOs, many with idealistic and over-worked staff, may contribute to the image, shared by many victims, that assistance is not necessarily something they have a right to receive. In addition, the current set-up outside state bodies also means that there are no formal mechanisms for complaint, should mistreatment or negligence occur. While we are not suggesting that prejudice and biased behaviour is common in shelters or assistance programmes, it is an issue that has been raised by several key informants and, therefore, warrants concern.

You can't decline what you are not offered

A central issue is who is offered assistance in the first place. Many women exploited in prostitution in their home country may also fall within the definition of trafficking

victims and, as such, are entitled to assistance. However, this group is not always considered eligible for or offered assistance in a systematic way.

Interviews with 20 street prostitutes in Belgrade revealed seven instances where entry into prostitution was clearly trafficking. One minor in prostitution was, at eleven years old, sold by her uncle to a man with whom she was forced to stay for one year. During that time, she was forced to have sex with clients and was regularly drugged with alcohol, cocaine and ecstasy tablets, to ensure her acquiescence. One of her regular customers helped her to escape but the man she was sold to came to her home, beat up the girl, her mother and grandmother, threatened to kill them and robbed them. The girl remained at home for some time but, as tension in the family grew, she eventually returned to prostitution.

Women and girls in this category were not systematically offered assistance available to trafficking victims. This is, at least in part, because different law enforcement entities work with prostitutes, with different training regarding trafficking and different objectives. In Serbia, for example, while the anti-trafficking police generally handle trafficking victims, the public order police deal with the local street prostitution. Where relations with police were not good – many street prostitutes reported police abuse and violations – prostitutes (whether trafficked or not) are not likely to seek out or accept assistance offered from them.

At present, there is a clear distinction between external and internal trafficking in terms of who gets offered assistance and how the police treat victims. While some so-called potential victims of trafficking (i.e. women and girls who were intercepted before they were exploited) are enrolled in assistance programmes, victims of internal trafficking in local prostitution markets seem seldom to have been offered any assistance.

A culture of gratitude or selection bias in trafficking research?

Analysis of patterns of accepting and declining assistance is difficult because of what might be described as a “culture of gratitude” among assisted trafficking victims, at least, amongst those with whom most organisations are willing to facilitate contact. Even in cases where organisations have said that victims have been dissatisfied with services, they have often been reluctant to admit this when interviewed. They have actually been far more candid about sexual abuse and violence, which would seem more sensitive topics. One young woman told us of her disappointment when the promised assistance failed to materialise but would not explain why this was the case, instead underlining that she understood that she could not get the assistance she had been promised. She was, she said, grateful for what she had received. Other women who had been promised assistance that they did not receive, also vacillated between this insistent gratitude and disappointment.

There were some exceptions to this pattern. One woman was both frustrated and disappointed with the assistance she received (or did not receive) and spent parts of the interview very agitated. The social worker put us in touch with her precisely to highlight that not all clients are satisfied: “I [asked her to participate] because I don’t think it is

right to say that we have victims and we are helping them, so everything is OK, because that is not really the case”. This hints that some service providers may not facilitate access to less satisfied beneficiaries and what seems to be a rather consistent gratitude for services could stem from selection biases in terms of who service providers facilitate access to.

There is a tendency for victims to feel that assistance is due to the good will of individuals, rather than services to which they are entitled by an accountable organisation with obligations within the social framework and as a civil society organisation. This issue of accountability and transparency is central. Service providers must be accountable in terms of providing a set standard of care and employing a certain type of professional. The one current mechanism for accountability – donors – is not sufficient, as donors may have limited criteria for what is considered “successful assistance”.

Part IV: Social context and personal experience as obstacles to assistance

Summary: For many victims, decisions about declining were a product of their individual and social situation and linked with the following issues:

- **Trust.** Trust was pivotal in decisions about assistance; declining in some cases was due to victims' suspicion of certain forms of assistance – for instance, business grants (and whether there would be hidden costs or debt), psychological assistance, legal support, etc. Negative experiences of assistance, both general and trafficking specific, also influenced the degree to which victims trusted the offers they were given.
- **Different aspects of stigma and exclusion.** For some, fear of being stigmatised as a trafficking victim also played into the decision-making process. Assistance which identifies a victim as trafficked can have grave consequences. Stigma was attached to prostitution, but also to being and failed migrant and not bringing home money. The situation for victims who were stigmatised did seem to improve over time, particularly where victims modified their behaviour in ways that meshed with social norms and expectations or were able to succeed in other fields.
- **Identifying with the victim role.** For some, the victim identity was at odds with their self-image perception and declining assistance was, in essence, declining this identity. Many were used to taking care not only of themselves but also their families and the desire to support their family was the motivation for migration.. Others had problems relating to the role as “trafficking victim”, not seeing their own exploitation/migration as “bad enough” to warrant assistance. Yet others embraced the victim role. However, this sometimes led to very high expectations of what should be provided, and subsequent disappointment, with some victims leaving programmes.

10. Trust

The issue of trust underpins all of our findings; it is pivotal in decisions about whether or not to accept assistance. Trust is at the foundation of the work that assistance organisations do, when asking trafficking victims to enter into unknown programmes or relocate to shelters they have never been to before. There are, however, two particular aspects of trust which were issues in and of themselves – suspicion of assistance and past assistance experiences.

Suspicion of some forms of assistance

Some victims are suspicious of certain forms of assistance, which may not be valued in the society or have negative associations for some people. Many victims expressed at least some suspicion and insecurity about the different types of intervention and assistance.

Victims' families were often also suspicious. One victim's husband discouraged her from seeking assistance, suspicious that services would not be free and would somehow cost them later on. When she received a business grant after some months of other forms of (positive and free of charge) assistance, he remained suspicious and even at the time of the interview had not changed his mind.

Suspicion may also be a greater obstacle for some forms of assistance than others, services providers noted that particularly resistance to psychological and legal assistance..

Trust is central to addressing suspicion, as one service provider noted:

In many cases when victims of trafficking call they have our number from friends. And if someone they trust gives them the number it also depends on how this person explains the services. Our number has been given by embassy representatives, police, priests, NGOs, employment agencies, and in these cases when we have intermediaries we have no problems with trust.

Trust often only applies to a specific individual or organisation. This dynamic complicates referrals when assistance and services need to be accessed from other organisations, which once again must overcome these suspicions.

Past experience of assistance

Some victims decline assistance because of past negative experiences – sometimes within the trafficking framework, sometimes more generally.

Negative assistance experiences were noted in different sectors in each of the three countries. One doctor explained one woman's intrusive and traumatic experience when being tested for HIV/AIDS. With her first test positive, a letter was sent to the local health clinic requiring her to take a second test:

... finally the family doctor, the social worker, the police and all of the neighbours come to her house to invite her to the second HIV test that finally was negative. So it was really, really horrific. Of course it was a breach of confidentiality and so on. It's a serious problem especially in small villages...

This experience might reasonably impact the woman's willingness to access future assistance. In this case she did continue to accept assistance but, as her psychologist observed, only out of necessity: "There was no other way out for her. She was not likely to get anything from other places".

Similarly, the (mis)handling of cases in destination countries also results in reluctance to access or accept assistance in countries of origin. Take, for example, the case of three women who were assisted in a shelter and agreed to testify against their trafficker only to have their return home delayed for months as a result. The police did not issue their exit visas in a timely fashion (a process which generally takes a matter of days) nor were the victims permitted to go home while the case was prepared, despite agreeing to return to testify. Delay was also due to the presiding judge failing to appear in court on two occasions. The women's families, waiting for them at home, were very stressed by the delays. Of note is that the suspected trafficker was arrested, imprisoned and deported, arriving home long before the "assisted" victims.

Interviews with street prostitutes in Belgrade (including seven trafficking victims) revealed that negative interactions with the police – e.g. abuse and harassment, being forced to provide police with sexual services, being arrested, extorted for money, denied protection from clients and pimps – impacted their willingness to turn to the police in cases of difficulty. The likelihood that these women would accept assistance seems low, particularly when the first point of contact would likely be the police.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, internal trafficking victims in Belgrade reported strong distrust in the police and were unlikely to seek help. Other marginalised groups – for example, ethnic minorities – may feel similarly reluctant due to negative past experiences, as one anti-trafficking actor noted:

Roma, that's a group that doesn't have as much referral or seek out assistance. I'm not sure if referrals are lacking because [Roma] are so marginalised. If they have never been assisted before by the state, only stigmatised by it, why would you seek it out now when you have faced such a terrible trauma?

The flipside is that some women and girls have had a very positive experience of assistance in the country of destination and are, as a result, dissatisfied with the level of care they receive in their country of origin. As a corollary, it is worth considering the degree to which cases of accepting assistance are a result of past positive experiences.

11. Stigma and exclusion

Some victims may decline assistance because they fear of social stigma and exclusion – issues which are linked to different factors. Stigma may affect not only the individual but may also spread to the family and even the local community.

When assistance identifies victims to the community

Receiving assistance from anti-trafficking organisations can potentially identify women as trafficking victims (seen by many as “deviant”) and, therefore, lead to stigmatisation, as one social worker explained:

Most are afraid their environment will find out – every time the woman receives some assistance it becomes suspicious to their environment so they think it is safest not to get any. They want to hide that from their families and friends in small towns.

Stigma can spread to the family as a whole. One returned victim was rejected by her family because of the shame of her prostitution and for fear that her cousins would not get married as a result. Specific forms of assistance are likely to be particularly identifying. Some organisations are known to work on anti-trafficking, others arrange meetings and pick-ups with trafficked persons in ways which may identify them to others present (for example, wearing organisational t-shirts and signs). Victims can equally be “outed” in other ways – through outreach in communities, police inquiries in communities or association with specific organisations. Residential facilities may also be key identifiers in countries where institutions are not typically part of the social assistance framework or where people have negative experiences of residential care, using it only in emergencies.

This highlights the need for less conspicuous interventions as well as the strategic advantage of helping communities rather than targeting individuals or families. Some programmes have been specifically designed to mitigate the risk of identification by targeting socially vulnerable groups including, but not limited to, trafficking victims.

What kinds of behaviours are stigmatised?

Understanding the role of stigma in decisions to decline assistance requires disentangling how stigma intersects with trafficking. While the most commonly cited source of stigma is prostitution, another is failed migration. And causes of stigma are not distinct but rather are mutually reinforcing. When women return with little or no money this is difficult to hide, and at the same time, the failed migration may be associated with having been trafficked into prostitution. The balance for returning female migrants is also a fine one, as returning with a lot of money may also be a problem, marking them as successful prostitutes.

Stigma because of prostitution

In all three countries studied, prostitution was neither legal nor socially condoned. Stigma not only manifests socially but can also have very real physical consequences. One psychologist explained how a victim was brutalised in her community because of stigma associated with her (forced) prostitution:

“[She] did not tell anything, but there were a lot of people suspecting because she had been away four years. She went to a party in the village and guys there took her out and raped her – ‘you were there and did this for money, why not do it for us free of charge’”.

Knowing the full story of an individual’s victimisation does not always (or even often) serve to mitigate the stigma associated with (forced) prostitution.

Fear of stigma can lead victims and their families to reject assistance and, in at least one instance, had fatal consequences. One NGO related how a father had approached them after he had heard about the organisation on the radio. His daughter had returned from trafficking very ill and they had spent almost all of their money on her treatment without any signs of improvement. The father insisted that they get help but his daughter and wife refused categorically. Over time, the wife agreed to receive assistance, due, at least in part, to the fact that the family could not afford further medical treatment. That treatment was undertaken in the capital (not their home town) may also have played into accepting assistance, as did the gradual development of trust in the service provider. Tragically, treatment came too late and the girl died.

Stigma because of failed migration, failure to earn money

Given the importance of migration as an economic (and even family survival) strategy, failed migration may result in stigma. This is exacerbated by the many “migration success stories” which circulate in sending communities, tacitly implying that a migrant is incompetent if he or she has failed where so many others have succeeded.

Foreign victims were reportedly stressed by long shelter stays (generally linked to involvement in criminal procedures against their traffickers) at least in part because it was hard to explain to their families why they didn’t return and/or were not sending money. To receive assistance, then, arguably highlights one’s failure as a migrant and results in stigma.

Debt incurred to fund migration may amplify frustration and fear when a woman returns without money, unable to repay the debt. This may lead to greater stigma directed at the woman who, through her “failure”, has amplified rather than remedied the family’s economic vulnerability. Debt may also lead victims to migrate again, exposing them to more risks and potential re-trafficking.

Behaviours that mitigate stigma

While for many victims stigmatisation was inevitable, it did not appear to be irrevocable. Reintegrated victims reported that often it was a matter of time – two and three years – before the community accepted them and treated them normally. One victim who returned to her home community was shunned each time she went to the village shop, treatment that continued for two years before the situation finally normalised.

Some behaviours likely mitigate stigma, thereby allowing the family or community to “forgive”. Culturally acceptable community reintegration requires an examination of the social obstacles and facilitators to successful reintegration. In one conservative community, it was argued by a local organisation that “the most important thing is that she understands her mistake” and “changes her behaviour”, suggesting that adjusting her behaviour (including language, appearance, attitude and actions) to local conditions is sufficient to counteract stigma. Common denominators appear to be changed behaviours as well as success in terms of income generation, highlighting the importance of supporting livelihood options as part of reintegration efforts.

12. Identification with the victim role

Accepting assistance often fundamentally changes a beneficiary’s view of herself. Many respondents spoke about their identity in explaining their different choices regarding assistance. 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 entirely positive. Accepting assistance means accepting the role and identity of trafficking victim, which is multifaceted and holds seemingly contradictory elements. On the one hand, trafficking victims are often stigmatised, while, on the other hand, the rhetoric surrounding the issue sometimes involves an exoneration of victims. It is, therefore, not an easy role to assume. In addition, to accept assistance, involves, at some level, acknowledging the gravity of what has happened, which, in itself, may be a difficult when many victims cope with trauma through repression and denial.

Relating to the trafficking term

While the definition of trafficking is not confined to forced prostitution, the idea that most “real victims” are in prostitution against their will still prevails. When asked who is a trafficking victim and whether they bear any responsibility for their exploitation, most institutional representatives said that it does not matter whether the victim consented to prostitution, that if she was exploited she is not to be blamed or stigmatised and responsibility lies with the traffickers. However, another picture of attitudes emerges when exploring the issue in more detail with key informants. Consider the statement of a police officer who had previously stated his understanding of trafficking in women as

described above, i.e. that it did not matter whether victims had entered prostitution knowingly:

The majority of those that claim they are victims of trafficking went of their own free will, and the reason they denounce the traffickers is that [the trafficker] broke their agreement. (...) Sometimes victims have used the police to make better deals with the traffickers. (...) We can't say that they are victims in the pure definition of the word. (...) They have not been grabbed and forced.

This illustrates how trafficking victims can be classified as more or less justified, or even “pure”, depending upon how voluntary their entry into prostitution was. The sentiment is also fairly common among different law enforcement and service providers.

Furthermore, this understanding of trafficking in women is also reflected among trafficking victims themselves. Many who would be defined as victims by national and international laws do not define themselves in this way. For instance, we interviewed several minors exploited in prostitution (which, in itself, qualifies them as trafficked) and who, in addition, had other vulnerabilities when recruited into prostitution. Nevertheless, some did not see themselves as trafficked and, consequently, questioned why they should receive trafficking assistance.

The image of trafficking as forced prostitution – who is “forced enough”?

Some trafficking victims assume that assistance is for those who were “more forced” than they were; others feel that romantic involvement with the trafficker means that they are not really victims. At the same time, a much-reported means of recruitment and control by traffickers is precisely to feign an intimate relationship with the victim. Even though “Rosa’s” trafficked exploited her in prostitution, moved her to another city when she was contacted by outreach workers, used her to smuggle drugs, threatened her and her family and so on, she still said: “He is not guilty [of trafficking] in my case. I will not report him to the police because I left of my own free will”. Love for this man meant that she did not see his actions as trafficking (or herself as a victim).

Many victims of trafficking are forced into their situation, not necessarily by another person but by the circumstances they find themselves in. These cases pose particular challenges in terms of the trafficking definition, as it can be difficult to determine where unfortunate circumstance ends and manipulation and exploitation begin. Women and girls may be reluctant to classify their survival strategies as ones of victimisation and may, therefore, decline trafficking specific assistance.

It was quite common for trafficking victims to emphasize that they did not enter prostitution voluntarily. Several respondents in assistance underlined how they were different from other women who knew what they were getting into. The question, then, is how someone who has entered prostitution knowingly and willingly, but who still has been trafficked, would feel being assisted alongside those whose stories are kidnappings, force and violence. While a woman may feel that she was exploited, it is very common for trafficking victims to blame themselves and look to their own actions to explain what happened, even when they have been subjected to coercion, threats or deceit.

When exploitation seems like the best available opportunity

Related to whether someone is “forced enough” is that some women and girls may feel that their situation may be the best deal they can hope for, if the alternative is to be at home (sometimes in difficult circumstances) and with no means of income or opportunities. Assistance which removes women from the “work situation”, however exploitative, may not always seem a solution.

One of the key components of the trafficking definition is exploitation. It can have an objective meaning, for instance, in regulated areas of work life, where minimum standards of pay and working conditions are imposed, and where breaking these regulations can be defined as exploitation. However, prostitution in most countries is outside the realm of regulated work which means the concept of exploitation is more subjective. Whether the person feels exploited will often differ from person to person, even in identical circumstances. People are more likely to accept an exploitative situation if there are other conditions that compensate. For instance, a very poor woman coming home after having been forced into prostitution talked longingly about how every time she opened the fridge when abroad, there was food - “even chicken”. Another factor that may mitigate exploitation and serve to justify one’s situation is if it is possible to make even small amounts of money.

Relating to the general role as victim

The role of trafficking victim was extensively discussed by respondents, all of whom related to it differently – some took issue with being defined as a victim generally, others were more accepting.

Rejecting a victim identity

Accepting assistance means accepting the identity of trafficking victim. While this status affords certain rights, it may also be at odds with the way that individuals view themselves. Some found it problematic to be on the receiving end of assistance as they were used to providing for themselves and assistance made them feel passive. Explained one woman who had been in the programme for about one year:

Sometimes I had a feeling that I am like a handicapped...Why should anyone help me if I have legs, if I have hands, this is the only thing that I have. This help, for example, was brought, but in the beginning I felt not quite comfortable, because I was used to doing everything on my own.

Many trafficking victims migrated in order to improve their (and their families’) lives, which is far from being passive. For someone who has been actively caring for others, it may be difficult to admit that they themselves may need some help. Assuming a victim identity may, thus, be experienced as relinquishing agency or a positive self-image.

Some women may also want to distance themselves from the traumatic experience and move on with their lives. One woman recruited by someone close to her family was subjected to extreme violence and degradation while trafficked. At the time of the

interview, she was still suffering from physical injuries, unable to work. Her recruiter lived nearby, a source of considerable stress for her, but she had not reported him to the police, nor did she plan to because, in her words: “I just want to be a mother”. This may be read as a desire to leave her traumatic past behind, exclude it from her identity and choose the more positive identity of mother (over victim). Victims who were heavily traumatised after brutal trafficking experiences sometimes declined assistance in an attempt to “just leave everything behind them”.

In some cases, women tried to diminish what they have been through. In some ways, this may be seen as a form of denial, but it may equally be a way of managing their traumatic past. Accepting assistance may, in a way, make the trauma real. .

Comparing their traumatic experiences to others may also function as a coping mechanism. Some people felt that they could not accept assistance as long as there were other people who were in worse situations. One woman from very difficult financial situations declined the reinstallation grant (approximately USD50) because she felt others needed it more than she did.

There are also women who may recognise that they are victims but feel that their experience wasn’t “bad enough” to receive assistance. One woman had been trafficked five years earlier and still suffered nightmares. She knew about assistance but thought she could manage on her own. After eventually coming for counselling, she said to the social worker, “why did I suffer for five years? I knew about you providing assistance but I thought that maybe mine is not like the worst cases”.

Embracing a victim identity

People manage victim identities differently and some trafficking victims seemed to embrace their victim status. They were often younger, in their late teens and early twenties, and perhaps were less likely to have developed a self-image linked, at least in part, with caring for others (something many older mature women and mothers had), making it easier for them to accept the victim identity.

Adopting a very strong victim identity may lead to discontent with available assistance and sometimes even to declining. This happens when the beneficiary develops very high expectations of what she should rightfully receive, as one social workers explained:

There is another group of girls here, it’s like the whole world owes them something. They are hostile, not willing to change. This hostility is not directed towards individuals, but the whole world. They say, “You must give me a job, you must teach me”. Usually they don’t stay long.

Adopting a victim identity and having high expectations of assistance may also be part of the process of receiving assistance and figuring out what can be expected. While it is quite common for beneficiaries to be shocked and grateful when they realise that assistance is real, it is also quite common for expectations to grow over time. One social described a pattern whereby many victims increasingly call the organisation over time,

asking for more and more things, and for help in solving problems. This was often accompanied by discontent when the beneficiary felt that she did not get help when she needed it.

Conclusion and recommendations

Victims of trafficking decline assistance for a multitude of reasons. They often feel that accepting is not a real option for them, leaving many with unattended assistance needs and problems. In some instances, this continued vulnerability and lack of assistance will also be the basis for continued trafficking and exploitation. While some victims do decline assistance because they do not want or need to accept it, others decline because of personal circumstances, due to the configuration of assistance and/or because of their social and personal experience.

Our conclusions and recommendations focus on what, could be changed and improved in order to increase the likelihood that trafficking victims can access the assistance they need and want. Addressing the following issues can, in our view, translate into significant and, often, immediate improvements in anti-trafficking assistance in SEE as well as further afield. It can also mean that victims who might not otherwise have accepted assistance will be more inclined to do so.

Provide realistic and comprehensible information

Victims need clear, comprehensible and realistic information about the various assistance options both abroad and upon their return home. This makes a strong case for providing written materials (appropriate for the victim's age, language and education), as they are often in a confused and often traumatised state at first contact and consequently have limited capacity to process the consequences of accepting and declining assistance. Written materials can be revisited by victims at a later and hopefully more stable stage, even if she has initially declined assistance.

Demonstrate reliability and build trust

While building trust takes time, an important step in this direction is the provision of reliable information and assistance. Thus, one step would be to identify and solve some of victims' specific problems – for instance, documents, nutrition or health concerns – thereby affirming that assistance is real, efficient and reliable. It was often when victims received the first concrete and specific assistance that they started trusting service providers, this being endlessly more convincing than assurances of good intentions.

Consider rules and restrictions from the victim's perspective

Any use of restrictions must be guided by a clear rationale, strict supervision and guidelines and must ensure protection of individuals' rights and ethical treatment. Further, serious discussion is needed about what types of interventions are appropriate

for trafficking victims (and when), what therapeutic effect is intended and their efficiency in attaining this goal. If restrictions are to be used, there is a need for a formal body to which organisations are accountable in cases of abuse or problems.

Need for monitoring, accountability and quality assurance

The anti-trafficking assistance sector is largely run by NGOs and IOs and there is little monitoring of this work by host governments or donors. Assistance should include systems for licensing service providers, regular monitoring of programmes and mechanisms for complaint. Trafficking assistance should be evaluated (including what does and does not work), both in the short term and in terms of more longer term impacts. However, evaluations should not only look at the effect on assisted victims but also at who is not assisted and why? What happens to these unassisted victims in the long term? Are there systematic differences between assisted and unassisted victims? Do victims who are not assisted need different types of assistance from what is available?

Allocation of adequate resources

Many service providers struggle with inadequate funds. Often, victim's needs (and those of their dependents) exceed available resources. Programmes must have budgets which allow them to accommodate these needs in ways that prevent victims from opting out of assistance. At the same time, organisations need to increasingly explore funding beyond international donors toward sustainable assistance and reintegration services – for example, coordinate with and refer to state social services, access state funded services (e.g. medical care, financial assistance, legal aid), access government funds or in-kind contributions (shelter, office premises), etc.

Consider the family in the provision of assistance

Family has significant and differing impacts on decisions about declining assistance. Including the family in assistance could partly assuage patterns of declining given that one reason to decline was the need to return home and support the family. Allowing victims to bring their children (or other dependents) into assistance programmes is similarly important. However, this must be done in ways that provide adequate care within existing resources and so that it is not disruptive for other beneficiaries, for example in shelter settings. Including family members could also potentially help to alleviate families' mistrust about the veracity of assistance, although this must be done so as not to breach confidentiality.

Develop programmes that are non-identifying and non-stigmatising

Assistance to trafficking victims could potentially be less stigmatising if integrated, to a larger extent, within social assistance efforts, in order that assistance is provided on the grounds of social vulnerability rather than being a trafficking victim. This approach, for

instance offering services to unemployed or poor women in the community, appears to have had a certain success in reaching victims who might not otherwise have accepted assistance.

Consider alternative assistance models and methods

The type of assistance, and how it is offered, must take into account the day-to-day lives and obligations of trafficked persons upon return. Assistance that does not involve staying in a centralised shelter (and thus, leaving ones family or community) may be a good alternative for the numerous victims who feel unable to leave parents or children behind, or who cannot afford to not have an income while receiving assistance.

Design and develop programmes for other “profiles” of victims

Victims who decline assistance are in different situations and hold different characteristics from victims who accept. Many victims only accepted assistance when faced with a desperate situation and had no alternatives. Conversely, people who had alternatives (e.g. going home to family) generally declined trafficking-specific assistance and sought formal as well as informal support elsewhere. This could mean that some of the characteristics associated with trafficking victims may be more representative of the assisted trafficking victims. Programmes must also be designed to meet the needs of these, to date, unassisted victims.

Leaving the past behind? When victims of trafficking decline assistance



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