



# Victims of human trafficking in asylum and reception

Trafficking in human beings is a serious crime and a violation of fundamental rights, explicitly prohibited by the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#). Human trafficking includes sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced criminal activities (such as drug trafficking and pickpocketing) and slavery or servitude.<sup>1</sup>

EU legislation contains provisions which address asylum applicants with special needs who may be considered particularly vulnerable, including victims of human trafficking. These provisions ensure that vulnerable applicants receive adequate support to benefit from their rights and comply with the obligations, which are defined under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

Several factors contribute to making asylum seekers, refugees and other forcibly-displaced people an easy target for traffickers, who prey on their precarious situation. As such, victims of human trafficking in the asylum procedure require due attention and procedural safeguards.



## Methodology

This situational update presents the latest policy and legislative developments in EU+ countries, based on publicly-available information on trafficking in human beings in asylum and reception systems. The sources of information include national authorities, EU institutions, international organisations and civil society organisations. Following up on Situational Update No 17 of 16 March 2023, this report covers the period 1 March 2023–30 June 2024.



The information and statistics provided by EU+ countries on identified victims of human trafficking are not collected in a harmonised way and do not necessarily only cover victims who are asylum seekers or refugees. Nonetheless, general observations about combatting trafficking in the national situation may be relevant in the context of international protection and may involve asylum or reception authorities.

The reporting on national practices, activities and recommendations serves as examples which are not exhaustive and do not imply endorsement on the part of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). Due to the continuously changing situation, the information described may have changed or been updated by the time of publication. Please consult the original sources for the latest developments and information.

## Introduction



Patterns of human trafficking are often interlinked and overlap with human smuggling, but they are considered to be different legally. Victims of human trafficking are usually deceived or forced into another country for the purpose of exploitation, whereas individuals usually choose to pay a smuggler to enter a country illegally, which does not necessarily imply any form of exploitation for economic purposes.<sup>2</sup> In a 2024 report, Europol depicts the links between trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling and the current challenges in both areas.<sup>3</sup>

The patterns in human trafficking continue to change over time. Online exploitation rapidly progressed during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued to grow in the post-pandemic period. With the increased use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), authorities are faced with new challenges in stopping recruitment and exploitation by human traffickers, as noted in the annual report of the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA).<sup>4</sup>

Victims of trafficking are often exploited in multiple ways and involved in illicit activities, which results in cases not being investigated or recorded as such, according to Europol. In addition, differences in national legal definitions of human trafficking can make it difficult to compare and assess trends in the EU. Nonetheless, Europol has observed a considerable increase in intra-EU trafficking over the past decade.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding and addressing new trends, especially new forms of exploitation and the role of new communication tools and technologies, are essential in the fight to stop human trafficking.

## Key trends and highlights

- ▶ The scope of the revised **EU Anti-Trafficking Directive** was expanded to include forced marriage, illegal adoption and the exploitation of surrogacy as crimes. The directive also foresees more rigorous tools to investigate and prosecute new forms of exploitation and provide a higher level of support services to trafficking victims.
- ▶ The recently-adopted **Pact on Migration and Asylum** introduces stronger safeguards and better identification and referral of the most vulnerable asylum applicants, including victims of human trafficking.
- ▶ New and updated national anti-trafficking action plans for better identification and referral were launched in many **EU+** countries in **2023** and **2024**.
- ▶ Various national initiatives in **2023** and **2024**, e.g. in cooperation with civil society organisations and municipalities, aimed to strengthen the protection of victims and foster cooperation among different stakeholders, including civil society organisations and municipalities. The developments included multilingual information tools, framework agreements with civil society organisations and the trainings of staff on identification of victims.
- ▶ **EU+** countries and international organisations commissioned a number of studies to collect information on the latest trends in human trafficking. This information allows for a better understanding of the profiles of victims, types of recruitment, the countries of origin of victims, etc.
- ▶ **EU+** countries have observed the rapidly-evolving new technologies and their growing use in online trafficking and exploitation.
- ▶ Data from **Eurostat** for **2022** show a **41%** increase in registered trafficking cases compared to the previous reporting year. **EU** institutions, international organisations and civil society organisations all underlined the importance of collecting harmonised data to understand the current realities and profiles of victims.
- ▶ Courts ruled on return decisions for trafficking victims, carrying out **Dublin transfers** of victims and protecting of victims of forced labour and slavery.



## 1. Developments at the international and EU levels

The EU introduced several legal instruments in 2023, namely the Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Anti-Trafficking Directive, which aim to ensure better protection and care of the most vulnerable, including victims of human trafficking in asylum and reception.

Following the European Commission's proposed revision of the Anti-Trafficking Directive<sup>6</sup> in December 2022, the European Parliament and the European Council<sup>7</sup> reached a provisional agreement on 23 January 2024 on expanding the scope of the directive. The Council adopted the amended directive on 27 May 2024, which further strengthens rules and includes forced marriage, illegal adoption and the exploitation of surrogacy as forms of exploitation (see *Section 1.1*).<sup>8</sup>

The European Parliament defined 10 laws that it would continue to work on after the June 2024 elections. These included boosting police cooperation and strengthening Europol's role in the fight against the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking.<sup>9</sup>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched a new action plan in April 2024 to prioritise the fight against child trafficking, as 30% of victims are underage. The action plan will also tackle migrant smuggling and broaden its scope to protect vulnerable migrants and identify trafficking victims among migration and refugee flows. UNODC plans to expand its on-the-ground presence and deploy resident experts to countries requiring assistance.<sup>10</sup>



The UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children published a report in April 2024 defining the obligations of state and non-state actors, including commercial vessels and international organisations, in the protection of victims at sea and the effective prevention of human trafficking, especially of children. The report includes several recommendations, for example having screening and referral mechanisms for victims of trafficking at places of disembarkation, providing access and referral pathways to specialised trauma assistance, and ensuring health services and a safe accommodation for victims

of trafficking. The Special Rapporteur underlined that expanding safe and regular opportunities for migration and pathways to international protection (including access to asylum, family reunification and resettlement) would help to deter trafficking operations.<sup>11</sup>

In another report, the UN Special Rapporteur underlined the obligation of states to ensure effective access to international protection for victims of trafficking and people at risk of trafficking and to comply with the principle of *non-refoulement*. The report also recommends expanding resettlement opportunities and complementary pathways (including humanitarian visas and family reunification) to prevent trafficking.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S. Department of State released its annual reports for 2023 and 2024 on trafficking of persons, with a comprehensive overview for EU+ countries. The 2023 report underlines the importance of working in partnerships with governments, law enforcement, civil society organisations and survivors to tackle human trafficking. The 2024 report underlines how digital tools amplified the outreach, scale and speed of trafficking and their significant role in facilitating exploitation and trafficking activities. But these same tools can be used in parallel to combat human trafficking.<sup>13</sup>



## 1.1. Anti-Trafficking Directive

The [Anti-Trafficking Directive](#) from 2011 was the first EU law on fighting human trafficking and protecting victims. Since its adoption, the forms of exploitation and types of human trafficking have evolved. Therefore, the European Commission proposed a revision of the directive in December 2022.<sup>14</sup>

Following negotiations between the European Parliament and the Council,<sup>15</sup> the directive was adopted on 27 May 2024 by expanding the scope and including forced marriage, illegal adoption and the exploitation of surrogacy as crimes.<sup>16</sup> The new law also foresees stronger prevention measures, better tools to investigate and prosecute new forms of exploitation, and a higher level of support services and assistance to trafficking victims.<sup>17</sup> The directive calls for improved coordination between anti-trafficking and asylum authorities so that this specific group of applicants receives sufficient support. This will have a direct impact on national practices in asylum as the directive must be transposed into national law within 2 years.

Some civil society organisations mentioned that the revised Anti-Trafficking Directive could have been further improved. For example, Picum stated that the revisions do not address barriers to safe reporting, remedies and compensation.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, La Strada International noted that support measures should have been better addressed and more binding provisions should be incorporated to strengthen the rights and protection of trafficking victims.<sup>19</sup> ECRE also stated that, while the proposed changes to the directive may provide light on the magnitude of trafficking, it recommended to the European Commission to focus more on the rehabilitation and integration of trafficking survivors by issuing them a regular residence permit.<sup>20</sup>

### New measures of the Anti-Trafficking Directive

The updated directive requires Member States to implement new measures and transpose them into national law within 2 years. These include:

- **Forced marriage, illegal adoption and exploitation of surrogacy must be included in the definition of trafficking in human beings in national legislation.**
- **Formal referral mechanisms should be established and a national focal point be appointed for cross-border referral of victims.**
- **National anti-trafficking coordinators should be established or equivalent mechanisms with the possibility to designate independent bodies.**
- **A National Anti-Trafficking Action Plan should be developed and adopted in consultation with the national anti-trafficking coordinator or equivalent mechanism, independent bodies and other relevant stakeholders active in the field. Member States should regularly review the action plan.**
- **National authorities should collect data on trafficking in human beings to better understand trends at the EU level and adopt data-informed policies and strategies. Eurostat will annually publish EU-wide data on trafficking based on specific indicators.**



## 1.2. Other legal instruments supporting victims of trafficking

In addition to the Anti-Trafficking Directive, the EU adopted other legislative instruments in 2023-2024 to better address special needs and vulnerabilities in the context of asylum and reception, such as the Pact on Migration and Asylum and the [Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence](#).

The [adoption](#) of the Pact on Migration and Asylum represented a major breakthrough in the reform of CEAS. The pact significantly enhances the protection of vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking, by introducing stronger safeguards and reinforcing existing measures. The pact contains 10 legislative acts which Member States have 2 years to apply fully at the national level.<sup>21</sup>

### Pact on Migration and Asylum

The pact's revised **Reception Conditions Directive** lists victims of trafficking among the categories of applicants who have special reception needs. It calls on Member States to ensure that they have access to medical and psychological treatment and care, including rehabilitation and counselling services.



The **Qualification Regulation** calls on Member States to take into account the special needs of trafficking victims, while the **Eurodac Regulation** refers to accessing data on trafficking victims for investigation proceedings. Both the **Asylum and Migration Management Regulation** and the **Asylum Procedure Regulation** reiterate the need for sufficiently-trained staff who interview potential victims to have knowledge of indicators showing that the person may have been victim of trafficking and awareness of interview setting which could adversely affect the applicant.

The new **Screening Regulation** of the pact foresees a preliminary vulnerability check to be carried out to identify persons with indications of being vulnerable, victims of torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment, stateless persons or people at risk of becoming stateless, and people with special reception or procedural needs. National authorities in charge of detecting and identifying victims of trafficking or equivalent mechanisms should also be involved in the preliminary vulnerability check, when appropriate.



### 1.3. Observations and recommendations by GRETA

During 2023 and 2024, GRETA published several country evaluation reports from its third evaluation round of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which focused on access to justice and effective remedies for victims of trafficking: [Estonia](#), [Finland](#), [Germany](#), [Greece](#), [Iceland](#), [Hungary](#), [Italy](#), [Lithuania](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Slovenia](#), [Spain](#), [Sweden](#) and [Switzerland](#). For several countries, GRETA recommended improving victim identification, in particular among asylum applicants. Other recommendations included better access to compensation, specialised assistance and safe accommodation which is adapted to the specific needs of victims.

GRETA urged some Member States, such as Finland, the Netherlands and Spain, to develop a national referral mechanism, as recently laid down in the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive.

Regarding access to information and legal aid, GRETA noted that in several countries information provision was not always comprehensible for victims due to a lack of qualified and independent interpreters. In addition, in France and Portugal undocumented migrants – including victims of trafficking – had difficulties in accessing legal aid due to long waiting times to obtain residence.<sup>22</sup>



GRETA's fourth evaluation round was launched on 30 June 2023. It will emphasise the increased use and role of ICTs in human trafficking, including structural changes within these operations.<sup>23</sup>

According to GRETA, the number of confirmed human trafficking cases among displaced persons from Ukraine remained low as a result of early preventive measures and risk mitigation. But it also underlined that the identification of trafficking victims can be challenging since they often depend on their traffickers for work or housing and therefore are reluctant to file a complaint.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. National developments

### 2.1. National anti-trafficking action for better identification and referral

The revised EU-Anti Trafficking Directive will require Member States to develop and adopt national anti-trafficking action plans in consultation with national anti-trafficking coordinators or equivalent mechanisms. Additionally, Member States will need to ensure regular reviews and updates to their action plan. To this end, several EU+ countries already launched or updated their national action plans during 2023 and 2024, with specific references to victims in the asylum procedure or in reception. Several EU+ countries also introduced changes to their practices to better identify, refer and protect victims of trafficking.



The French government launched in December 2023 its [National Plan to Combat the Exploitation and Trafficking in Human Beings for 2024-2027](#). The national plan includes the creation of a national mechanism for early identification, referral and protection of victims. It calls for the need to improve the content and publication of annual administrative data on human trafficking and exploitation from various government departments. This would help to better understand the profile of victims, particularly in terms of their specific vulnerabilities, e.g. women, children, migrants and migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, etc. Tools for prevention which are tailored to the vulnerability of potential victims could then be developed. In addition, multilingual prevention campaigns could target victims or potential victims in administrative and transit areas in different authorities, such as the prefectures, the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), the National Court of Asylum (CNDA) and the Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII).<sup>25</sup>

Ireland launched its [Third National Action Plan to Combat and Prevent Human Trafficking](#) in November 2023, which aims to provide victims with protection from being removed from the territory and to increase awareness and the use of cultural mediators.<sup>26</sup>

Malta launched its [National Strategy and Action Plan Against Human Trafficking](#) for 2024-2030. The strategy acknowledges the current lack of data on the nexus between asylum and trafficking and includes several measures to enhance the identification of trafficking victims in asylum and reception, namely by training asylum and migration officials.<sup>27</sup>

Austria adopted its seventh [National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking 2024-2027](#), which includes training and raising awareness among asylum case officers. It also foresees to continue the role of the focal point for human trafficking at the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA), which was initially established in 2021.<sup>28</sup>



Romania's [National Strategy against Trafficking in People for 2024-2028](#) aims to raise awareness and provide more information on trafficking for asylum seekers and other third-country nationals entering Romania legally or illegally. This would be done by more targeted information campaigns and multilingual information materials.<sup>29</sup> Romania's National Identification and Referral Mechanism was also updated in 2023<sup>30</sup> to include provisions for identifying and supporting foreign nationals, including asylum seekers. Within the mechanism, IOM Romania has a specific role in identifying, supporting and referring foreign victims of trafficking.<sup>31</sup>

The Slovak government approved a resolution for the [National Programme to Combat Human Trafficking for 2024-2028](#) in October 2023 which was prepared in coordination with IOM Slovakia.<sup>32</sup>

The German federal government announced further steps to develop a National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking. It will address all forms of trafficking and cover four fields of action, namely prevention, protection and support to trafficked persons, prosecution and cooperation at the national, European and international levels. The federal government aims to have the action plan adopted before the end of the legislative period.<sup>33</sup>



Italy updated its national referral mechanism for the identification, assistance and protection of victims of human trafficking and exploitation with a set of recommendations using a multi-sectoral and multi-agency approach.<sup>34</sup>

Ireland revised its national referral mechanism with the aim to establish clear definitions for identification and to clarify the rights of trafficking victims.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the current competent authority for identification, An Garda Síochána, other relevant authorities and registered charitable organisations will become involved in identifying victims.

The Spanish government resumed in March 2024 the work on the [draft law against trafficking and exploitation of human beings](#) after processing was put on hold due to the elections. The preliminary draft adopts a comprehensive approach to trafficking going beyond a criminal response, including measures for prevention, awareness-raising, early detection, assistance and protection for victims.<sup>36</sup>

The Norwegian government decided in June 2024 to develop a strategy against human trafficking. The work was initiated under the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, in cooperation with several other ministries. The purpose of the strategy is to achieve better



coordination and provide more predictable assistance to victims of exploitation. Contributions are expected from public agencies, NGOs and international organisations. The strategy will be presented in the spring of 2025.<sup>37</sup>

## **2.2. New initiatives for protecting victims and preventing trafficking**

New initiatives in EU+ countries in 2023-2024 aimed to strengthen the protection of victims.

Slovakia opened new interview rooms which are designed and adapted for personal interviews with trafficking victims, protecting them from the risks of secondary victimisation.<sup>38</sup> Focusing on prevention, IOM Slovakia held workshops for staff from various institutions on counter-trafficking and communication with potential victims<sup>39</sup> and conducted several capacity-building activities to support Ukrainians fleeing the conflict and seeking employment in Slovakia, as labour exploitation remained a challenge. The organisation also translated an [e-learning course](#) on trafficking of human beings for healthcare providers and other relevant professionals who are in contact with potential victims.<sup>40</sup>

In France, the Director General of OFII, the Prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône, the City of Marseille and eight local associations signed a charter for stronger cooperation and improving the care of female asylum applicants who are victims of violence or human trafficking. Three key areas of action were identified: raising awareness about the stakeholders involved and their specific roles, coordinating activities, and ensuring that the specific needs of the target population are better taken into account. The objectives underline the importance of detecting, supporting and protecting vulnerable women throughout the asylum application process, for example by providing emergency accommodation places in the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur.<sup>41</sup>



France published new [information tools](#) in several languages on the prevention of human exploitation and trafficking, which included contacts for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. The tools were created by a working group which included UNHCR and the Interministerial Mission for the Protection of Women against Violence and the Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings (MIPROF), bringing together various stakeholders from government departments, international organisations and associations involved in the support of victims of human trafficking, asylum seekers, refugees and children.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, France launched awareness-raising campaigns on prostitution, human exploitation and human trafficking in the framework of the Olympics and Paralympic Games taking place in Paris during July and August 2024.<sup>43</sup>

The NGO France terre d'asile noted significant progress in addressing the risks of human trafficking in the asylum procedure, but still observed some structural limits on how both the authorities and specialised organisations can identify victims and provide them with the adequate support and protection during the asylum procedure.<sup>44</sup>

The Italian Ministry of the Interior published a handbook<sup>1</sup> on identification, referral and care for applicants with vulnerabilities and special needs, including victims of trafficking. It provides guidance on uniform procedures to be adopted in asylum and reception systems.<sup>45</sup>

The State Agency for Refugees (SAR) in Bulgaria signed a framework agreement with the NGO Foundation A21 to undertake joint activities related to campaigns, projects and training on the identification of human trafficking victims.<sup>46</sup>

The Polish Prime Minister signed a [new order](#) on the establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings in September 2023, (previously, the Committee was established within the Ministry of the Interior and Administration) as a response to the growing need to increase the effectiveness of actions taken by the government in the area of counteracting human trafficking.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, an [amendment of the Criminal Code](#) entered into force on 1 October 2023 and introduced a significant increase in penalties: <sup>48</sup> Perpetrators of human trafficking can be subject to a penalty of deprivation of liberty for a term of between 3 and 20 years, and if proven to have acted with particular aggravation from 5 to 25 years' imprisonment.

The Swedish government established five regional centres on work-related crime, including labour trafficking, which act as hubs for government agencies to cooperate on joint workplace inspections and other activities. Inter-agency cooperation within the Swedish Migration Agency focused on the work permit process, which contributed to an increase in identifying victims of labour trafficking within the asylum process.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of 2023, IOM Lithuania opened its Migration Information Centre for foreign nationals ("MICenter"), offering a range of support services, including legal consultation and assistance by lawyers who are specialised in human trafficking and labour exploitation. They familiarise victims with their rights and can refer them to the appropriate institutions when needed.<sup>50</sup>

Through the EU-funded HEROES project and with consortium partners, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) published a [manual](#) with tools and

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of the Civil Liberties and Immigration developed the handbook in collaboration with the National Commission for Asylum, the Department of Public Security, the Ministry of Health, the EUAA, the European Commission, Frontex, UNHCR, the IOM, UNICEF, Italian Red Cross, Italian Coast Guard, Central Service for the Management of SAI and other stakeholders.



strategies to detect and protect victims of human trafficking and victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The manual is directed at frontline responders, including migration and asylum authorities, social workers, police representatives, border officials, health professionals and international organisations which are likely to come into contact with potential victims.<sup>51</sup>

On the occasion of the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the Council of Europe joined the UN Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Human Beings (ICAT) in advocating for targeted measures to reduce the vulnerability of children to falling victim to trafficking and to ensure adequate assistance and care to child victims, especially in the asylum procedure.<sup>52</sup> An ICAT report underlines that the prevention of child trafficking also entails providing access to territory and the asylum procedure, with sustainable and long-term solutions in place for children and their families.<sup>53</sup>

In collaboration with the General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection (GSVPIP) of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MoMA) and with the full support of the National Centre for Social Solidarity, IOM Greece organised capacity-building sessions for 500 frontline workers who are in direct contact with trafficking victims in reception centres, shelters or other facilities, and at crucial entry points like islands and land borders. The target group included staff working with migrant children, following an evaluation comment for Greece by GRETA. Additionally, IOM Greece is developing a practical handbook for trainees as a comprehensive resource that covers various aspects of counter-trafficking, including identification of victims, the legal framework, best practices in victim support and integration measures. The handbook is tailored to address specific regional and cultural contexts.<sup>54</sup>

IOM developed and published a toolkit that serves as a practical guidance tool to address the needs of migrant workers and victims of labour exploitation in the EU, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The toolkit has been specifically developed to support national authorities (relevant labour, immigration, prosecution and counter-trafficking agencies), as well as other relevant stakeholders (such as civil society organisations and trade unions) to effectively support and empower victims of trafficking for labour exploitation and migrant workers.<sup>55</sup>

Civil society organisations are often involved in services for early identification of victims. In 2024, a group of organisations led by Save the Children implemented a project for the early identification and protection of minor girls and young women in transit zones of Italy, France and Spain.<sup>56</sup> They noted that the majority of trafficking victims, mostly irregular migrations, do not report the crimes to the authorities. The organisations aim to provide a safe place for survivors where they can no longer be coerced by trafficking networks.

The NGO FIZ Advocacy and Support for Migrant Women and Victims of Trafficking<sup>2</sup> published its annual report on trends in human trafficking in Switzerland, which specifically addresses the situation of victims in the asylum system. FIZ reported that the largest group of victims referred to them during 2023 were victims of sexual exploitation, as was the case in 2022. However, it observed a rising trend of other forms of exploitation related to domestic and care work and catering, resulting in a slightly higher share.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> FIZ manages the Counselling Centre for Migrant Women and provides specialised counselling and support services to female victims of trafficking. It also delivers training programmes and works on advocacy. <https://www.fiz-info.ch/en/FIZ-Portrait>



The Smile of the Child in Greece described daily challenges when supporting trafficking victims, for example a lack of trained interpreters for rare dialects who can specifically handle such sensitive cases, victims being reluctant to contact the police and sometimes long delays between reporting and the trial when the victims may lack adequate support.<sup>58</sup>

### **2.3. Understanding trends in human trafficking**

Both EU+ countries and international organisations commissioned studies to collect information on the latest trends in trafficking. This would allow them to better understand the profiles of victims, types of recruitment, country of origin of victims, etc. EU+ countries also looked at the rapidly evolving use of new technologies and their potential for further growth in online trafficking and exploitation.

The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings in Spain carried out a study on the digital business model of human trafficking. Information was collected on criminal networks, use of online platforms, data, challenges and good practices by disseminating a questionnaire to EU countries. It was observed that the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a much more widespread use of technologies to lure victims. Yet, there is a lack of official data to understand the real extent of the current situation. The report of the study summarises good practices and provides a list of resources available in different EU Member States. The conclusions of the study note that the Internet enables such forms of crime but it is also essential for awareness-raising and prevention on a fast and large scale.<sup>59</sup>

The Spanish Red Cross reported that 96% of the trafficking victims that they assisted in 2023 were migrants, mostly women who were victims of sexual and labour exploitation. The Red Cross further indicated that 70% of the victims they assisted did not have a residence permit and 20% were applicants for international protection.<sup>60</sup>

Latvia,<sup>61</sup> Lithuania<sup>62</sup> and Poland<sup>63</sup> published reports on the situation of trafficking in their national contexts. The reports summarise current trends and developments.

The Finnish Ministry of the Interior commissioned a study to examine the reflection period provided to victims of human trafficking and the impact of a suspicion of trading in sexual services on the denial of admittance or stay. The study confirmed the challenge of identification and the obstacles for detection. For example, migrants selling sex may not report occurrences because they may fear being deported and receiving an entry ban.<sup>64</sup> The Non-Discrimination Ombudsperson in Finland made a series of recommendations to the government, namely to amend the Aliens Act so that more victims can meet the conditions to obtain a residence permit.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the Finnish Immigration Service set up a new programme in May 2024 to steer and monitor assistance systems for human trafficking victims to ensure consistency and transparency.<sup>66</sup>

The Coordination Unit Against Trafficking in Human Beings (KOM) in Norway published its annual report on the situation of human trafficking in June 2024. The focus in 2023 continued to be implementing measures to prevent the exploitation of refugees from Ukraine.<sup>67</sup>

An IOM study on human trafficking found that potential victims entering Northern Ireland from Ireland were often detected through asylum or immigration processes and most of them were referred to the national referral mechanism. They observed an increasing trend of Eritrean and Somali nationals entering Ireland and travelling to Northern Ireland.<sup>68</sup>



## 2.4. Data on trafficking and information gaps



EU institutions, international organisations and civil society organisations have all underlined the importance of collecting data on victims of human trafficking in order to better understand the current realities and the profiles of victims. This point is reaffirmed by the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive which calls for accurate, coherent and anonymised data to be collected and published. Consequently, Member States will need to collect and report data on trafficking in human beings to the European Commission, to be published annually by Eurostat. The harmonised data can then serve as a basis for data-informed policies and strategies across and within EU+ countries.

At the 24<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons in April 2024, experts called for more action in ending trafficking in participating states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). They urged to move beyond awareness-raising campaigns and urgently re-evaluate prevention efforts, including to bridge the gap between data and action and to develop measures that could stop human trafficking in its existing forms but also prevent the emergence of new forms.<sup>69</sup>

To help with data collection, in October 2023, the IOM and UNODC released the first technical guidance on administrative data on trafficking in persons in an effort to align collection and produce comparable data. The two organisations actively trained national officials in the standardised approach.<sup>70</sup>

Data from Eurostat for 2022 showed a 41% increase in registered cases compared to the previous reporting year, with a total of 10,093 victims registered in the EU. Eurostat explains the increase as a possible result of higher detection rates of victims as a result of awareness-raising activities in the EU to prevent trafficking of displaced persons from Ukraine.

Nonetheless, the actual number of trafficking victims is likely significantly higher than the data suggest since the statistics only capture registered cases. In total, 63% of victims in the EU are women and girls. When the age is reported, children represent 15% of trafficking victims, with a staggering 75% of them being young girls.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, data collected by the IOM in 113 countries found that there were more girls than boy victims. The IOM also underlined that reliable and up-to-date data are essential for an enhanced global anti-trafficking effort. Based on the IOM's data collection efforts on child trafficking victims over the past 20 years, the organisation noted that the significant lack of data are often due to child victims being hard to reach through traditional surveys and the ethical issues surrounding such research. The IOM recommended that the research and data collection on trafficking in human beings, especially children, should be driven by clear policy and programmatic goals to avoid the pitfall of a data collection which has no clear purpose or intended use.<sup>72</sup>

Different national entities or bodies in several EU+ countries released their national data collection revealing latest trends in human trafficking in their respective country. In France, the Interministerial Mission for the Protection of Women against Violence and the Fight



against Trafficking in Human Beings (MIPROF) and the Ministerial Statistical Service for Internal Security (SSMSI) jointly published the results of their annual survey of victims of human trafficking, which is supported by civil society organisations. Around 3,000 victims of human trafficking were assisted by 72 organisations in 2022. Of the victims, 319 were already exploited abroad, meaning during their migration route. Overall, 7 out of 10 victims originated from Africa, 52% of whom were Nigerian nationals. Minors accounted for 16% of all victims in France.<sup>73</sup>

The Swedish Migration Agency published data on trafficking victims for 2023, which showed that the number of suspected trafficking cases nearly doubled compared to 2021. Most suspected cases were victims of labour exploitation holding a work permit, namely for the agricultural sector.<sup>74</sup> Denmark similarly reported a significant 35% increase in victims of labour exploitation in 2023 compared to 2022.<sup>75</sup>

The annual report of the Portuguese Observatory of Human Trafficking also observed an increase in registered cases during 2022, mostly for labour and sexual exploitation. The observatory's report presents disaggregated data, showing that on average minor victims were 14 years old and the majority of victims were trafficked from Africa to Portugal.<sup>76</sup>

Likewise, the German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings carried out a data collection of specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons and found that the majority of victims in Germany originated from West African countries, mainly Nigeria.<sup>77</sup>

Annual data published by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior indicated that Spain remained a transit and destination country for trafficking in 2023 because of its geographical location, proximity to the African continent, cultural ties with Latin America, and other factors which can influence human trafficking and exploitation networks. There has been a noted rise in criminal networks using ICTs in all phases of trafficking, but especially in recruitment, control of victims and advertising of their services.<sup>78</sup>

This observation is shared by the Federal Criminal Police Office in Germany which publishes annual data on human trafficking. Their annual report for 2022 also noted that victims most frequently communicated with traffickers through the Internet using different platforms, dating apps, social media, etc.<sup>79</sup>





### 3. Case law related to human trafficking

#### 3.1. Decisions on return to the home country of victims of sexual exploitation



From 2023-2024, national courts reviewed several trafficking cases involving women, mostly from the African continent. Considering country of origin information, some courts overturned decisions and considered that a return to the country of origin would pose a significant risk for the victims.

For example, the Constitutional Court in Austria [annulled](#) a lower court decision and held that a mother of two children, a victim of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, would be at risk of being re-trafficked if returned to Nigeria.<sup>80</sup> Yet, in another case, the Federal Administrative Court [considered](#) that a Nigerian woman, a former trafficking victim who managed to escape, would not be in danger if returned. In view of her contradictory statements, the court did not find it credible that she or her family, who remained in Nigeria, had been subsequently threatened by her traffickers since she escaped. The applicant got married to a Nigerian citizen who was entitled to reside in Great Britain, thus she would not be regarded as a failure in Nigeria or be exposed to the risk of re-trafficking.<sup>81</sup>

In France, the National Court of Asylum Law (CNDA) [granted](#) subsidiary protection to a former victim from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who was trafficked by a Nigeria-based transnational sexual exploitation network.<sup>82</sup>

The Court of Appeal of Palermo in Italy [upheld](#) the appeal of a Nigerian woman and ruled that the applicant would be at risk of stigmatisation and re-trafficking if returned. Consequently, the victim was granted refugee status and the right to remain in Italy.<sup>83</sup>

In Czechia, the Regional Court in Ostrava [assessed](#) the case of a Nigerian woman whose asylum application was rejected twice. The asylum authority had considered that the woman became a victim of trafficking during her journey to Europe and could therefore safely return and get assistance in her home country. However, the regional court referred to relevant COI and international law to conclude that the woman had already fallen victim to trafficking in her country of origin, Nigeria, and not during her journey to Europe, and she could be at risk of being re-trafficked and persecuted if returned.<sup>84</sup>

#### 3.2. Victims of forced labour and slavery

Forced labour and exploitation can commence in the country of origin, during the migration route or in transit countries to Europe. It is often interlinked with the victims having to pay off debts .



The Tribunal of Rome [granted](#) refugee status to a victim of labour exploitation from Bangladesh who applied for international protection in Italy and appealed the negative decision. The applicant initially went to Libya with the help of his uncles, where he worked as a mechanic to repay the debts. The applicant alleged that he could not leave work, his documents were taken, he had been kidnapped and assaulted. Although the competent Territorial Commission considered the applicant's statements credible and consistent with exploitation, the court noted that the reasons for having fled his country were considered purely economic and not relevant for the recognition of international protection. In contrast, the Tribunal of Rome considered that the applicant would be at risk of being re-trafficked in the event of return, given the situation of economic poverty in the country of origin and the pressure from family members.<sup>85</sup>

In a similar case, the Tribunal of Perugia [granted](#) subsidiary protection to an applicant since he would be at risk of becoming a victim of trafficking and debt slavery upon a return to Pakistan. He had applied for asylum before the competent Territorial Commission, which rejected the application. In the appeal, the Tribunal of Perugia noted that the statements of the applicant about slavery conditions were credible and cited country of origin reports on widespread debt slavery in Pakistan. Additionally, the tribunal considered the report of the anti-trafficking entity attesting the applicant as a victim of trafficking. Due to the inability of the authorities in Pakistan to address these practices, the tribunal concluded that the applicant would be at serious risk of becoming a victim of slavery again, having his dignity compromised and subjected to degrading treatment.<sup>86</sup>



### 3.3. Transfer of victims of trafficking under the Dublin procedure

Following a [CJEU decision](#) which ruled that Dublin transfers of trafficking victims may not be implemented during the reflection period,<sup>3</sup> the CJEU also [ruled](#) that an appeal against the rejection of a resident permit for a victim could not lead to the suspension or interruption of the transfer time limit.<sup>87</sup> The court held that that the Dublin III Regulation did not preclude a Member State from exercising its discretion to improve protection by giving a suspensive effect to an appeal in order to prevent the enforcement of a transfer decision until the final decision of the appeal procedure. The CJEU decided that a Member State did not have the discretion to nationally regulate the suspension or interruption of the transfer time limit, even if it could suspend the implementation of a transfer decision by national law.<sup>88</sup>

Based on CJEU decisions, the Council of State in the Netherlands [confirmed](#) the lower court's judgment that the time limit to transfer an applicant to Italy under the Dublin III Regulation had expired, even though the applicant had, during the appeals procedure, applied for a temporary residence permit as a victim of human trafficking.<sup>89</sup>

Another [case](#) in Austria involved a trafficking victim from Cameroon who was forced into prostitution in Croatia before she escaped and travelled to Austria. The asylum application in Austria was rejected as inadmissible on the grounds that Croatia was responsible under the Dublin III Regulation and that there was no reason to assume that Croatia was unable or

<sup>3</sup> Provided in Directive 2004/81/EC.



unwilling to protect the applicant. In the first appeal instance, the Federal Administrative Court stated that the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA) was required in the admissibility procedure to examine the granting of a residence permit for special protection since the applicant was a victim of human trafficking and further held that the BFA failed to investigate the specific state of health of the applicant who presumably suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. In a subsequent appeal, the Supreme Administrative Court annulled the judgment of the Federal Administrative Court and considered, based on its previous case law, that the BFA was not required to examine *ex officio* the granting of a residence permit for special protection in the admissibility procedure and that there was no lack of investigation on the part of the BFA.<sup>90</sup>



#### 4. EUAA support to national administrations

The EUAA is committed to supporting EU+ countries in their efforts to identify and refer potential victims of human trafficking to the specialised care and support services they need. The EUAA aims to build capacity and strengthen practical cooperation and information-sharing among EU+ countries and other relevant experts on trafficking in human beings in the context of asylum.

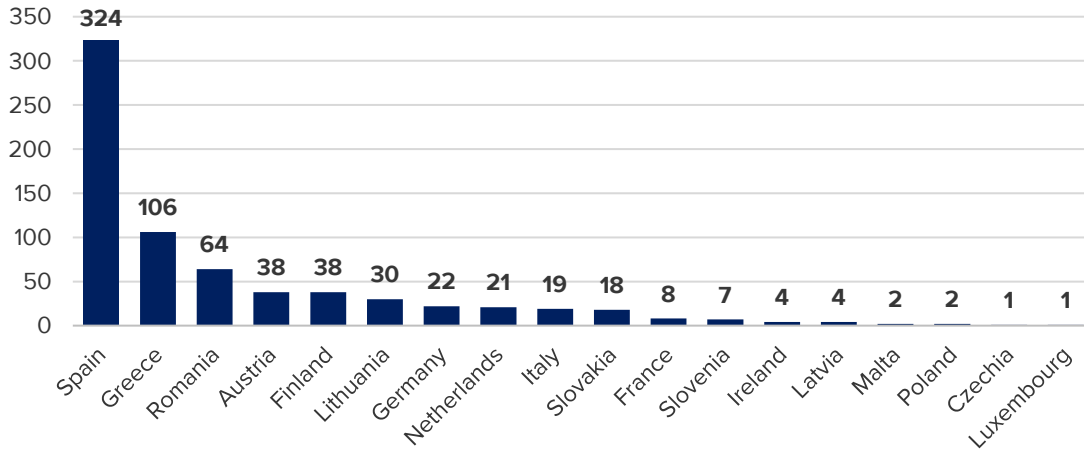
To this end, the EUAA has developed a range of training modules, best practices, practical support tools and guidance material to improve and harmonise practices at the national level in addressing and managing the needs of trafficking victims in asylum and reception. The EUAA training curriculum ensures that asylum and reception officials throughout Europe have the skills needed to provide fast and fair procedures which are in line with EU standards.

Between 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2024, the EUAA delivered 52 sessions related to trafficking in human beings, with close to 900 learners. The training sessions were tailored to various target groups, ensuring that specific roles received relevant training. For example, frontline roles within NGOs and national administrations were the primary recipients of training on trafficking in human beings to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge.



Across EU+ countries, the highest number of participations in EUAA training on trafficking in human beings were staff from Spain, Greece, Romania, Austria and Finland. These five countries jointly accounted for almost 64% of total participations.

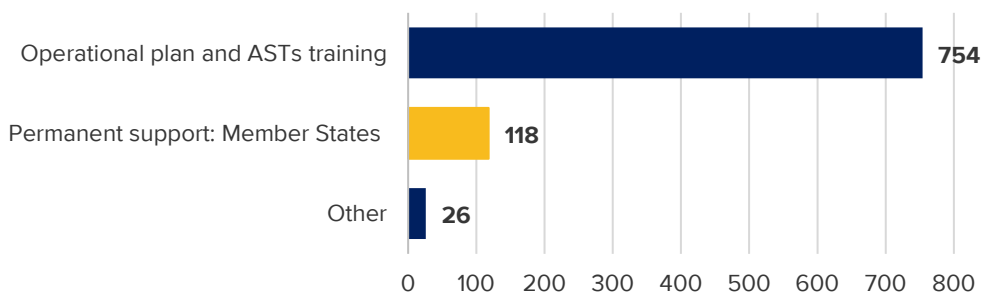
**Figure 1. Participation in trainings on trafficking of human beings by EU country, 1 January 2023-30 June 2024**



Source: EUAA C2 Learning Management System data as of 15 July 2024.

Most attendees of the EUAA training courses participated under the Agency’s Operational Plans to build capacity in Member States and as part of Asylum Support Teams. This was particularly the case in Greece, Italy and Spain. With a 93% satisfaction rate for the training activities, national officials reported that they were quickly able to apply the knowledge they gained in the field.

**Figure 2. Participation in training on trafficking of human beings by framework, 1 January 2023-30 June 2024**



Source: EUAA C2 Learning Management System data as of 15 July 2024.



## Conclusion

Forms of exploitation and patterns in human trafficking continue to evolve and adapt to new migratory flows. Criminal networks may recruit victims in the country of origin, during their migratory journey or once arrived in the EU. Different methods are used to target the most vulnerable, and EU+ countries have observed a rapidly evolving use of new technologies and widespread use of Internet fora, social media and dating apps for all forms of exploitation.



Emerging trends create additional challenges and the need for EU+ countries to ramp up efforts in the combat against human trafficking and exploitation. In response, legislation and policy measures at the EU level were strengthened in 2023 and 2024 with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, the Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence.

These developments trigger changes to be made at the national level. In anticipation of transcribing the EU-level directives into national law, several EU+ countries already began to put in place national action plans to combat human trafficking and referral mechanisms to support victims – including asylum applicants. Improving victim identification, especially among asylum applicants, is one of the priorities of the EU-level directives and establishing national referral mechanisms. Several EU+ countries already gather relevant data on trafficking and the situation in their country. But harmonised data collection in this area at the EU level, as foreseen by the Anti-Trafficking Directive, will be crucial to understand the true magnitude of the situation, the latest trends and the profiles of victims.

Challenges are also inevitable as asylum and reception systems need to adapt to changing realities to better protect and support victims who apply for international protection and ensure that they are not at risk of re-exploitation or exposure to additional trauma. For example, this requires comprehensive information provision and better access to legal aid. However, both GRETA and civil society organisations have reported about the lack of qualified and trained interpreters being an obstacle to support victims adequately, including during the asylum procedure.

Some EU+ countries have already put activities in place, such as providing multilingual information campaigns in transit areas, establishing adapted personal interview rooms and increasing awareness of the role of cultural mediators and interpreters to engage with victims in a victim-centred and culturally appropriate manner. Some countries also reported about their continuous efforts to increase safe spaces and emergency accommodation places for victims, as recommended by GRETA.

Examples at the country level in this report show the importance of collaboration among several entities, including international and civil society organisations, health professionals, municipalities, etc., when providing support to asylum applicants who are victims of human trafficking. To improve the delivery of these services, many developments in 2023 and 2024 focused on improved coordination among stakeholders and setting up well-defined agreements. The multistakeholder cooperation generally involved training and capacity-building on counter-trafficking, including national authorities, social workers, health professionals, etc. There were also joint information activities between national authorities



and civil society organisations and the development of practical manuals on victim identification.

Member States will need to continue, and even put additional efforts, in providing specialised training on trafficking to all frontline staff and stakeholders who are in contact with potential victims to ensure early victim identification and referral. The EUAA is committed to supporting EU+ countries in their efforts and provide them with a range of training modules, best practices, practical support tools and guidance material to improve and harmonise practices at the national level when addressing the needs of trafficking victims in asylum and reception.

Trafficking in human beings remains a global phenomenon which reaches beyond the borders of EU Member States. The changing methods used by criminal networks means that measures to prevent and combat trafficking need to be continuously adjusted and updated, not only as a reactionary measure but also pre-emptively. While initiatives at the EU level help to harmonise measures to combat human trafficking, national authorities must continue to remain vigilant and enhance support provided to victims.



## Additional resources

As the go-to source of information on international protection in Europe, the [EUAA Asylum Report](#) provides a comprehensive overview of key developments in asylum in Member States of the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland (EU+ countries). The Asylum Report 2024 covers this topic in [Section 4.5. Identifying and supporting victims of human trafficking](#)

[Situational Update No 17](#) covers this topic for 2022 to the beginning of 2023.

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