

Promising practices in protecting victims of human trafficking during the COVID-19 pandemic

Today is June 4, **International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression**. We dedicate this newsletter to all the children who are struggling to find a way to be free from violence. On this occasion, we are also focusing our attention particularly to girls, victims of human trafficking, and their position in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown that life of a girl and a woman, victim of violence, is in many ways reminiscent of a permanent state of emergency. Many of the girls and women with such experience, particularly victims of human trafficking, were socially isolated even before the crisis caused by the pandemic. Unfortunately, all the worries other citizens had in COVID-19, which referred to whether they would have enough food, work, freedom, came true for victims of human trafficking.

Atina's experience from the past period shows that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed many other problems in our society which have also negatively affected trafficking victims who already lack support to go through life.

In this newsletter, we wanted to show their strength, which has managed to overcome everything, despite the hardships they experienced. We are sharing promising practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we are very proud of and which resulted from a lot of patience and hard work.

As an example of a promising practice, we have singled out one of the highest verdicts for human trafficking in Serbia, which was issued during the pandemic, with the hope that such conduct will become a rule in the future. We are also sharing an article on online psychological support for victims of trafficking, which has been used by 30% more victims than before. You will also find a reflection on the violence in digital surroundings, as well as on the position of migrant girls and women who wrote *Letters from Isolation*, depicting their experiences in the pandemic.

One of the highest human trafficking verdicts in Serbia was issued during the COVID-19 pandemic

By a verdict of the High Court in Pančevo, the defendant was convicted to 20 years in prison for committing the criminal offense of sexual intercourse through abuse of position and the criminal offense of human trafficking. Deputy Higher Public Prosecutor in Pančevo, Olivera Sekulić Šošdean, who worked on this case stated that, on the very day when she was on call in the midst of the pandemic and the state of emergency, she received this, perhaps the largest and most important trafficking case in her career, and that she believes the way it ended represents success and a good example of joint work. For Atina, this verdict is also of utmost importance, as the girl was recognized at an early stage as a victim of human trafficking, and introduced to the protection system.

Online counseling with human trafficking victims during the COVID-19 pandemic

This crisis required for psychotherapy to fully forgo direct contact and move into a space that provided greater health security - into the world of online communication. It was necessary to find new and safe frameworks for counseling and psychotherapy in order for life and work to

continue to flow. We talked with psychotherapist Tanja Dobrić Brankov about her experience of working in Atina's counseling center during the state of emergency and the pandemic in general.



Online counseling within organization Atina is a service that will continue to exist even when we leave the pandemic far behind us, with continuous improvement and learning, and in constant desire to be where the women we work with are, to respond to their needs, and be their support in overcoming life difficulties.

During the pandemic, 178 girls and women with the experience of trafficking contributed to shedding light on the issue of violence in digital surroundings

At the beginning of March 2021, it was announced that there are several groups on the Telegram application in which tens of thousands, mostly men from the Balkans, exchange various pornographic content. In May of this year, a group again appeared on the Telegram application, in which persons from the Balkans share intimate photos of girls from Serbia and the region. Before Serbia, in March 2019, a group on the Telegram in Northern Macedonia published, in a very similar way, contents with girls and women in a pornographic context. Following these events, women's rights activists from the Balkan region, from a total of 139 civil society organizations including Atina, solidarily supported all women victims of digital gender-based violence, and asked relevant institutions to respond in accordance with their commitments and mandate, thoroughly and timely investigate the case of groups on the social network Telegram (such as: Balkan Room, Public Room, GevgelijaHub, Serbian Room, Smokva, etc.), in order to punish the perpetrators and protect the victims from **further victimization**.

Greater dependencies on the virtual world and isolation caused by the pandemic have made the risks of various forms of digital violence much higher. This is also indicated by the analysis of Atina "**Behind the screens: Analysis of human trafficking victims' abuse in digital surroundings**" carried out during the coronavirus pandemic, when a large part of global communication moved to the digital space, which, justifiably, further increased the fear of violence and exploitation on the Internet.

Within this analysis, 178 girls and women, victims of human trafficking, shared their experiences, and one of the conclusions is that a third of trafficking victims were recruited online, while 65% of them were exposed to digital threats, which were most often aimed at intimidation in order to change or withdraw a testimony or statement in criminal proceedings. Due to everything cited above, one of Atina's priorities is to prevent digital abuse from becoming

a “new normal” and a phenomenon to which the public, due to its frequency, will become indifferent, under the slogan - virtual is less real, and therefore less important.



Atina's response to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite the fact that state statistics show the number of reports of violence against women during the pandemic has decreased, this does not mean that there was less violence. In Atina's experience the problems will only begin once the pandemic calms. We cannot wait for the victim to ask for help in order to react, in order to even admit that the problem exists. Unfortunately, a dominant paradigm when it comes to victims of all forms of violence is the one shaping the question whether victims receive assistance and support if they ask for them, instead of asking whether assistance is offered to victims clearly and sufficiently, and whether support reaches them at all.

Women, especially in the current circumstances, are reluctant to report violence for a number of reasons. It was particularly challenging to work with women who were in the process of exiting violent and exploitative relationships; for many, plans to turn to someone for help or report have been delayed, while some have said they will only take that step once the crisis is over. This process is completely understandable, we had that experience in work during the refugee crisis where we met women who would say they were suffering violence and were planning to ask for divorce or help, but only when they arrived in the destination country. In fact, this experience has confirmed what we knew before, that victims must feel safe in order for the recovery to begin at all. The state of complete uncertainty and constant standby has postponed the recovery process for many of them.

Letters of migrant and refugee women from isolation

Atina's mobile team, which had regularly visited asylum and reception centers until the outbreak of the pandemic, remained in contact with women and girls who reported daily from the centers, talking about their fears and worries. This is exactly how the Letters from Isolation came about, from the idea of opening a space for women and girls to talk about all the challenges, fears and experiences in societies they came from, which aggravate social and gender isolation, as well as with reencountered isolation in the pandemic. These women wrote letters about their experiences of all these changes, how it reflected on their situation, and their vision of the future. Although, it could be said, their views of the world are different, depending on the culture they come from, what unites them during the pandemic is the female perspective

of a challenge.



“We are aware that difficult times will come after the crisis, probably more difficult than ever. They will be challenging in a different way, currently unknown to us. That uncertainty is what scares us all. On the other hand, we in Serbia constantly live through beginnings, and this will be a similar story. De integro. Starting from scratch all over again,” Jelena Hrnjak said speaking of the way in which coronavirus pandemic will affect human trafficking survivors and their economic independence. “I believe that we should make the best out of this crisis, which I consider a crisis of humanity. In addition to disinfecting our hands and space, this is also the time to disinfect our thoughts and emotions. I know that women will find a way to fight through, just like they always have before - heroically and with a smile on their face”.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

This campaign was produced within the project “Support to civil society organisations’ initiatives to assist and protect victims of trafficking in human beings during the COVID-19 pandemic” NGO Atina is carrying out with the financial assistance of the Council of Europe. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the Council of Europe.