



# FROM TRAUMA TO TESTIMONY: GUIDELINES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT TO TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS IN CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS AND COURT PROCEEDINGS

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Belgrade 2026

**Citizens' association for combating  
trafficking in human beings and all  
forms of violence against women –  
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SKRIPTA International  
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Print copies: 100

**ISBN-978-86-82960-04-1**

This publication was produced within the joint  
programme of the European Union and the  
Council of Europe "Horizontal Facility for the  
Western Balkans and Turkiye." The content of  
this publication is the sole responsibility of NGO  
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# Foreword

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The participation of trafficking survivors in criminal investigations and court proceedings is among the most demanding and most sensitive experiences within the recovery process. While testimony is crucial for achieving justice and holding perpetrators accountable, for survivors, it often means facing the trauma again, along with the loss of control and fear that are frequently deeply woven into the experience of exploitation.

Two decades of NGO Atina's experience in working with victims of human trafficking show that the quality of judicial proceedings and the psychological well-being of victims are not opposing goals. On the contrary, they are inseparably linked. A victim who feels safe, respected, and well prepared for this process has more space to provide testimony, while a system that recognizes and respects the psychological consequences of trauma has greater chances of reaching a fuller and more reliable truth.

*"From trauma to testimony: Guidelines for psychological support to trafficking survivors in criminal investigations and court proceedings"* emerged from NGO Atina's day-to-day practice in supporting victims of human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence. It is not only the result of direct support to victims, but also of continuous cooperation with institutions and application of an interdisciplinary approach that integrates psychological support, legal protection, and long-term follow-up of recovery and reintegration processes.

A particular value of this manual lies in its grounding in the actual experiences of victims and professionals who accompany them through criminal investigations and court proceedings. The focus is not only on procedures, but on people, their fears, dilemmas, strengths, and needs. The manual is based on a trauma-sensitive, women-oriented, and empowering approach, which rejects the notion of the victim as a passive witness and insists on her right to have a voice, choice, and dignity at every step of the proceedings.

Within the system, there are support mechanisms, such as witness and injured-party support services at prosecutors' offices and courts, that represent a step toward humanizing these procedures. However, their role is, by nature, limited and is most often reduced to individual, time-bound interventions linked to specific procedural acts. NGO Atina's experience shows that such support, although necessary, is not sufficient on its own and does not respond to the complex and long-term needs of victims of human trafficking.

Practice clearly shows that the formal existence of legal mechanisms is not enough. Victims of human trafficking need continuous, comprehensive,

and long-term support that does not stop once they enter the courtroom, nor end once testimony is given. This is where the distinctive role of civil society organisations, and Atina's starting point, comes into focus, with an unequivocal message: there is no genuine recovery without achieving justice. Justice is not an abstract concept, but a process in which a survivor can regain a sense of control and dignity, and have the violence they endured socially recognised and acknowledged.

Atina's psychological counseling service has been active since 2003 and represents a foundational, integral component of all our programmes. Yet psychological support does not exist in isolation; it is one branch in the canopy of a set of services that together constitute the recovery framework. Experience teaches us that a hungry person without a safe place to live or a source of income cannot simultaneously cope with the deep psychological processes that recovery inevitably opens up. This approach enables understanding survivors' needs holistically and tailoring interventions to their pace, capacities, and choices. That is why psychological counseling at Atina is continually developed in close connection with other forms of support and the work of a team of professionals who are involved in that process daily. Their roles are clearly differentiated yet interconnected and complementary; each bears specific responsibilities, and together they ensure continuity, stability, and safety for women involved in investigative and court proceedings. Psychological support is woven into every phase of work with beneficiaries: through individual support plans, preparation for testimony, accompaniment during proceedings, and the long-term process of recovery and reintegration, culminating in full social inclusion. This makes it possible for support to be adapted to victims, and not the other way around.

The intention of this manual is not to offer universal or rigid solutions. On the contrary, it invites reflection, adaptation, and responsible action in each case. It is intended for professionals in the judiciary, police, social and health protection systems, as well as for everyone who, in their work, comes into contact with victims of human trafficking, to reduce secondary victimization and strengthen trust in institutions. At the same time, it is a call for systemic investment in trauma-sensitive, long-term models of support developed by civil society organizations, because without such investments, the fight against human trafficking remains declarative.

Judicial proceedings can also have therapeutic potential, but only if conducted with understanding, care, and respect toward those participating. This manual is our contribution toward that goal.

**Jelena Hrnjak**, NGO Atina's programme manager

Belgrade, January 2026

# Supporting victims of human trafficking in the context of criminal investigative and court proceedings

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The approach that NGO Atina has developed in working with victims of human trafficking is based on continuous, trauma-informed, and individualized support, in which participation in criminal investigations and court proceedings is not viewed as an isolated intervention, but as part of a broader process of recovery, empowerment, and regaining control over one's own life. NGO Atina's experience shows that safe and meaningful participation by victims in these proceedings cannot result from a single intervention but only from a structured, long-term, interdisciplinary support model grounded in clearly defined organizational principles.

Victims of human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence almost always participate in criminal investigations and court proceedings. Testimony places them in a highly vulnerable situation: recalling a traumatic event and presenting emotionally burdensome content in front of people they do not know (the judge), as well as in front of familiar, potentially threatening actors (the perpetrator, the defense counsel). Therefore, adequate preparation is crucial and enables the development of coping mechanisms for this stressful situation, thereby minimizing the extent to which it endangers their psychological well-being. Improved emotional stability among witnesses also leads to clearer, fuller, and more reliable testimony. In that sense, the victim's well-being and the effectiveness of the justice system are inseparable.

Over the past decades, legal theory has developed a field that sheds further light on this connection: *therapeutic jurisprudence*, which recognises the psychological effects of legal processes on those involved.

Therapeutic jurisprudence is oriented toward perceiving justice not only through formal-legal outcomes but also through the consequences of proceedings on participants' psychological well-being. This approach encourages reflection on how existing legal norms can be applied, without compromising the core principles of justice, to reduce the potential harmful effects of proceedings and strengthen their positive, supportive impact.

One of the key contributions of therapeutic jurisprudence is identifying practices that, even when not intended to cause harm, can still have counter-therapeutic effects. Hours-long testimony without breaks, especially when questions provoke re-experiencing of traumatic events, is an exam-

ple of such situations. Professionals' awareness of the impact of such practices, as well as simple organizational measures (time planning, proposing breaks), can significantly enhance the psychological well-being of witnesses, without requiring any changes to existing legal norms<sup>1</sup>.

However, Atina's experience indicates that such corrective practices within the judicial system are insufficient unless they are accompanied by continuous, external, trauma-informed support for the victim, beyond the judiciary's institutional remit.

In line with the core premises of therapeutic jurisprudence, Atina's experience also confirms that the very act of testifying can have a potentially therapeutic effect for the victim. Realising this potential requires appropriate, comprehensive, and long-term preparation.

## **Principles underpinning the preparation of victims for participation in criminal investigations and court proceedings at the NGO Atina**

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Over the years, the NGO Atina has developed principles that permeate the organization's work across all areas, including beneficiary preparation. These principles are not a set of individual professional skills, but are embedded in Atina's organizational structure and way of working, enabling consistent implementation regardless of the individuals involved.

### **Individualized support**

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The support provided by NGO Atina is tailored to each person's specific needs. Upon entering the programme, needs are assessed, and an individual support plan is developed in agreement with the beneficiary. In this way, the person, often for the first time, exerts real influence over her own life. Over the long term, this pattern fosters self-confidence and self-respect, contributing to greater emotional stability, even when giving testimony.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of therapeutic jurisprudence has been developed by David B. Wexler and Bruce J. Winick since the 1980s, starting from the view that law and judicial proceedings can have insufficient judiciary's therapeutic or counter-therapeutic effects on the psychological well-being of participants in proceedings. See: David B. Wexler & Bruce J. Winick, *Law in Therapeutic Key: Developments in Therapeutic Jurisprudence*, 1996

## Comprehensiveness of the support

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NGO Atina's support covers a wide range of areas: safe housing, medical, legal, and psychological assistance, expansion of social networks, education, and employment. Most of these forms of support begin well before the stage of participating in proceedings.

Within NGO Atina, an interdisciplinary approach does not mean *ad hoc* co-operation among individuals from different institutions; instead, it involves a coordinated team working within a shared set of values and a common methodological framework, focused on providing holistic and continuous support to the victim.<sup>2</sup> The team includes a social worker, a psychologist, and a lawyer, and the relationship of trust with the beneficiary is established mainly before preparation for testimony begins.

## Long-term support

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The support that NGO Atina provides is not time-limited; it remains available to beneficiaries for as long as they need it. This continuity enables the development and deepening of a relationship of trust, which is the foundation for the effectiveness of all interventions in the process of preparing for testimony.

Cognitive psychology points to the phenomenon of *reactive devaluation*, which shows that the impact of a message depends not only on its content but also on the source from which it comes.<sup>3</sup> In the context of preparing for testimony, this means that interventions have a significantly greater impact when delivered by a person with whom a relationship of trust has already been established.

## Balanced distribution of power

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NGO Atina's approach is based on the understanding that all participants in the assistance process are equal collaborators. Professionals bring expert knowledge (experts by knowledge), while people who have survived vi-

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<sup>2</sup> Holistic and trauma-informed support models for victims are based on integrating psychological, social, legal, and safety support through a constant and coordinated process.

<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of reactive devaluation in cognitive psychology describes the tendency to discredit or undervalue messages depending on the relationship to the person delivering them. See: Lee Ross & Constance A. Stillinger, Psychological Barriers to Conflict Resolution, Stanford University, 1988.

olence are experts in their own experiences, needs, and goals (experts by experience). This perspective enables shared decision-making and supports the development of an identity grounded in personal strengths rather than defined solely by victimization.

## Voluntariness

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All interventions within the programme are based on the principle of voluntariness. Participation in the programme, acceptance of particular forms of support, and the decision about potential involvement in proceedings are guided by the beneficiary's own choices. This approach supports the restoration of a sense of control over one's life, a key factor in stability when confronting demanding situations, including testimony.

## Preparation for the testimony

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Preparation for testimony is an individualized process tailored to each beneficiary's current needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities. The process involves a social worker, a psychologist, and a lawyer, with clearly defined and mutually aligned roles.

The social worker is usually the person who knows the beneficiary best. She is alongside the victim in the most vulnerable situations: in the field immediately after exiting violence, during medical visits, in crisis moments before meeting with the psychologist, etc. Beneficiaries, therefore, develop a powerful relationship of trust with them, which represents a significant potential for the social worker's role in the preparation process.

The psychologist typically establishes contact with the beneficiary somewhat later; however, throughout the work, they also build a relationship of trust. The psychologist's specific contribution to preparation lies in assessing the beneficiary's current psychological functioning and in providing professional expertise in delivering empowerment-focused interventions.

The lawyer is a unique figure in the preparation process from a legal perspective. Although the relationship with her is established in later phases, immediately before testimony, the sense of protection and safety she can offer in that difficult situation for victims makes it possible to build a constructive relationship quickly.

This division of roles reflects the fact that the complex needs of victims of human trafficking go beyond the competencies of any single profession or institution, including services operating solely within the judicial system.

While such services can play an essential role in providing information and logistical support, they cannot, on their own, ensure the in-depth, long-term, trauma-informed preparation needed to enable survivors to go through proceedings without additional adverse consequences.

The interventions through which preparation is carried out are grounded in the characteristics of the psychological functioning of persons who have survived violence. The following chapter, therefore, provides an overview of the psychological nature of this trauma and the specific features of functioning in its aftermath.

## Psychological foundations of human trafficking trauma

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Exposure to exploitation represents a specific and complex trauma with a strong and long-lasting impact on a person's psychological functioning. Situations of human trafficking most often involve a combination of different forms of violence, emotional, physical, sexual, and social, whose shared core is the systematic deprivation of control over one's own life. It is precisely the loss of control that constitutes the central traumatic experience shaping the victim's subsequent psychological responses.

In the context of prolonged violence, such as human trafficking, violence is not an isolated incident but a pattern of a relationship. In such relationships, the perpetrator uses a range of psychosocial mechanisms to establish and maintain complete control over the victim. These mechanisms include physical and emotional violence, restrictions on freedom of movement, prohibitions on communication, and isolation from the outside world. Physical violence often serves to demonstrate power and intimidation, while emotional violence manifests through continuous devaluation, humiliation, and threats. In cases where the victim is forced to perform morally stigmatized activities, the very danger of exposing her status to family or community can have a strong controlling effect.

Control of movement and prohibition of communication further reinforce the victim's isolation, directing her exclusively toward the perpetrator and thereby increasing his power. If the violence takes place outside the victim's home environment, especially in a foreign country, with language and cultural barriers, the sense of fear, disorientation, and helplessness is additionally intensified.

The combined effect of these mechanisms leads to the gradual formation of a victim position, whose main characteristic is the experience of personal helplessness and loss of control over one's life. The person withdraws, yields to the perpetrator's authority, and accepts imposed "rules of the game," striving to meet expectations and avoid punishment. In this phase, the perpetrator often further strengthens control through subtler psychological mechanisms: imposing a negative self-image on the victim, systematically destroying any perspective of a future outside the violent relationship, unpredictability of punishment, and presenting violence as "educational," "deserved," or even "well-intentioned." In trafficking contexts, a common mechanism is intimidation through alleged connections with the police or other institutions, further discouraging any attempt at resistance or escape.

In such circumstances, accepting the role of a victim may represent a survival strategy. Coming to terms with the current situation should not be viewed solely as passivity or acquiescence to violence, but rather as an attempt to preserve psychological and physical survival in circumstances that, at that moment, exceed the person's capacity to resist. Understanding this mechanism is crucial for avoiding blaming victims for "passively enduring" violence.

Alongside acceptance of the victim role, standard coping mechanisms include repression and splitting. Through repression, a person pushes extremely stressful and hurtful content out of awareness to reduce its immediate impact. At the same time, splitting separates knowledge of the traumatic event from the emotions accompanying it. In such cases, a person may know what happened but not display the expected emotional reactions. These mechanisms can lead to fragmented, inconsistent, or emotionally "flat" testimony, which professionals, if unfamiliar with the psychological effects of trauma, may misinterpret as lying, manipulation, or lack of credibility.

In practice, the psychological consequences of trafficking trauma manifest through a series of relatively stable patterns of emotional and behavioral functioning, appearing in different combinations and intensities among most victims.

For most victims after exiting violence, the following features can be observed:

- fear, directed both toward the perpetrator (fear of retaliation) and toward family and the immediate environment, due to fear of stigmatization, rejection, or disbelief;

- a poor self-image, accompanied by very low self-esteem and difficulties accepting one's identity;
- a sense of guilt, internalized under the perpetrator's influence, with the victim feeling responsible for the violence she survived;
- sudden and frequent mood changes that may seem unrelated to the conversation content and confuse the interlocutor;
- low frustration tolerance, impaired concentration, agitation, and impulsive reactions;
- difficulties integrating experiences from the period of violence into one's sense of identity, especially when victims were forced into behaviors contrary to their values;
- refusal to recall traumatic experiences in an attempt to avoid their renewed harmful impact;
- generalized distrust of people, including professionals in various institutional roles;
- conforming to expectations of authority figures, as a consequence of heightened social perceptiveness developed for survival;
- delayed manifestation of traumatization, where signs of trauma may appear only after establishing a safe and supportive environment.

All the above are expected and understandable consequences of the traumatic experience of human trafficking. However, in institutional contexts, they are often misinterpreted as indicators of unreliability, manipulativeness, non-cooperation, or personal traits of the victim, if not viewed through a trauma-informed perspective.

As shown, the essence of trafficking trauma is a profound and long-term loss of control over key aspects of one's life. Accordingly, the basis of psychological recovery is the gradual restoration of an internal locus of control, that is, the experience that the person can again influence circumstances that directly affect her. It is precisely in this context that the potential therapeutic significance of judicial proceedings lies: they can enable an inversion of power between victim and perpetrator, providing space for the truth about the endured violence to be spoken before institutions that have the legitimacy to recognize and condemn it. However, for this potential to be realized, judicial proceedings must be accompanied by structured, continuous, trauma-informed support, such as that provided by NGO Atina's work model.

## Neurobiological basis of stress and trauma

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In recent decades, neuroscience has significantly contributed to understanding stress and trauma, especially by explaining reactions frequently observed in practice among people who have survived prolonged violence.<sup>4</sup> Behaviors that were previously interpreted exclusively from a psychological standpoint are now understood in terms of their clear neurobiological basis. The significance of this knowledge lies in understanding the limits of voluntary control: many trauma-triggered reactions occur outside the level of conscious control. They cannot be voluntarily regulated or “switched off.” For this reason, communication interventions in the context of obtaining testimony from trafficking victims must be grounded in understanding the neurobiology of trauma.

Neuroscientific findings indicate that prolonged exposure to stressful situations (certainly including long-term violence such as human trafficking) creates altered functioning of the central nervous system and the organism as a whole. Namely, any state of arousal (i.e., the amygdala’s appraisal that perceived external stimuli pose a particular threat to the organism) activates the sympathetic nervous system via the hypothalamus. A signal from the hypothalamus triggers the release of cortisol and adrenaline, which, in turn, sets off a cascade of reactions aimed at protecting the organism (enabling a fight-or-flight or ‘freeze’ response). The heart beats faster, pumping blood into muscles and other vital organs; pulse accelerates; blood pressure rises; breathing speeds up; airways dilate; sugar and fat reserves are released to provide energy, etc. A side effect of these physiological changes is reduced efficiency of the prefrontal cortex, where higher cognitive functions are located (thinking, memory, impulse control, etc.). In such a state, a person has more difficulty organizing thoughts and accessing memories and is more prone to impulsive reactions.

In people exposed to prolonged violence, these changes may become relatively lasting. Research indicates increased sensitivity of the threat-detection system, reduced capacity for processing and storing memories, and lowered activity in centers responsible for higher cognitive functions.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, a person may react more strongly and intensely to stimuli that objectively do not pose an immediate threat.

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<sup>4</sup> Contemporary neuroscience research points to a significant contribution of neuroscience in understanding the consequences of trauma and stress reactions.

<sup>5</sup> Findings on enduring changes in the functioning of the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex among individuals exposed to prolonged trauma have been described in studies by James Bremner and colleagues

It is important to emphasize that these physiological reactions are activated outside voluntary control. Therefore, interventions that rely on demands for the person to “take control of their behavior” or “concentrate on the topic” cannot produce the desired effect. Higher cognitive functions can become more effective only by reducing tension and establishing a sense of safety, i.e., by activating mechanisms that calm the organism. Activation of the parasympathetic nervous system is linked to processes of calming and recovery, which form the basis of trauma-informed interventions.<sup>6</sup>

Leaving the violent situation itself opens space for gradual stabilization, especially if the person enters a comprehensive support programme. A safe place to stay, medical care, supportive social contacts, and psychological support constitute a new life context that reduces tension and fosters a sense of safety.

Testimony situations, however, represent a particular challenge in the recovery phase. Evoking traumatic memories with the expectation that they be detailed and precise, as well as the possibility of another encounter with the perpetrator, can again activate fear and a sense of threat. To ensure that testifying is as minimally destabilizing as possible while still allowing comprehensive and relevant testimony, it is necessary to systematically promote tension reduction. Therefore, interventions, both in the preparation phase and during testimony, focus on:

- meeting the victim’s current needs (needs for clarity, safety, respect, and understanding),
- restoring a sense of control over key aspects of the situation, and
- creating a context in which the possibility of contact with the perpetrator (visual and/or auditory) is reduced as much as possible.

## Specificities of psychological preparation for testimony within a long-term support programme

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Beneficiaries are included in psychological counseling based on an assessment of their needs, usually shortly after entering NGO Atina’s programme. Thus, the process of psychological support begins before testifying in

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<sup>6</sup> Activation of the parasympathetic nervous system is associated with processes of calming and physiological recovery, which forms the basis of trauma-informed interventions.

investigative and court proceedings. By the time preparation for testimony begins, the psychologist has already established a relationship of trust with the beneficiary.

Within the helping professions, it has long been recognized that an established relationship of trust significantly affects the quality of communication with the client and the achievement of the desired outcomes of the process. Since this phenomenon is rooted in universal aspects of human nature, the same applies to judicial proceedings.

Over the past decades, forensic psychologists have systematically examined the impact of rapport on the quality of witness testimony in criminal proceedings. Research findings indicate that the completeness and coherence of a statement are closely linked to the quality of rapport established with the witness prior to the person conducting the interview giving testimony.

As research shows, crucial to building rapport is demonstrating care for the witness's physical, emotional, and cognitive needs throughout the interaction, as well as showing readiness to listen to their view of events.<sup>7</sup> With NGO Atina's support and the victim's prior work with the psychologist, the survivor has already received affirmation of care, respect, and understanding, meaning the preparation process begins on a stable, constructive foundation.

In the early phases of working with victims, the focus is on supportive interventions to strengthen self-confidence and self-acceptance. Psychological support is oriented toward overcoming trauma symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and guilt. The result of this process is also detailed familiarity with the person's history, the specifics of their current psychological functioning, potential vulnerabilities in upcoming investigative and court proceedings, and their strengths and psychological resources. This knowledge enables the planning of an individualized strategy for preparing for testimony.

Within NGO Atina's programme, psychological preparation may also include persons close to the victim, family members, friends, or partners, those who go through the entire process with her psychologically, even when not physically present. Informing these persons about upcoming proceedings, their purpose, course, and the roles of different actors contributes to their clarity and calmness, enabling them to provide adequate support. They

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<sup>7</sup> Fisher, R. P., & Geiselman, R. E. (1992). Memory-enhancing techniques for investigative interviewing.

Fisher, R. P. (1995). Interviewing victims and witnesses of crime.

Powell, M. B., Fisher, R. P., & Wright, R. (2005). Investigative interviewing.

must receive information about the possible impact of testimony on the victim's psychological state so that they can recognize certain behaviors as expected stress reactions rather than as "problematic." This further reduces the risk of conflict and tension in the environment during a stressful period.

Although NGO Atina's comprehensive assistance contributes to the stabilization of beneficiaries, this is not the psychological basis one can rely on when immediate preparation for testimony begins. As the testimony date approaches, visible changes in functioning frequently occur. Increased agitation appears; fear of the perpetrator intensifies; sleep problems and nightmares re-emerge or worsen; doubt in one's own strength and ability to testify becomes present. Withdrawal from social contacts, apathy or impulsivity, and longer episodes of crying are often observed.

For this reason, professionals involved in preparation or obtaining testimony must be aware of the intensity of stress that this situation carries for people who have survived violence. Even victims who had access to a broad spectrum of support, health, social, and psychological, may show regression when faced with a situation that requires evoking traumatic events and a potential encounter with the perpetrator.

## Preparation by the psychologist

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The individuality of support within NGO Atina has been emphasized multiple times, and it powerfully shapes the psychologist's preparation as well: the conversation with each beneficiary is tailored to their specificities. However, a common strategy is to divide the process chronologically into two parts: the first aims to reduce tension and raise awareness of one's strengths, creating the emotional context necessary for absorbing information; the second provides concrete, comprehensive information about the upcoming testimony. The general goal of both parts is empowerment. Their effects interweave and complement each other. The chronological order is established solely to create mental preconditions for achieving the fullest possible impact of the upcoming interventions.

### Part one of the preparatory process

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The conversation opens with safer topics (e.g., informal talk about current life events that do not provoke discomfort). The transition from informal issues to discussing upcoming testimony is also made by introducing a po-

sitive fact (for example, that the defendant's detention has been extended, that she has been granted the status of a particularly sensitive witness, etc.).

The next direction is reducing vulnerabilities stemming from trauma. These are certainly individual, but some appear in most victims and will be briefly considered. Given the negative identity experience, it is expected that they may experience proceedings as a situation in which they are "on trial" (being assessed). Therefore, it is essential to help victims recognize their importance and their contributions to the proceedings. Another easily activated weak point is guilt, so, at the very beginning, various interventions are used to achieve an appropriate distribution of responsibility (in the psychological sense).

There is a widespread belief that people who have experienced violence want to testify so that the perpetrator will be punished. NGO Atina's experience is that victims of human trafficking mostly do not have an authentic motivation to testify. Considering the psychological mechanisms underlying this trauma, it is not difficult to understand that the need for peace is often primary after exiting a threatening situation. For victims, testifying means re-confrontation with trauma, which endangers the fragile peace they have currently achieved. Therefore, a precondition for adequate preparation is working on awareness of authentic motivation. In the context of investigative and court proceedings, this means helping the victim understand the significance of testifying in achieving long-term psychological peace and stability. Most persons exposed to exploitation who went through criminal investigations and court proceedings state that only the conclusion of the proceedings, especially a conviction, brought them a sense of peace and freedom.

The next step is to remind the person of her strengths identified during the previous counseling process (such as the ability to survive even in harsh conditions, determination, and the courage to step out of the situation at a particular moment). Identified strengths are then placed in the context of the upcoming stressful event (how they can facilitate the testimony situation). A closely related intervention is reminding the person of personal coping mechanisms that were also identified during prior counseling, and elaborating on how they can be applied during testimony. The intention is the same: to illuminate ways she can use them while giving testimony.

Self-confidence is also strengthened by emphasizing her importance in the process. In a violent situation, victims are constantly made to feel insignificant and worthless. Testifying, on the other hand, positions her role quite differently: the knowledge she has is essential for the legal assessment of the offense and decisions on sanctions. This intervention also leads to an inversion of the power relationship between perpetrator and victim, which

is a crucial potential not only for coping with testimony, but also for further psychological recovery.

## Part two of the preparatory process

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After empowerment, the next step is to convey information about all aspects of the upcoming testimony that are important to the victim. The amount of information is paced to avoid overwhelming the person. Within NGO Atina's programme, preparation is always carried out through multiple meetings, allowing the work to be tailored to the person's current state. In general, the victim must receive as much information as possible before testifying to reduce uncertainty and the risk of surprise. This strengthens the person's sense that she has, to some extent, control over the stressful situation.

The provided information includes:

### A) General framework of investigative and court proceedings

- Explanation of the purpose of judicial proceedings as a whole and outlining the phases of proceedings (police work, prosecution, court);
- More detailed explanation of the purpose of each phase; explanation of the roles of the police, prosecution, and court.

### B) Information about the specific upcoming testimony situation

- Organizing a meeting before leaving for testimony.

Immediately before giving testimony, good practice includes organizing a brief meeting in a safe, non-institutional setting to support psychological stabilization. Such a meeting may consist of an informal conversation in a place the person knows and feels secure in. The opportunity to participate in decisions about this meeting (e.g., choosing the location) is a critical element of empowerment because it helps restore a sense of control and reduce anxiety. This space is also used to reaffirm the empowerment strategies developed during prior psychological work briefly.

- Organizing the victim's stay at the prosecutor's office/court while waiting

This is planned in as much detail as possible to minimize any chance of encountering the defendant and other potentially threatening figures (defense counsel, the defendant's spouse, the defendant's children, etc.). To adequately inform the beneficiary, prior contact is established with the wit-

ness support service. Conveying details that demonstrate institutional care (that a witness support service staff member will meet her at the entrance, escort her safely to the service office, provide any information she needs at that moment, etc.) significantly reduces stress before testimony. In that sense, it is vital to help the victim view these actions as a sign of respect and understanding from the system and the community.

➤ **Information about the space in which she will testify.**

The victim needs to know whether she will be able to testify from a separate room or must be in a room with other participants. If testimony is given from an individual room, information is provided about the room and who will be with her. It is crucial to know whether the person from the organization accompanying her can be present in the room. Because some prosecutor's offices and courts have tiny rooms for video testimony, the number of people allowed inside may be limited. It is therefore essential to obtain, in advance, information from the witness support service about any limitations and to prepare the victim accordingly.

In addition, a technical support person may be present during testimony. For the victim, that means sharing sensitive, intimate information in front of another unknown person. Informing her in advance and explaining the purpose of the technical support person's presence can significantly reduce discomfort. Finally, it is essential to provide information about the communication process via the audio-video link itself. The fact that she will see and hear only the judge on screen, and that only the judge will be able to see her, contributes to emotional relief.

➤ **Who will be present in the prosecutor's office/courtroom, and what will be each actor's role?**

Along with clarity, the beneficiary is reminded that, besides persons she experiences as threatening, there will also be persons she experiences as her support.

➤ **If she will testify in the room where the proceedings take place, information on seating arrangements is required.**

The seat for the accompanying organization's representative is planned to reduce emotional tension coming from the defendant and defense counsel.

➤ **Who among the present actors can ask her questions?**

Experience shows that this information is essential, even for victims testifying from a separate room, to ensure clarity and establish a measure of control over the process. It is also necessary to prepare her for the possibili-

ty of personal questions. Expected discomfort has a less devastating impact when anticipated.

- Conveying the obligation to provide truthful information in a specific way.

It is emphasized that it is essential for the prosecutor/court to know what happened so they can legally assess the defendant's acts and make the correct decision. Telling a person "you must tell the truth" can imply we do not believe she would do so, i.e., that we do not trust her. If truth-telling is framed as enabling the court to understand and protect her, it further encourages the person to share all relevant information.

- Introducing the means available to manage tension.

The victim is informed that she can request a break; that she can refuse a proposed break if it would be easier for her to continue and finish sooner; that if she does not understand a question, she can say so freely; that if she does not remember a detail, she can say so, etc. Individual coping mechanisms are also placed in the context of this specific situation, and ways of applying them are elaborated.

- Informing her about the possibilities for protection by other actors during testimony.

Possibilities for the lawyer and the prosecutor to respond in certain situations to block threatening questions are explained. This encourages the sense that she is not alone in a hostile environment.

- Informing her about the next steps in the proceedings.

If she will testify during the investigation, she must know in advance that the case may not proceed to trial (e.g., the judge does not confirm the indictment). A victim empowered to share traumatic events may expect her confession to have, from her perspective, a just outcome—meaning a conviction. Yet outcomes cannot be predicted. To avoid risking loss of trust in the process and in persons supporting her, it is essential to present this possibility in advance. An additional advantage is that the potential situation can be framed in a non-threatening way. From the victim's viewpoint, the absence of a trial is a "victory" of the perpetrator over her and the system. Explaining that it would mean the court considers that the prosecution did not present sufficient evidence can restore her sense of safety and trust that the system believes her. We note that this rarely happens in practice, but since we cannot predict the outcome, we want to explain all possibilities. Providing potentially harmful information does not create unrest if accompanied by an adequate explanation.

- Informing her about the time demands of court proceedings.

Sometimes, victims expect that after giving testimony, a judgment will be issued at the same hearing. To prevent disappointment, proceedings will include additional hearings so all evidence can be examined, and the case will not conclude the same day.

- Pointing out the possibility that the final judgment may be an acquittal.

Emphasizing her role and the information she has can automatically create the assumption that disclosure will necessarily lead to conviction. Since outcomes cannot be predicted, it is essential to talk about the limits of her role. She can influence the scope of information available to the prosecution and the court regarding the period of violence, thereby affecting the judgment. Still, the ultimate decision lies with the court. As mentioned, negative information can be presented in a less threatening context: an acquittal means the court found the evidence insufficient to convict under the law. For the victim, it is essential to see that an acquittal means the system failed to prove violence, not necessarily that it does not believe violence occurred. This intervention is critical for preserving trust in institutions. If a victim feels her role has been rendered meaningless, it would be difficult to motivate her to participate in any appellate proceedings.

- All aspects of the proceedings are viewed through the lens of the victim's needs, and information is communicated by emphasizing which need a given action addresses (e.g., the defendant's detention has been extended, indicating the court considers the victim's safety necessary).

This approach develops authentic motivation and is also preparation for possible appellate or repeated proceedings.

- It is emphasized at the end that she will be promptly informed of all further steps.

In preparations for court testimony, a challenge for helpers is encouraging the victim by saying that the upcoming testimony is the last in a series. Practice shows it is impossible to predict whether circumstances may lead to testimony again (for example, proceedings held in the defendant's absence may be repeated once the defendant becomes available). Therefore, it is advisable to refrain from encouragement that could become false promises.

- Agreeing on marking the end of testimony in a pleasant environment after leaving the building.

From a psychological perspective, the essence is debriefing in an informal setting. It is essential to allow the victim to elaborate on impressions and express feelings. The function is emotional closure and ventilation of tension. Feedback from the psychologist is also necessary, as it provides an opportunity to highlight moments during the interview where the victim showed strength. Awareness of personal power and reclaiming control over life events ("I am not helpless in important life situations; I can manage my life") is a key part of achieving long-term psychological well-being.

- At the end of psychological preparation, space is opened for the beneficiary to request additional information if needed.

Before ending the conversation, fears and concerns related to the discussed situation are explored. Through supportive interventions, help is provided to integrate psychological processes and preserve the person's functionality.

## Preparation by the social worker

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NGO Atina's experience shows that the role of a social worker can be effective only when it is embedded within the work of a specialized organization that systematically and long-term supports victims of human trafficking and other severe forms of violence. Although social workers or other helping professionals may perform similar roles in different contexts, the key factors are not only individual skill but also the organization's institutional framework, experience, and value-based approach. It is precisely specialization, continuity of work, and a trauma-informed approach that enable the building of trust, an in-depth understanding of the consequences of violence and the fears beneficiaries face, and the provision of support that goes beyond fragmented institutional interventions.

In that sense, cooperation between judicial and police authorities and specialized organizations such as NGO Atina is not an additional or secondary form of support, but a key precondition for ensuring victims' safe, dignified, and effective participation in investigative and court proceedings.

The social worker is the person within NGO Atina who knows the beneficiary best and serves as her primary point of support throughout the recovery and participation in investigative and court proceedings. She is alongside the beneficiary from the very beginning, from the first contact and the moment of exiting violence and exploitation, through outreach and fieldwork, visits to doctors, the police, and other institutions, all the way to the most

vulnerable moments of crisis, including the period immediately before meetings with the psychologist and giving testimony.

Due to continuous, intensive contact, beneficiaries develop a strong relationship of trust with social workers. This relationship is one of the greatest strengths of the social worker's role, not only in preparation for participation in court proceedings, but also in the overall process of psychological recovery, stabilization, and integration. In a complex, often lengthy process that spans from investigation to final judgment, the social worker is usually the only constant the victim can rely on. Her support is continuous, comprehensive, and easily accessible. At the same time, its intensity and scope are adapted to the victim's current needs, as well as to changes in the course of proceedings and the actions of different parts of the system.

The social worker is, in the fullest sense of the word, the victim's trusted person throughout the proceedings. Her primary role is to ensure continuity of emotional and practical support, as well as a sense of safety and protection. In certain situations, her presence also has a very concrete protective function; she may serve as a physical barrier between the perpetrator and the victim. The mere presence of the social worker at the police station, prosecutor's office, or court often significantly reduces fear and strengthens the victim's sense of safety.

In most cases, court proceedings additionally emotionally and psychologically overwhelm the victim, especially in acute phases when she may feel confused, frightened, and anxious. Fear is often multilayered, linked both to the perpetrator and the possibility of reencountering him, and to the proceedings themselves, their unpredictability, and uncertain outcome. Particularly sensitive and turning points for the victim's recovery, as well as for her participation in the proceedings, are the start of the main hearing and the moment she is summoned to testify. In those phases, the social worker's role is crucial. By then, she already knows the victim's reactions, her fears, and, most importantly, her "triggers," i.e., situations, questions, or presences that may provoke intense trauma responses. Given that participation in investigative and court proceedings often represents a return to the traumatic event for the victim, this kind of recognition and anticipation of reactions is of critical importance.

Interventions by the social worker during preparation for participation in investigative and court proceedings are carried out in synchronization with the psychologist's interventions, as part of the team's interdisciplinary work, and include a range of specific tasks.

One of the most essential specificities of the social worker's role is providing continuous, clear, and timely information about the course of the proce-

dings and upcoming steps. The social worker is the only person who has continuous insight into all phases of the process, from pre-investigation and investigation, through the filing of the indictment, preparatory hearings, and the main trial, to the delivery of the judgment and its finality. She actively monitors the actions of competent authorities, gathers information, and conveys it to the victim in a way that is understandable and adapted to her psychological state. At the same time, she remains in constant contact with institutional representatives included in the support network, ensuring coordination and information exchange.

The social worker also has a key role in monitoring the realization of the victim's rights throughout the entire process. She helps the victim understand her rights and make informed decisions related to the proceedings. In practice, it is not uncommon for multiple proceedings to run in parallel before different courts and authorities, for example, a domestic violence case before a basic court and a trafficking case before a higher court, often against the same defendant. In such situations, the social worker plays a decisive role in integrating information, informing the victim, and communicating with the authorities handling the case to secure adequate protective measures and prevent further victimization.

Another critical dimension of the social worker's work is the continuous assessment of the beneficiary's needs throughout the proceedings. Court processes often last a long time, and a victim's needs change over time. A deterioration in health, the loss of a close person who provided support, the need for safe accommodation, or additional psychosocial support are all circumstances that can directly affect the victim's ability to participate in proceedings and testify. The social worker identifies these changes and takes concrete steps to ensure an adequate response.

A particularly demanding situation arises when victims are charged with criminal offenses or misdemeanors committed during the period of exploitation. These cases are exceptionally emotionally burdensome and require more intensive, coordinated support to provide psychosocial assistance while also protecting the victim's rights as a person recognized as a victim of human trafficking.

The social worker's role is also reflected in supporting communication between the victim and representatives of investigative and judicial authorities. Her presence serves as both a protective and a corrective mechanism, encouraging professional and sensitive conduct among various system actors. This further strengthens the victim's sense of safety.

In practice, support provided by the social worker within Atina's model of work and long-term support programme includes:

- accompanying the victim through key phases of investigative and court proceedings, including visits to the police, prosecutor's office, and court;
- providing clear, timely, and victim-adapted information on the course of the proceedings and upcoming steps;
- preparing the victim for various possible scenarios (hearing postponements, changes of dates, encounters with the defendant, questioning by the defense);
- reducing anxiety through presence, supportive communication, and strengthening the sense of control;
- recognizing situations that may trigger trauma responses and reacting in cooperation with the psychologist;
- monitoring the realization of the victim's rights and supporting informed decision-making;
- coordinating communication with institutions and other system actors to prevent secondary victimization.

## Sample structure and context

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Following the presentation of NGO Atina's model of long-term, trauma-informed, and interdisciplinary support to victims of human trafficking in preparation for participation in criminal investigations and court proceedings, this section provides an empirical insight into victims' experiences during key phases of the process. The focus is on points where the risk of retraumatization and secondary victimization increases (first contact with the police, taking a statement, confrontation in the courtroom, repeated retelling of testimony, postponements), as well as on factors that contribute to a sense of safety, stabilization, and readiness to participate in the proceedings (if the person so chooses).

This section draws on interviews with 15 individuals who have gone through different stages of investigative and/or court proceedings related to human trafficking. The findings are not intended to be generalized; instead, they serve as an analytical basis for understanding what helps in practice, where the system most often generates additional stress, and how, at those

points, the role of continuous, specialized support, such as that provided by NGO Atina, can be identified.<sup>8</sup>

The sample consists predominantly of women (87%), with men accounting for 13%. The largest share of respondents falls within the 31-40 age group (53% of the sample), followed by the 26-30 age group, while the 18-25, 41-50, and 50+ groups are each represented with approximately 7%.<sup>9</sup> Four interviewees were minors at the time they were exploited. Their experience indicates that exploitation in these cases lasted significantly longer than for those who entered later. This confirms that early entry into exploitation often leads to longer and more severe forms of abuse.

Vulnerabilities that preceded exploitation were multiple and cumulative. In most cases, severe economic hardship was present (poverty, unemployment, or homelessness), and often prior domestic and/or sexual violence. Five of the fifteen interviewees were unemployed at the time of entering exploitation or immediately before. At the same time, seven of the fifteen were registered in the social welfare system, most often through financial social assistance or other services. The sample also includes incomplete or absent formal education, disability, and mental health difficulties, as well as belonging to ethnic and national minorities. This set of circumstances points to complex, cumulative vulnerability preceding exploitation.

Geographically, in this sample, exploitation was recorded in most cases in Serbia. A smaller number of cases involved multiple locations or a combination of Serbia and abroad. The longest exploitation cases were not necessarily linked to cross-border movement, but also occurred in local settings, calling into question the common perception that human trafficking happens only "somewhere far away."

## Types and duration of exploitation and patterns of coercion

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Sexual exploitation is present in around 80% of cases, but almost half of respondents experienced multiple forms of exploitation (7 out of 15). In these cases, sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced begging, and coercion into committing criminal offenses were combined. Labor exploitation occurred

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<sup>8</sup> This section of the report provides insight into the experiences of a limited sample (n=15) and aims to identify patterns of experience, risk points, and protective factors within proceedings, rather than to draw statistically representative conclusions for all victims of human trafficking

<sup>9</sup> The age categories refer to the survivors' ages at the time the interviews were conducted, rather than at the time of exploitation

in around 40% of cases, beginning in about one third, and coercion into criminal acts was recorded in at least four cases. Men in the sample were primarily exploited through begging, forced labor, and coercion to commit criminal activities.

Cases of forced marriage and exploitation from early childhood are particularly alarming. One case of forced marriage from the age of eleven was recorded, involving repeated “sale” of a child for the purpose of entering a so-called “marital union,” both in Serbia and abroad, alongside parallel sexual and labor exploitation, begging, and coercion into committing criminal acts. Such patterns indicate “family-mediated trafficking”, i.e., situations in which the child’s parents directly participated in exploitation. In these cases, domestic violence was also present before the exploitation, so that exploitation can be viewed as a continuation and escalation of earlier violence against the child.

In fourteen cases, complete data on the duration of exploitation are available; in one case, intent to exploit was proven before exploitation occurred. Cumulatively, respondents spent a total of 608 months in exploitation, corresponding to a period of 50 years and 8 months. The average duration per victim is approximately 43.4 months, i.e., around 3 years and 7 months. Cross-tabulation with minor age confirms a deeper pattern: those who were exploited as minors endured longer enslavement on average (around four and a half years) than the group average. Overall, the picture shows that trafficking is not a short episode, but for many, a long-term condition of deprivation of freedom, income, education, and social ties.

It is also worth noting that the longest cases were not linked to the abroad. Two of the longest exploitations, 14 and 10 years, occurred in Serbia. By contrast, one attempted trafficking case was interrupted at an early stage (during transport before leaving the country), showing how early detection and rapid response can change a person’s life trajectory.

### **Court proceedings: How long do they last, and what do they bring**

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The trial was completed in eight of the fifteen cases, while in the remaining seven, proceedings are ongoing, and a significant number have lasted since 2022. All victims participated by giving statements and testifying. Where known, the duration of proceedings ranges from an exceptionally short three months (due to weekly hearings) to approximately three years. In several cases, judgments were quashed, and trials were repeated, requiring victims to relive their testimony. In at least four instances, attempts to intimidate and influence victims were recorded, including offering money

and/or threats. In one case, after perpetrators were released from prison, the victim encountered them on public transport without having been informed of their release, representing a severe failure in the protection system.

## **Judgments and sentences: The Relationship between sentencing policy and the length of imprisonment**

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An additional problem is the criminalization of victims. In around 60% of cases, victims were forced to commit misdemeanors or criminal offenses during exploitation. In at least four cases, proceedings were initiated against them precisely for acts committed during the exploitation period. In one story, because community service was interrupted after the person was identified as a victim and moved to safety, the earlier obligation was converted into an 18-day prison sentence. Such outcomes constitute double victimization.

Finally, none of the victims in the sample received compensation. Without reparations and the confiscation of the profits the perpetrators gained, financial and social harm remains with victims: loans and contracts opened in their names, debts and enforcement proceedings, reduced pensions and other benefits; all of which leave long-term consequences even after criminal proceedings.

## **What we learned**

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Within this small group, drastic and telling facts are evident: exploitation lasts for years and mostly occurs locally; victims are multiply vulnerable and often criminalized; they testify, but rarely receive protection and never receive compensation. The human and social harm is irreparable. Therefore, the system response must be faster, protective, and reparative. Without that, victims continue to pay the price for a crime committed by others.

The first and hardest fact is the duration of exploitation, life without freedom, education, income, or safety. These are irreplaceable years lost during working age: missed opportunities for schooling and employment, years of impaired mental and physical health, broken and devastated social ties and relationships. Years that no one will ever return or compensate for.

Second, although trafficking is often imagined as an international crime happening far from public view, in most cases it takes place in local communities in Serbia.

Third, victims were forced to commit crimes and then prosecuted for those same acts. This is a fundamental betrayal of the protection principle. The system is there to stop coercion and provide support, not to continue violence through additional sanctions against victims.

Fourth, the absence of compensation means that a criminal judgment, even when convicting, does not correct social and economic injustice. Victims remain burdened with debts, often unable to find employment due to criminal records. Without compensation and confiscation of unlawful gain, justice does not reach those who need it most.

Fifth, findings from this sample indicate several priority directions for action. Witness protection must be the rule, not the exception: timely notification of releases from detention or prison, the issuance of restraining orders, and sanctioning intimidation. Clear protocols are needed to prevent the prosecution of victims for acts committed under coercion, alongside the review of existing cases and the expungement of records where justified. The system must ensure reparations by awarding compensation and confiscating the perpetrators' assets. Early detection and urgent intervention have a proven positive effect, while long-term cases require multi-year psychosocial and legal support. Finally, allegations of officials' involvement must be independently and thoroughly investigated, because impunity undermines trust and discourages reporting.

## Report on the experiences of trafficking survivors in criminal investigations and court proceedings

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To understand the real-life effects of investigative and court proceedings on victims of human trafficking, a qualitative study was conducted based on interviews with survivors who had passed through different stages of these processes.

The report is based on semi-structured interviews<sup>10</sup> conducted in July and August 2025 with individuals who were identified as victims of human traf-

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<sup>10</sup> The semi-structured format combines pre-defined topics/questions with flexibility for participants to expand their responses in line with their experiences. Before each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the conversation, how the data would be used, and their rights (voluntary participation, the option to stop at any time, and the option to refuse to answer any question). Data were processed and presented in accordance with privacy and personal data protection principles.

ficking and who had experience participating in investigative and/or court proceedings. Due to the limited sample, the results cannot be generalized and refer exclusively to the experiences of these 15 individuals.

Interviews were conducted in a calm and private setting, without interruptions, using a prepared questionnaire and with informed consent. Participants were told they could stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions if they did not wish to or were unable to. The real names of victims and their relatives were neither mentioned nor recorded during the interviews. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, and transcripts were produced from these recordings, forming an integral part of the present analysis. The report includes quotations from participants, but without identifying information and with full respect for privacy and personal data protection.

The study aims to analyze the experiences of trafficking survivors during their contact with institutions and throughout court proceedings, as well as their experiences with the NGO Atina, with a particular emphasis on preparation, the support provided, and their emotional experience. The analysis covers 15 cases involving women and men who had been subjected to different forms of exploitation.

## First contact with institutions

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All trafficking survivors interviewed for this study had their first institutional contact with the police during the process of identification and exit from exploitation. This contact occurred in three ways, equally often (five participants each): the survivor initiated the contact; someone else reported the crime; or the police entered the premises where exploitation was taking place.

One-third of the participants reported the crime to the police themselves. Two participants were encouraged and supported in taking this step by close persons (partners, children, relatives). At the same time, three decided to do so because they could no longer endure the violence ("That was the last straw").

In two cases, the police were contacted by citizens whom the survivor approached for help; in two cases, the police checked the survivor's identity and detained them while they were on the street; and only once was the report filed by an institution (Institute for mother and child health care), which the survivor had approached for help due to injuries sustained.

One third of the participants stated that the police themselves uncovered the trafficking after receiving a report. In three cases, this involved sexual exploitation, and in two instances, labour exploitation, i.e., forced begging. In cases of sexual exploitation, survivors described the police intervention as invasive and frightening, mainly due to the pronounced elements of sudden forced entry ("they smashed all the doors," "it was chaos"), which they experienced as an additional distressing and traumatic entry into the process of being rescued.

The overall impression is that the first contact with the police immediately after identification as a trafficking victim is not decisive for survivors' overall perception of the police or other institutions. Previous experiences with the police had a significantly greater influence, particularly in situations where participants felt that their vulnerability had been visible. Still, no adequate protective response followed (e.g., failure to intervene when a minor was alone on the street, or earlier police checks in venues where exploitation was taking place, without further action).

### **Experiences during the investigative phase**

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During the investigative phase, 7 out of 15 participants reported a positive experience. Survivors stated that the police officers were "correct and polite" and that they "had understanding for their situation." What mattered most was when police officers paid attention to the survivor's physical condition, monitored it, and were willing to take breaks during statement-taking.

Four participants reported a negative experience: "And then, like, I'm going to the police for the first time in my life, I don't even know why I'm going to the police. Before that, I only went there to pick up my ID card, and that was it. I didn't know what to say, and I wasn't guilty of anything." They experienced hours-long questioning ("until morning") and insistence on details as a sign of mistrust. In all such cases, the survivors were women who had experienced sexual exploitation. They felt uncomfortable when several officers were present in the room ("they take me into an office where there are six police officers, without any prior explanation", the survivor was a minor at the time, author's note), regardless of the officers' gender.

They reacted particularly negatively to insistence on intimate details for which they could not see the purpose of discussing during the interview (e.g., what kind of underwear they were wearing). "At least let a woman question me, but a man is questioning me, an inspector, and it made me uncomfortable. Whether I was wearing a thong or regular underwear, why is that so important if someone abused me? They could have questioned

me without that. But I was young then; I thought it had to be that way. And then I started thinking maybe they won't believe me, maybe nothing will come of this. And I said to myself, why did I even give a statement? Maybe he's someone's man..."

Survivors sometimes experienced detailed questioning as a lack of trust in their testimony ("It's like they don't believe me, like they literally wanted every detail... to catch me in a lie.") and an attempt to discredit them. In such situations, some tried to rationalize the officers' approach ("I really wanted to tell them every detail, to prove I wasn't lying... Then I realized... it's like they wanted me to relax and tell them everything, so I started talking.").

In two interviews, participants described experiences they found particularly disturbing, including physically and sexually inappropriate behaviour during the procedure. These accounts point to situations where professional boundaries and protection of the survivor's dignity were absent, which had a strongly negative impact on their sense of safety.

Four participants had ambivalent feelings. In general, they were satisfied with the police's attitude toward them. Still, they felt additionally traumatized by the insistence on details during statement-taking ("Questions like what it feels like when an electroshock 'burns' you... those are the kinds of unnecessary questions they were pulling out, they didn't know what else to ask me.").

## **Emotional aspects**

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One fifth of participants reported confusion during the investigative phase due to a lack of information about what would happen next and how the process would unfold. "She told me, but in that stress, when fear and stress pile up, you hear it, but it's like you didn't hear it, like you didn't understand anything."

In addition to confusion, survivors reported fear ("I wasn't indifferent... I carry that fear inside me"). A specific form of psychological pressure was fear for their own safety or the safety of close persons ("my mom and dad will go through stress, will they be okay, will something happen to them at home...," "I was afraid for my loved ones... I know what he threatened me with before.").

One-fifth of participants experienced guilt. Statements such as "I was ashamed; I thought it was my fault that I was there. No one told me it wasn't my fault," "I felt like I had done something wrong, like I caused all of this," and

"They just looked at me like I had done something wrong," suggest that shame and guilt emerged as a secondary consequence of institutional treatment, in situations where the survivor lacked emotional support.

## Information about procedures

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The findings indicate that a lack of timely and understandable information about the course of proceedings significantly increases survivors' feelings of insecurity and anxiety, and in some cases calls into question their willingness to continue participating.

In the majority of cases, formal information from the police about procedures and what would follow was absent. When asked whether they received information from institutions (police, judicial authorities) about what the court process would entail, 73% (11 out of 15) stated they did not have sufficient information. They were not informed of their right to a recovery and reflection period. They therefore felt pressure to provide as much information as possible immediately, believing it was necessary for the investigation. One participant received partial explanations from the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking.

## Experiences during court proceedings

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Two-thirds of participants described court proceedings as predominantly negative. Several main reasons can be identified:

- **Re-traumatization due to repeated testimonies or inappropriate questions**

Thirteen survivors had to repeat their story multiple times during the process and were forced to recall details of traumatic experiences again and again, which triggered re-traumatization. These procedures indicate a lack of institutional sensitivity in working with particularly vulnerable witnesses.

Defence lawyers and some investigators used provocative comments that further undermined survivors' dignity. They employed strategies to discredit survivors, linked trafficking experiences to earlier life events ("...the lawyer asked me about what happened to me when I was adopted and what happened earlier in my life"), insinuated voluntariness ("they tried to connect this experience with my past... with the idea of saying that I was there voluntarily"), and asked (from the survivor's perspective) humiliating

and meaningless questions, which survivors experienced as a lack of empathy.

- **Victim-blaming**

An additional psychological burden was the feeling that judges/attorneys were blaming survivors for what had happened to them. Some survivors experienced questions from lawyers and/or judges as hostile ("I had the impression that the victim is always the one to blame. Like she caused something," "...I felt more like I was the defendant, not them.").

- **Fear and confronting perpetrators**

Four individuals stated that they had direct contact with the perpetrator in the courtroom ("When I see him, everything comes back; I can't sleep."). Even when there was no physical contact, survivors were questioned in the presence of the defence, which they experienced as confrontation and therefore felt fear ("And yes, their lawyer blamed me because she thought the report came from me... I felt like I had done something wrong.").

- **Lengthy proceedings and adjournments**

Slow justice and lengthy proceedings exhaust survivors and prolong their trauma ("The trial ended, but the verdict is still pending. It has been going on for years.").

Survivors lose trust in the judiciary because years of waiting and repeated summons to hearings create a sense that their case does not matter. This mistrust produces a deep sense of powerlessness and loss of faith in justice. Survivors often feel they are being punished again by the system, rather than protected.

All these negative experiences indicate that for most trafficking survivors, court proceedings were a source of secondary victimization.

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## Emotional and psychological aspects

During court proceedings, most survivors experienced strong negative emotions, most often fear (27%), discomfort (20%), confusion, and anger. They also reported persistent distrust in the system and feelings of helplessness ("That helplessness, it's terrible. And it's a feeling a person can never get out of themselves; even the smallest thing will trigger it...").

## Outcomes of court proceedings

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Interview analysis shows that the majority of cases did not end with a final judgment. Proceedings last 5-7 years, with frequent adjournments, changes of judges, and repeated testimonies. In 13 out of 15 cases, proceedings were still ongoing, or there was no final judgment.

In none of the analyzed cases were perpetrators finally convicted and serving a sentence. Participants mentioned that suspects were "convicted in absentia," but not imprisoned.

What bothers survivors most is the long duration of proceedings and having to attend hearings multiple times, which they experience as re-traumatization. They feel exhausted, and some express resentment at how institutions operate ("If the judge in my case had been more educated about what it means to be a particularly vulnerable witness... and if I had had all the protection a particularly vulnerable witness should have...," "The judge was completely uninterested." In some situations, prosecutors' comments were discouraging ("...and every time the prosecutor would say, 'we don't have tangible evidence'... In the end, I felt such anger, like it's pointless that I'm saying all this and trying, nothing matters..."), instead of encouraging and protecting the survivor.

Although some survivors managed to regain self-confidence and self-respect, they feel that the traumatic experience permanently changed how they view the world ("All this time I feel like a hero for getting through this and continuing a somewhat normal life... To this day, I sometimes feel fear; someone might try to intimidate me, that's terrible. When I see the police, I still have trauma that I can never heal. I don't believe in anything anymore.").

## Contact with the NGO Atina

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Most survivors first came into contact with NGO Atina immediately after trafficking was uncovered, and they exited exploitation.

One-third stated that the contact was initiated by the police, who called someone from the NGO Atina or brought them directly to the safe house. In six cases, survivors first had contact with the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, which connected them to NGO Atina. Two participants said that a person they confided in (a brother in one case, and a journalist in another), who recognized that trafficking was involved, connected them to NGO Atina, but did not explicitly explain how.

For 13 out of 15 survivors, NGO Atina's support was crucial for their sense of safety ("I had some support; I felt safe and secure, it was completely different. It was the only place I could go and feel safe." "All those women gave me a sense of safety. And I felt a completely different approach, like they were the only ones who understood me and were on the right side."). During the interviews, survivors said they still enjoy coming to this space because they feel comfortable and welcome.

However, one survivor stated that immediately after exiting exploitation, they needed more privacy ("I needed peace. What bothered me in NGO Atina was that the office was always full. Back then, I needed to be alone with myself, to process everything."). Some expressed a similar concern about the atmosphere in the safe house.

As the most critical aspect of their experience with NGO Atina, survivors highlighted their relationships with staff; every participant described them as supportive. In some cases, they mentioned specific names, but the analysis indicates that the most frequent and emotionally intense relationships were with social workers and psychologists. Survivors felt accepted ("I never had support from my parents, brothers, or sister, but in them I found everything, a family, everything.") and felt that their experience and emotions were validated ("there was respect, I know how I lived"). In most cases, survivors described the support as coming from the NGO Atina team, social workers, psychologists, and lawyers, without naming individuals, which suggests the support was structured through team-based work.

Nearly two-thirds stated it was important that staff were available; 60% said so explicitly ("they were always there, I could always ask them"; "I had a group of people who took their role seriously and who were there for me at every moment, whenever I was struggling, whenever I needed to talk... Whenever I called, they responded; they were there when it was good, when it was bad, and when it was even worse; someone was there.").

The most intensive cooperation was with social workers. With them, survivors addressed everyday life issues, made short- and long-term plans, prepared for trials, and social workers were often present at the hearings.

Psychological support was critical. Survivors processed traumatic experiences in different ways: some needed to talk about them, while others needed time to feel safe enough to share their story and emotions. They valued psychologists' patience and understanding ("...she's very patient, she understands, she doesn't judge me," "It meant a lot that they encouraged me to get out of the house... They gave me suggestions, what I could start, what I should do first, to begin with a small step..."). This relationship included acceptance and understanding of the coercion survivors had been been

under ("My psychologist is the best in the world, she tells me I'm not guilty of anything. I literally dreamed her sentence; I wrote it down."). For some, it mattered most that psychologists recognized their strength ("A sentence that meant a lot to me was when she said, 'If they threw you into a forest, you could find your way out.' That sentence, I don't think I'll ever forget it.").

In addition to social workers and psychologists, NGO Atina provides legal aid. Two-thirds of participants said they first received comprehensive information about the whole legal process from NGO Atina. In contrast, the other two said they received that information only during the court process. From NGO Atina's lawyers, they learned about procedures and about their rights, such as the right to have a trusted person with them in court and to obtain the status of a protected witness.

The presence of Atina staff created a sense of safety ("the very fact that someone is physically next to you, when they are there, the others can't address you in certain ways because the women from Atina will stop them... that gave me psychological safety"; "They told me I would have protection... whatever I needed, they were there... psychologically, I got peace. Freedom... because they were there with me."). In most cases, the survivor was accompanied to hearings by a social worker; if the social worker were absent, another NGO staff member from Atina would go. The impression is that what mattered most was that someone they trusted was present, not necessarily the same person each time.

Being informed about what to expect at least partially reduced feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability, and therefore anxiety.

Of the other services received from NGO Atina, 13 of 15 reported using assisted housing at some point during the recovery process. Most had positive experiences because they felt safe there, that someone continuously cared for them, and that it was a secure place from which they could plan their next steps. However, there were also negative experiences, primarily related to a lack of intimacy and privacy due to sharing space with other women.

Two interviewed men, who were also victims of exploitation, spoke about the need to establish safe accommodation (a shelter or another type of alternative housing) for male trafficking victims. Several survivors stated that NGO Atina provides ongoing education and support (help with completing schooling), employment support, and engagement in various activities (one person continued collaborating with NGO Atina as a peer supporter).

## Feedback and suggestions from survivors regarding institutional practice

Based on their experiences with institutions, the interviewed survivors of human trafficking provided recommendations and advice on how professionals working with this type of trauma should act. Their key recommendations should address how survivors are treated and include patience, respect, a non-discriminatory attitude, and empathy for what they have been through.

**"Well, don't put pressure on them... I think that if you pressure a victim, especially when she is compassionate, you won't get much from her. She won't be able to relax, because it takes time. I mean, you need to empathize with that person..."**

Survivors stated that they lacked clear information about procedures, which they expected to receive from institutions. They highlighted the taking of statements by the police as a particularly sensitive moment, as well as later phases of the investigative and court proceedings, when there is insistence on details that are very intimate or painful for the victim. They recommend that such questions should be announced in advance, with an explanation of why they are necessary, for example:

**"I understand that it is difficult for you to talk about this. To understand as clearly as possible what happened, it would be important for me that you tell me..."**

During statement-taking, it would be preferable to have fewer people present in the room and to keep the procedure short or break it.

Most recommendations relate to improving inter-sectoral cooperation to prevent the re-traumatization of survivors through repeated questioning about their trafficking and exploitation experience. This primarily implies earlier involvement of organizations such as NGO Atina, already during the investigative phase, and taking statements in the presence of persons with whom the victim feels safe, in a secure environment, with greater privacy:

**"Yes, for example, the women from the Centre for the protection of victims of human trafficking could conduct that first interview somewhere like NGO Atina... That could later be forwarded to the police; the conversation could also be recorded, because it's so frustrating, it's terrible."**

During court proceedings, the strongest recommendation concerned the need for additional training for professionals on human trafficking and on how to approach survivors of trafficking:

**"If the judge had been more educated about what it means to be a particularly vulnerable witness, and if I had had all the protection that a particularly vulnerable witness should have..."**

Survivors believe that proceedings last far too long (often 5-7 years), with frequent adjournments and repeated hearings. As a result, survivors feel betrayed, lose trust in institutions, and usually fear that perpetrators and/or their associates may harm them or their family again.

Despite these negative experiences, the message to potential victims is to remain silent, seek help, and rely on organizations with expertise in providing support.

### **Survivors' feedback and recommendations regarding NGO Atina**

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Participants assessed NGO Atina's presence and continuous support throughout the entire process of exiting trafficking and exploitation as the most significant positive experience. For 60% of participants, constant presence and the feeling that "there is always someone who will respond" were key safety factors.

The interviews also highlight specific features of NGO Atina as an organization providing support to trafficking victims:

- Constant availability and responsiveness of NGO Atina staff

Survivors described NGO Atina's presence as necessary across all phases of the process. Atina was among the first organizations they came into contact with after the police. Social workers were present throughout the entire process, sometimes already in the investigative phase, then during the pre-trial stage, and during court hearings. In other words, during all contacts with other institutions, NGO Atina staff were alongside survivors.

- Day-to-day support

Survivors particularly emphasized daily support, encouragement to take action, organizing everyday life, continuing education, and finding employment. Because of the feeling that they matter to someone and that they

belong somewhere ("in NGO Atina I found a family"), survivors often remain in contact with NGO Atina staff for years after exiting trafficking.

- **Informational role**

Most survivors stated that they first received information about the court process and their rights from NGO Atina.

- **Holistic approach**

Based on the indirect analysis of interviews, it is evident that survivors valued NGO Atina's comprehensive approach, which includes daily practical support combined with psychological and legal assistance. Such an approach does not exist within institutional backing.

## **Summary**

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The report summarizes the experiences of 15 survivors of human trafficking during court proceedings and their interactions with institutions. The analysis focuses on survivors' preparation, the support they received, and their emotional reactions, with particular emphasis on NGO Atina's role.

## **Key findings:**

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- The first institution survivors come into contact with during identification of trafficking and exit from exploitation is the police. Experiences vary, from positive (being heard appropriately, with patience and consideration) to actions survivors perceived as inappropriate, distressing, or additionally victimizing.
- The next institution survivors come into contact with is the Centre for the Protection of Victims of human trafficking and/or Atina.
- Around half of the respondents reported positive experiences with institutional representatives during the investigative phase. At the same time, slightly less than one-third stated that the experience was inappropriate, primarily due to the manner of questioning (according to survivors, insistence on details or intimate questions they perceived as irrelevant, and a judgmental tone).

- Survivors did not receive information from institutional representatives about the steps and procedures awaiting them. Two-thirds first received this information from NGO Atina's social workers.
- Survivors experience court proceedings as unpleasant and re-traumatizing. During proceedings, they felt fear for their own or their family's safety, as well as helplessness, discomfort, and confusion. They felt pressure that the outcome depended on their testimony and therefore tried to answer all questions, even when they found them humiliating or judgmental, and even when they were exhausted. Positive emotions (such as trust, gratitude, and pride) were linked exclusively to their contact with NGO Atina staff.
- Court proceedings last a long time, and perpetrators are not always deprived of liberty, which leads survivors to fear for their safety, feel resentment and anger, and lose trust in institutions and the state.
- Survivors see their cooperation with NGO Atina as a key support and recovery point. They value NGO Atina's availability, respectful attitude toward their experience, patience, and non-blaming approach. They stress that NGO Atina is the only place where they received a comprehensive approach, daily practical support, and psychological and legal assistance.
- Feeling understood and accepted results in survivors remaining in contact with NGO Atina staff even after they have exited exploitation.

## Recommendations

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- **Early and mandatory involvement of specialized civil society organizations**  
Specialized organizations supporting trafficking survivors (such as NGO Atina) should be involved from the first police contact, before or during the first statement, to prevent disorientation, secondary victimization, and inappropriate treatment.
- **The right to information is a continuous process, not a one-off action.**  
Survivors must be informed clearly, understandably, and in stages about their status, rights, the course of proceedings, and possible out-

comes, repeating information across phases, given reduced capacity during acute trauma.

- **Guarantee the presence of a trusted person during all procedural actions.**  
Law and practice should ensure survivors have the right to be accompanied during statement-taking, questioning, and hearings by a trusted person trained in trauma-informed support, whose presence has a real protective function.
- **Limit the number of interviews and prevent repeated testimonies.**  
Inter-sectoral cooperation and information exchange must be strengthened to minimize repeated testimonies, which survivors experience as mistrust and a significant source of re-traumatization.
- **Prohibit inappropriate, humiliating, and irrelevant questions.**  
Investigative and court proceedings must prohibit questions that intrude on survivors' intimacy without a clear procedural purpose, as well as questions that implicitly blame survivors or challenge credibility based on behavior, past, or social status.
- **The status of a particularly vulnerable witness must have binding consequences.**  
Granting this status must entail concrete protective measures (special rooms, separate entrances, limited confrontation, control of questioning), rather than remaining a mere formal label.
- **Ensure physical and spatial protection of survivors in court.**  
Courts must ensure survivors are not exposed to direct or indirect contact with perpetrators, including in hallways, waiting rooms, or common areas, as these contacts can be strongly re-traumatizing.
- **Recognize memory gaps and fragmented testimony as trauma consequences.**  
Institutions must be trained not to treat inconsistencies, memory gaps, or emotional reactions as arguments against credibility, but as expected consequences of trauma and coercion.
- **Introduce a risk assessment that includes family safety.**  
Risk assessment must include threats to family and close persons, as fear for others is a frequent reason for silence, withdrawal, or disengagement.

- **Ensure psychological support throughout the entire process.**  
Psychological support must be continuous and accessible throughout investigative and court proceedings, including adjournments, waiting for verdicts, and repeated hearings.
- **Recognize lengthy proceedings as a form of secondary victimization.**  
Lengthy trials (5-7 years) must be recognized as an additional psychological burden, requiring monitoring, support, and adaptation of pace to survivors' needs.
- **Develop gender- and context-sensitive protection models.**  
The protection system must recognize the differing needs of women, men, children, persons with disabilities, and older survivors, including accommodation and support for male survivors, who are currently structurally excluded from existing capacities.
- **Prevent professional and institutional victimization.**  
Clear behavioral standards must be established for police, prosecutors, judges, and lawyers to prevent ridicule, belittling, suspicion, and non-empathetic communication that survivors experience as deeply harmful.
- **Ensure continuity of support after proceedings end.**  
Support must not end with the completion of proceedings or the loss of formal victim status; flexible long-term support models are needed, as consequences often emerge or intensify after the process ends.
- **Systematically recognize specialized organizations as part of the protection system.**  
Interview experiences show specialized organizations are not an "add-on" but a key pillar of protection; their role must be formally recognized, institutionally integrated, and sustainably funded.



CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији  
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

364.62:343.431-058.64

343.143

343.988:061.2

**OD traume do svedočenja : smernice za psihošku podršku žrtvama trgovine ljudima u istražnim i sudskim procesima /** [Dragana Ćuk Milankov ... [et al.]]. - Beograd : Udruženje građana za borbu protiv trgovine ljudima i svih oblika nasilja nad ženama – ATINA, 2026 (Beograd : Skripta international). - 45 str. ; 24 cm

Tiraž 100. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst.

ISBN 978-86-82960-04-1

1. Ђук Миланков, Драгана, 1968- [autor]  
а) Удружење грађана за борбу против трговине људима и свих облика насиља над женама – Атина (Београд) -- Пракса б) Жртве трговине људима -- Психолошка помоћ в) Сведоци -- Процесни положај

COBISS.SR-ID 185304329



