

# Empowering change: Atina's impactful journey in 2024: A year of advocacy, support, and transformation



Girls'  
Football  
festival in  
Vienna,  
June  
2024,  
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# ATINA

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UDRUŽENJE GRAĐANA ZA BORBU PROTIV TRGOVINE  
LJUDIMA I SVIH OBLIKA NASILJA NAD ŽENAMA

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Atina's director, Marijana Savić, met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department.

German and French Ambassadors Anke Konrad and Pierre Cochard awarded Marijana Savić, founder and director of the Belgrade-based NGO Atina, with the 2024 Franco-German Human Rights Prize.



# 1 A year of Impact: Atina's landmark achievements in advancing justice, protection, and empowerment in 2024

One of the most significant milestones in Atina's 21-year history was achieved in 2024—under the and thanks to EU-funded program “Support to Social Housing and Active Inclusion” financed by the European Union and carried out by UNOPS, the United Nations Office for Project Services, when Atina proudly established its first permanent premises. The initiative *“Together we thrive – Assisted Housing and Open Club Initiative for the Social Inclusion of Victims of Human Trafficking and Exploitation,”* which has put an end to years of institutional homelessness and opens a new chapter for Atina, providing a strong foundation to expand services and deepen support for victims of human trafficking. More than just a safe and stable base, this new space is set to become a national hub for developing comprehensive victim support services in Serbia. Its impact extends well beyond Atina, symbolizing an absolute protection system progress grounded in trust, collaboration, and enduring partnerships.

## 1.1 Celebrating a year of recognition: Atina's director Marijana Savić's extraordinary impact in 2024

In 2024, Atina and its visionary leader, Marijana Savić, marked an exceptional year of progress, advocacy, and recognition for their tireless efforts in the fight against human trafficking. Marijana's dedication to empowering survivors and transforming policies led to remarkable accolades that reflect her outstanding contributions. She was appointed by the UN Secretary-General to the *Steering Committee of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings, especially Women and Children (UNVTF)*, a testament to her leadership on the global stage.

In addition, *Marijana was named a 2024 Hero of the Fight Against Human Trafficking by the U.S. State Department*, a powerful acknowledgment of her unwavering commitment to justice. Considering that in *the latest TIP report, the Republic of Serbia has been on the Watch List for the third consecutive year*, NGO Atina's director, Marijana Savić, met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department. On that occasion, she *emphasized that establishing a sincere and committed partnership is essential for advancing Serbia's fight against human trafficking.*

To top off this monumental year, she received the *2024 Franco-German Human Rights Award*, further cementing her role as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for change. These accolades highlight not only her exceptional leadership but also Atina's continued impact in protecting the rights and dignity of trafficking survivors worldwide.

## **1.2. Comprehensive Support for Victims of Human Trafficking and Gender-Based Violence: Empowering Women and Girls through Housing, Advocacy, and Direct Services**

*The year 2024 was marked by tremendous effort, commitment, and, most importantly, tangible impact on the lives of women and girls who have experienced violence and exploitation.*

In 2024, NGO Atina continued its unwavering commitment to supporting women and children affected by human trafficking and gender-based violence, maintaining a holistic, person-centered approach that prioritizes respect, understanding, and non-judgment. Through its comprehensive social inclusion program, Atina provided vital direct assistance to 330 beneficiaries, including 200 primary (direct) and 130 secondary (indirect) beneficiaries. Many of these individuals faced the harsh realities of being socially marginalized, discriminated against, and subjected to various forms of violence. Among the direct beneficiaries, 134 were identified as victims of human trafficking, and 19 were presumed victims. Additionally, 47 beneficiaries were recognized as victims of gender-based violence. Most beneficiaries were female (92%), with males comprising 7% and trans individuals 1%.

Atina's work primarily focuses on young people, with 69% of newly referred victims under 30 years old, and 43% of the total beneficiaries being minors. The most common forms of exploitation encountered by Atina's beneficiaries were sexual exploitation (75 individuals), forced begging (16 individuals), and forced marriage (16 individuals, primarily minors). In 2024, Atina's team made 20 referrals to relevant institutions to protect its beneficiaries' human rights, including reports to the Center for the Protection of Human Trafficking Victims, the police, and other institutions. Atina's collaboration with various actors, including state institutions, NGOs, and international organizations, facilitated 61 referrals to its programs, highlighting the importance of a networked approach to victim support. These efforts emphasize the ongoing need for targeted services to address the specific challenges faced by victims of trafficking and gender-based violence, particularly in the realm of sexual exploitation.

## **1.2.1. Reintegration Center: Empowering Women and Girls to Rebuild Lives After Human Trafficking**

In 2024, the center provided vital assistance to beneficiaries of the extensive social inclusion program, ensuring their access to a wide array of support services to rebuild their lives. These services included psychosocial support, legal counseling, assistance with formal and informal education, economic empowerment, and the opportunity to participate in support groups tailored to their needs.

A significant aspect of Atina's work involves helping beneficiaries resolve their civil-legal status. In 2024, 85 individuals were assisted in obtaining essential documentation, including birth certificates, identity cards, and health records. Legal counseling and mediation with referral services and competent institutions also played a crucial role, with 44 beneficiaries receiving support in 2024. Medical support was equally essential, addressing urgent health needs and ongoing care. In 2024, 49 beneficiaries were referred for health assessments and received necessary medical services, while 125 individuals received emergency economic support, including help with basic needs like food, clothing, and hygiene products.

Additionally, 53 beneficiaries participated in formal or alternative education programs, fostering their ability to regain independence and build more purposeful futures. Psychological counseling was also a cornerstone of the program, with 55 beneficiaries receiving specialized trauma-informed support. The center further offered empowerment workshops, language classes, and other essential activities, ensuring that all beneficiaries—whether in the shelter or part of the refugee-migrant population—received resources needed to heal, grow, and thrive. In parallel, the organization empowered 71 women economically, provided 62 individuals with legal assistance and counseling, ensured 49 received medical support, offered psychosocial counseling to 55, and assisted 53 beneficiaries in continuing their education. This comprehensive, holistic support demonstrates Atina's unwavering commitment to building safer, more inclusive futures for all at-risk women and girls.

## **1.2.2. Field Support Team: Bridging Gaps and Delivering Critical Assistance Across Serbia**

For years, the field support team has been a cornerstone of NGO Atina's comprehensive social inclusion program, working tirelessly to ensure that every woman and girl in need receives the support they deserve, no matter where they are in Serbia. In 2024 alone, the team conducted 134 field visits, reaching 65 beneficiaries directly to provide crucial assistance and guidance. This dedicated team works closely with each individual to offer personalized



support, helping them navigate difficult circumstances and access vital services.

In addition to the field visits, NGO Atina operates an SOS hotline, a vital lifeline for those seeking help or information. The hotline serves as a first point of contact, providing essential advice and connecting callers to the appropriate resources. In 2024, the hotline received 609 calls, with 18 cases leading to direct referrals to Atina's programs. Meanwhile, 234 calls involved issues falling under the scope of other organizations, and 285 inquiries were handled by offering general information and guidance. The hotline is crucial in ensuring that people in need are never alone, guiding them toward the support they require and connecting them with the resources to make a difference.

### 1.2.3. **Licensed services of Assisted housing: Empowering Victims of Human Trafficking through Safe Housing and Support**

Since 2018, NGO Atina has been providing a licensed assisted housing service specifically for victims of human trafficking, with safe housing available within the organization since its founding. Remarkably, until April 2019, Atina's housing service was the only specialized accommodation for human trafficking victims in Serbia's social care system, before the state-run Center for the Protection of Human Trafficking Victims launched its emergency shelter. In 2024, Atina continued its mission by providing housing and support for 10 women victims of human trafficking. Among these women, five are from the migrant population—three from Nigeria, one trans woman from India, and one woman from Ukraine—while five are from Serbia's domestic population. The women in this program represent a range of exploitation experiences, including labor exploitation (4 victims), sexual exploitation (4 victims), forced marriage (1 victim), and coercion into criminal activities (1 victim).

During the reporting period, Atina implemented an impressive 1,433 individual services for the women in its supported housing program, aimed at their recovery and reintegration into society. One of the standout success stories was that of a trans woman from India, who had previously been granted asylum in Serbia. With the dedicated support of Atina's team, she successfully found a job, secured independent housing, and achieved all the goals set in her protection plan. Her journey is a testament to the complexity and challenges faced by trans individuals, as there are no other accommodation services available in Serbia for trans people, whether from the local population or the refugee/migrant community. This beneficiary's successful integration and the support of Atina's direct support team are rare and remarkable achievements. In addition, two other women—one from Ukraine and one from Congo—were granted asylum during the same period, marking another positive step in the ongoing efforts to provide safety and opportunities for those escaping human trafficking.

The recent six-year evaluation, *Housing Solutions tailored for Women: Continuity, Quality, Togetherness*, confirms that the service is effective and



essential to Serbia's protection system. It offers a rare sense of safety, respect, and dignity, with many women describing it as the only true home they've ever known. Despite proven results and alignment with legal standards, the service lacks reliable public funding. For trafficking survivors to continue accessing quality housing and reintegration support, state institutions must recognize and invest in this irreplaceable model.



## **Housing solutions tailored for women: Continuity, Quality, Togetherness**



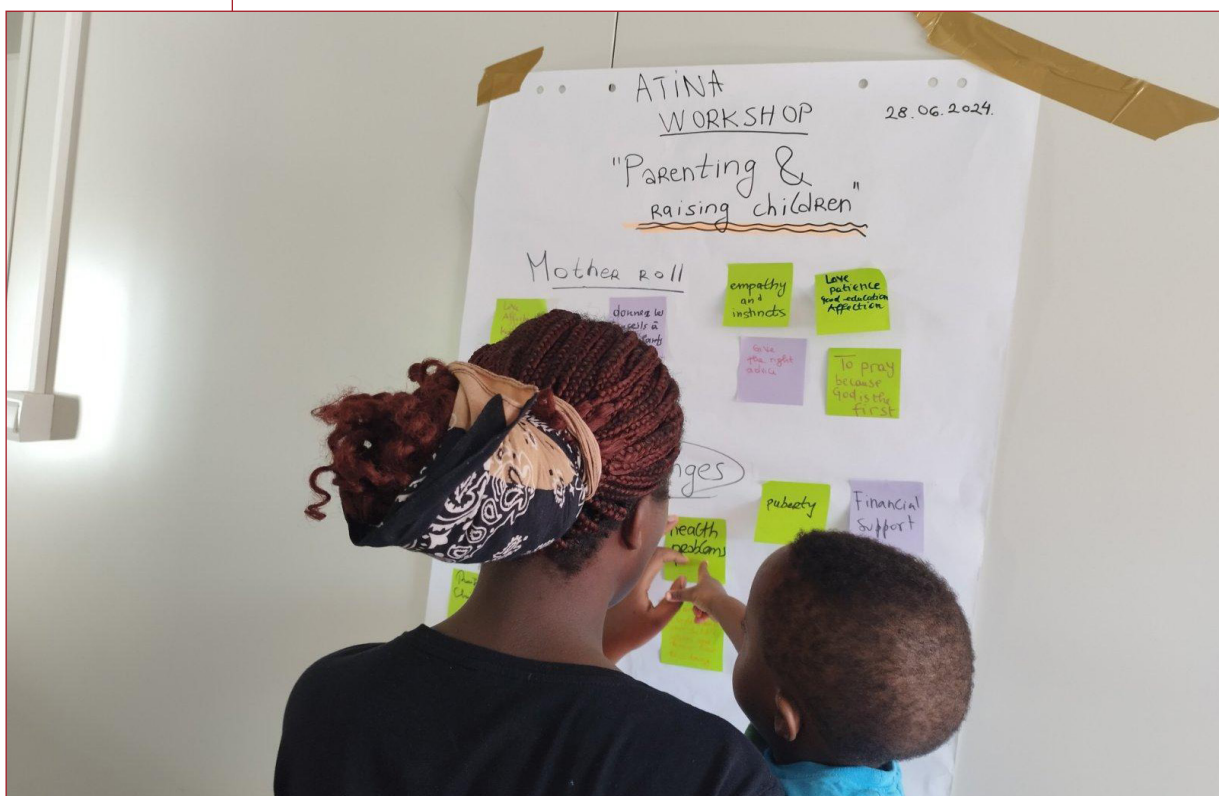
Between 2018 and 2024, NGO Atina's assisted housing service provided critical, life-changing support to 61 women and girls who survived human trafficking, including Serbian nationals, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Through

78 individual admissions, the service offered trauma-informed, individualized support that spanned safe accommodation, psychological and health care, education, employment, and legal aid—essential for recovery and long-term social reintegration. Officially licensed in 2018, the program has been entirely sustained by international donors, who have stepped in even when state shelters were closed and are maintaining continuity in care despite the lack of institutional support. At its core, the service prioritizes the voices and choices of survivors, involving them directly in planning across 12 key areas of integration, with psychological support consistently highlighted by beneficiaries as a turning point in their healing.

## 1.2.4. Empowering Change: Atina's 2024 Impact on Migrant Women and Girls Affected by Trafficking, Violence, and Displacement

NGO Atina has long stood at the frontline of protecting the rights and dignity of refugees and migrants in Serbia, particularly women and girls who are disproportionately affected by violence, exploitation, and displacement. Through consistent field presence, direct support services, and deep community engagement, Atina has become a key actor in responding to gender-based violence and human trafficking within migrant and refugee populations. In 2024, this commitment translated into an impressive 144 educational and empowerment workshops delivered across asylum and reception centers in Krnjača, Bujanovac, and Dimitrovgrad, as well as Atina's own Reintegration Center—reaching a total of 410 migrant and refugee women and girls, primarily from Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, and Burundi.

Empowerment workshop with migrant girls and women in Serbia



## 1.2.5. Advancement of Refugee Women Advocacy Group Actions

*In 2024, the Refugee Women Advocacy Group significantly strengthened its advocacy impact, conducting 42 meetings and 10 targeted mentorship sessions to enhance members' legal and strategic advocacy skills. The group actively contributed to national policy discussions, submitting recommendations for key legislative reforms: The group expanded its outreach and engagement through 27 workshops in asylum centers and Atina's Reintegration Center, reaching 180 refugee and migrant women from eight countries, including Burundi, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Syria, Cuba, Ukraine, and Russia. The group engaged over 150 students in structured legal and advocacy discussions at Belgrade's Faculty of Law and *Political Sciences*, strengthening awareness among future legal and policy professionals. Internationally, Group members served as trainers in European advocacy programs, sharing their expertise on cultural mediation and migrant women's rights. Groups' participation in roundtable discussions in Bujanovac and Sombor with local institutions, civil society organizations, and state representatives strengthened multisectoral collaboration on trafficking and migration policies.*

A significant advocacy tool was promoting the Group's documentary film *"Women on the Move,"* which over 70,000 people viewed through social media, screenings, and policy forums. The film played a key role in shaping public perception and informing stakeholders about migrant women's experiences. In response to the film's impact, the Group produced a sequel featuring *"Voices for Justice"* testimonials from institutional partners and highlighting key advocacy achievements. Beyond film advocacy, the Group engaged in over eight public speaking engagements and two panel discussions at international events, ensuring that refugee women's voices were heard in European policy spaces.

The group's advocacy has had an impact, as one of its members was awarded a complete master's scholarship at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Law, marking an essential step in integrating refugee women into academic and professional fields. The group aims to expand legal advocacy, increase its membership, and deepen its engagement with national and international policymakers, ensuring the continued advancement of refugee and migrant women's rights in Serbia and beyond.

The work of the Advocacy Group was presented as a model of positive practice at an international conference in Italy in June. Oxfam Italy organized the conference as part of a project with the Intesa San Paolo Foundation. As part of the same project, members of the Migrant Women's Advocacy Group participated as lecturers in an online training organized in September 2024. Members of the Advocacy Group also gave a lecture at the Faculty of Political Sciences in July as part of the Summer School dedicated to the topic of Forced Migration. A total of 24 regular meetings of the Advocacy Group were held, and work continued to develop recommendations for improving the support system.

## 2. From Survival to Self-Reliance: How Economic Empowerment Transforms Lives

Economic empowerment is more than just employment—it's a pathway to freedom, safety, and long-term independence for women and girls who have survived violence and exploitation. Atina's economic empowerment program is built on this belief, offering a holistic approach that combines psychological support with skill-building, education, and hands-on experience. It aims to equip women to survive and thrive, helping them reclaim agency over their lives, achieve financial autonomy, and reduce the risk of re-victimization.

At the heart of this initiative is *Bagel Bejgl*, a social enterprise launched by NGO Atina in 2015 as a space for healing, learning, and empowerment. Here, women and girls gain practical work experience while developing professional skills in a supportive, rights-based environment. These workshops covered a wide range of empowering and life-saving topics: from personal resilience, reproductive health, and parenting, to recognizing gender-based violence and understanding legal rights and reporting mechanisms. July focused on identifying human trafficking and risk factors, building protection strategies, and mapping support networks. This long-term, hands-on engagement isn't just a service—it's a lifeline, enabling women and girls to rebuild their confidence and reclaim control over their lives.

Recognizing that economic empowerment is central to achieving gender equality and breaking the cycle of violence, Atina also ensured that migrant and foreign women had access to tangible livelihood opportunities. In 2024, 58 women from these communities participated in economic empowerment programs. Of them, eight joined external professional trainings, 35 received hands-on training through Atina's social enterprise Bagel Bejgl, 26 were supported in their job searches, and 10 women secured long-term employment. These aren't just numbers—they represent transformed lives, renewed confidence, and women stepping into a future of their own making.

On May 21, NGO Atina and Bagel Bejgl were also visited to discuss deepening partnerships. *The UK State Minister of Europe, Ms. Nusrat Ghani, alongside the Serbian Commissioner for Protection of Equality, Ms Brankica Janković, visited Bagel Bejgl, Atina's social enterprise.*





# 3 **Advancing Anti-Trafficking Efforts: Atina's Key Role in Shaping Serbia's National Action Plans and Legal Reforms"**

In 2024, the Government of Serbia adopted a new program for the fight against human trafficking (2024–2029) and an accompanying Action plan (2024–2026), which are strategic documents that set the national agenda for combating trafficking and supporting survivors. Atina actively contributed to drafting the Action Plan, with six key implementation activities under its direct responsibility, ranging from legal and psychological support to economic empowerment and systemic advocacy. Atina was selected to serve on the Special Working Group for monitoring and implementing the Program, where she provided regular updates on its activities and policy recommendations. Meanwhile, attempts to revise the outdated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for victim support, the first revision effort since 2019, were never finalised by the Ministry of Interior.

A new push emerged to draft Serbia's first Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, another Action Plan milestone. Atina joined the working group, which began in late 2024 and moved quickly, with frequent sessions marked by intense debate. Atina, alongside the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking and other civil society actors, *NGO Astra*, and *NGO Freedom have no price*, strongly argued for the "social path" alternative. While the draft law has gone through multiple revisions, consensus has yet to be reached. Atina remains fully engaged in this process, committed to ensuring that future legislation prioritizes the rights, dignity, and safety of trafficking survivors.

# 4

## **Bridge – Stepping forward in the protection of women and girls in Kosovo\* and Serbia**

Since March 2023, NGO Atina, in close partnership with the organization *PVPT from Prishtina*, has been implementing a transformative three-year initiative titled *“BRIDGE – Stepping Forward in the Protection of Women and Girls in Kosovo and Serbia.”* Built on nearly two decades of collaboration in supporting victims of human trafficking, this project is designed to bridge the divide created by the lack of formal relations between Belgrade and Pristina—by focusing on what matters most: the real and urgent needs of women and girls at risk of trafficking and gender-based violence. Atina and PVPT aim to overcome political and institutional barriers through practical, hands-on collaboration. The BRIDGE project encompasses direct support services, in-depth research, capacity-building activities, and the creation of cross-border professional networks to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts on both sides. A cornerstone of the project is a comparative analysis of human trafficking responses in Serbia and Kosovo. To gather the necessary data, NGO Atina organized several key focus groups and interviews in 2024 with CSOs like Caritas, ADRA, ASTRA, A11, CIM, Praxis, Roma Center for Women and Girls Daje, as well as with the Center for Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, Serbia’s formal victim-identification body. Atina conducted interviews and focus groups in northern Kosovo, including visits to a safe house and the community center “Jelena Anžujaska,” and engagement with local health and social welfare institutions (e.g., CHC Kosovska Mitrovica, CSWs in Zubin Potok and Zvečan). These engagements provided critical insights and showcased a strong willingness among professionals to continue contributing to this vital research. In parallel, 40 in-depth interviews with survivors were conducted. These stories will form the basis for 4 to 6 detailed case studies, which are expected to be finalized in 2025.

To build long-term resilience and prevention, Atina also launched a new component of the BRIDGE project—awareness workshops for young people. In 2024 alone, four such seminars were held in Novi Pazar, Vranje, and Bujanovac, reaching 43 high school and university students from diverse educational backgrounds, including medical, economic, and legal fields. As the BRIDGE project moves into its final stages in 2025, the focus will shift toward deeper cooperation and experience-sharing. Study visits between Serbian and Kosovo’s professionals are planned to strengthen mutual understanding and cross-border collaboration. In addition, Atina continues its policy-level advocacy through its membership in Working Group 35 of the National Convention for Accession to the European Union.

# 5 Researching, reporting, and policy making

In 2024, NGO Atina was highly active in advancing its mission, implementing numerous impactful projects, and contributing to significant research initiatives. As part of a project funded by the British Embassy in Serbia, Atina produced a pivotal publication, "Identification of Victims of Human Trafficking in Mixed Migrant Flows," authored by Ahmed Mešić, a prosecutor at the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This comprehensive publication explores the legal frameworks for victim protection and support and provides real-world case studies from the Prosecutor's Office, which were resolved judicially.

NGO Atina also contributed to international research efforts in 2024, including a study by the European Feminist Network WIDE+ on potential discrimination in online job applications. This research, which was conducted across several European countries, focused on identifying discrimination against vulnerable groups, such as migrant and refugee women and victims of human trafficking. In Serbia, Atina representatives gathered valuable data through focus groups (FPAR sessions), engaging 21 participants from various backgrounds, including refugees, migrants, and human trafficking victims. Atina's detailed findings were compiled into a final report and shared with international researchers via online meetings.

*The NGO Atina announced on June 12, the International Day Against Child Labor, in a public statement, that Serbia needs to respond more clearly and firmly to the abuse of children and adopt a regulation on light forms of child labour that are not dangerous to the child's life and health. Citing that Serbian laws do not fully protect children from the worst forms of child labour, NGO Atina calls for the harmonisation of existing legal procedures, tightening penalties for perpetrators of crimes who force children to work, and strengthening the efficiency of inspection services, along with implementing adequate protective measures for children. In addition to adopting the Regulation on Light Forms of Child Labor, it is necessary to adopt the revised version of the Regulation on Severe Forms of Child Labor as soon as possible, enable better coordination between state services and civil society organisations in this area, raise awareness about the dangers of child labour, and provide specialised support to children and families from marginalised groups, with a particular emphasis on integrating these children into the education system and preventing their dropout.*

Additionally, in collaboration with the German ASB (Workers' Samaritan Foundation), Atina worked on improving housing solutions for women victims of gender-based violence in Serbia. This project culminated in a regional roundtable in Skopje (October 31–November 1, 2024), where representatives from Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia gathered to discuss solutions. Atina used these insights to create a policy document titled "Housing Solutions for Women Survivors of Violence: Strengthening Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans," which explores EU integration



possibilities, the Istanbul Convention, and German feminist foreign policy to improve housing solutions for survivors.

Beyond project implementation, Atina continued its advocacy efforts in 2024, producing several key reports for domestic and international bodies. These included reports for the Office for Coordination of Activities in the Fight against Human Trafficking, the European Commission, the US State Department, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls. Additionally, Atina contributed to the GREVIO expert group's assessment of Serbia's implementation of the Istanbul Convention, attending discussions and sharing her findings on gender-based violence. Through its multifaceted approach, NGO Atina pushes for legal, social, and policy changes that protect vulnerable populations, ensure their rights are upheld, and promote their successful reintegration into society.

## 6. Activism and partnerships

To further elevate this issue at a national level, Atina, supported by the British Embassy, organized a high-level roundtable in Belgrade on January 29, 2024, titled *"How to Achieve a More Effective Joint Response to Human Trafficking and Gender-Based Violence in the Migrant Population."* The event gathered 45 representatives from national institutions and international organizations to discuss practical improvements and strengthen inter-agency cooperation.

To strengthen the protection of victims of human trafficking and gender based violence and partnerships with other institutions and organizations, NGO Atina signed 12 memoranda of cooperation in 2024, representing the backbone of work not only this year but also in the coming period. The memorandums were signed with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the *Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking*, the *Center for the Protection of Infants, Children and Youth in Zvečanska, Belgrade (with the Maternity Home)*, the School for Adult Education in Belgrade "Đuro Salaj"; the Association "Freedom Has No Price" from Novi Sad, the University Library "Svetozar Marković"; the Roma Association Novi Bečej, the Association "Roma Center for Women and Children Daje," the Association "Center for Youth Integration"; the Association "Center for Women's Support" from Kikinda; with the hotel "Mercure" (Accor Group) regarding the prevention of sexual exploitation of children; with the Elementary School in Niš "Sreten Mladenović Mika."



Signing the MoU with the Center for the protection of victims of human trafficking in December 2024

In another major undertaking, Atina partnered with GIZ (German Corporation for International Cooperation) and the National Employment Service (NES) to launch the “Training for NES Advisors Related to Work with Hard-to-Employ Clients” project. This innovative training program was designed to equip NES advisors with the skills necessary to better support victims of sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking in their journey toward employment. In total, Atina conducted eight specialized training sessions across Serbia, in cities such as Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš, Čačak, and Užice, reaching a vast network of employment counselors. A comprehensive guide (brochure) was also created for NES advisors working with people in hard-to-employ categories, providing them with vital tools for their work.

In collaboration with UN Women Serbia, the Ministry of Justice, the Judicial Academy, various CSOs, and universities, Atina also rolled out the “Combating Violence Against Women and Girls in Serbia” project. With the support of the US Embassy in Serbia’s International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) Department, this project produced a KAP Assessment on the Digital Dimension of Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls in Serbia. This critical assessment, complemented by relevant case studies, sheds light on women’s unique challenges in the digital space. Through these diverse and impactful projects, NGO Atina continued to play a role in advancing social inclusion, empowering women and girls, and strengthening national and international networks in the fight against human trafficking and gender-based violence.

In December 2024, UN Women Serbia and a delegation of civil society organizations (CSOs) carried out *a two-day mission to Brussels to deepen cooperation with European Union institutions and advance Serbia's gender equality agenda*. The mission marked a step in Serbia's broader efforts toward European integration, with gender equality and women's rights playing a central role in aligning with EU standards and values. The delegation consisted of UN Women Serbia representatives Milana Rikanović (Gender Specialist and Head of UN Women Serbia), Jelena Sekulić Nedeljković (Project Officer), and Ivana Tabasević (Operations Analyst), as well as five Serbian civil society activists: Biljana Stepanov (Center for Support of Women), Biljana Janjić (NGO FemPlatz), Sonja Tošković (Belgrade Center for Human Rights), Jelena Hrnjak (NGO Atina), and Sofija Mandić (NGO CERPIS). Each brought a wealth of experience and expertise in gender issues, human rights, and advocacy, forming a robust and unified voice in Brussels.

The mission's agenda opened with a bilateral meeting with Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Tonino Picula. This session provided a valuable opportunity to discuss how Serbia can better integrate gender equality into its EU accession framework and highlight ongoing efforts to address gender-based violence, the underrepresentation of women in politics, and the shrinking space for feminist activism. The conversation also explored avenues for closer alignment between EU political priorities and Serbia's national strategies for gender equality and women's empowerment.

On the occasion of the *International Day of the Girl*, Edward Ferguson, the British Ambassador to Belgrade, emphasised the importance of collective efforts to build a society free of violence, where girls have equal opportunities







Stephanie Shillinglaw, Jelena Hrnjak, Dejana Stosic, and H.E. Mr. Edward Ferguson. Ambassador to Serbia

for education and career aspirations. "The British Embassy, in collaboration with dedicated individuals and organisations, including the Jelena Šantić Foundation and the NGO Atina, supports activities to create a better future for women and girls," Ferguson said. Dejana Stošić, a human rights educator and activist committed to fighting gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, played a crucial role in marking this day. She and the Ambassador addressed gender equality issues and necessary legislative changes in Serbia.

Additionally, in 2024, Atina expanded its impact by initiating a cross-border project titled "Safe Haven: Developing Resources for Housing Services for Victims of Human Trafficking in the Western Balkans." Collaborating with partners from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, and supported by the U.S. Department of Foreign Affairs and World Vision International, this project aimed to enhance housing solutions for victims of human trafficking by creating sustainable, victim-oriented services. This initiative sought to improve the quality and accessibility of housing for those in need. Through these diverse initiatives, Atina continued to demonstrate the profound impact that sports can have in fostering inclusion, dialogue, and peacebuilding, while also advancing critical efforts to support victims of human trafficking.

*NGO Atina took part in an international conference focused on improving the position of victims of human trafficking in the processes of identification, assistance, and safe return.* The event emphasized the importance of cross-sector and cross-border cooperation, particularly between Croatia and



Serbia, in addressing this complex issue. Key conclusions included the need to treat human trafficking as a form of violence, ensure victim compensation, and strengthen the role of civil society in protection mechanisms. Special attention was given to the importance of addressing root causes like poverty and marginalization, especially within Roma communities.

In 2024, NGO Atina established active cooperation with SIT - School for International Training, which organizes visits of international students to Serbia and a one-month internship in civil society organizations. As part of this program, NGO Atina hosted two students from the United States of America during the spring and fall of 2024, who were assigned mentors in the organization and worked with them for a month. The fruits of that work were the presentations about their experience in the NGO Atina, which these students presented at the premises of SIT in Belgrade at the end of their stay. This work with SIT will continue in 2025. Furthermore, during 2024, NGO Atina continued its active cooperation with SHL, and it also hosted a young volunteer from Germany who is staying in Atina for a year (fall 2024 - summer 2025).

In 2024, Atina's team participated in 15 conferences, 24 trainings, 55 lectures, workshops, and roundtables, 5 study visits, and 15 online and hybrid events organized in Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Belgium, Romania, Italy, Spain, and Austria. The main topics covered were identification, prevention, support systems, legal aid, online exploitation, trafficking; gender-based violence against women and LGBTQIA+ groups, domestic violence, femicide, child protection; migration and refugee support – Integration, legal issues, mental health, women's rights in migration; women's Human Rights & Empowerment – Legal advocacy, economic empowerment, gender equality; Mental Health & Trauma Support – Vicarious trauma, resilience, psychoanalytical approaches; Institutional Cooperation & Policy Influence – Anti-trafficking coordination, EU accession processes, social services reform; Children's Rights & Youth Support – Participation, trauma-informed care, anti-violence systems; Civil Society Development & Sustainability – Fundraising, NGO capacity building, network strengthening.

NGO Atina was active within the *Network of Women Against Violence*, in which 24 women's organizations from 17 cities in Serbia participate, then in the *Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS)*, the Platform of Organizations for Cooperation with UN Mechanisms, and within it in three thematic groups - gender equality, migration and asylum, and economic and social rights. NGO Atina was involved in the work of the *Wide+ network*. Atina has also participated in the work of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage in Serbia, which was founded to combat this harmful phenomenon. Through the MODS network, Atina was also active within ECPAT, an international coalition of organizations that protect children from sexual exploitation, and participated in the work of the *International Social Service*, which *in 2024 marked 100 years of establishment and hard work*. NGO Atina was also active within the *National Convention on the European Union*, in the working groups for Chapters 19 (employment and social policy), 24 (freedom, justice, security), and in the Working Group for Chapter 35 - other issues, in the case of Serbia, the normalization of relations between official Belgrade and Pristina.

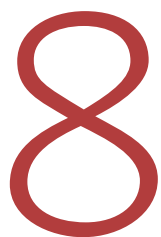
# 7 Unifying Communities Through Sport: Atina's

- **2024 Initiatives Promote Tolerance, Reconciliation, and Empowerment**

In 2024, NGO Atina continued to leverage the power of sports as a dynamic tool for addressing key social issues, fostering values of tolerance, non-discrimination, reconciliation, and non-violence. Through several groundbreaking initiatives, Atina actively integrated sports into its mission to build communities rooted in unity, respect, and equality. *Atina's participation in the Sport Zajedno initiative* was a standout project, and it utilized sporting activities to strengthen mutual trust and foster reconciliation among diverse communities. This initiative led to two pivotal events that were instrumental in promoting integration and reconciliation across regional communities.

One of the most exciting highlights of Sport Zajedno was the Girls' Football Festival, which took place from June 28 to June 30, 2024, in Vienna. This vibrant festival brought together eight girls' football teams from six different countries, underscoring that football is more than just a sport – it's a powerful platform for promoting respect, fair play, and mutual tolerance. In this event, 188 individuals participated, including 124 players, over 20 coaches, and 40 members of partner organizations. The festival's mixed-team approach allowed participants to train and play alongside one another, breaking down cultural barriers and proving that sport can unite people and inspire understanding across divides.

Another key event under the Sport Zajedno umbrella was a specialized training for multipliers, organized by Atina. This event gathered over 30 participants from diverse communities across the region to engage in sports activities, exchange experiences, and learn practical methods for overcoming prejudices and resolving conflicts. The training, which drew attendees from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Austria, and Albania, was a powerful platform for fostering collaboration and building mutual respect among individuals from different backgrounds. The focus on non-violent conflict resolution through sport demonstrated the universal language of sports and its ability to bridge divides and create lasting social change.



## **Conclusions - Atina's 2024 Strategic Reflections and Priorities**

2024 marked a transformative year for Atina, establishing its first permanent premises. More than a physical space, this is a foundation for stable, dignified support. However, essential services such as assisted housing and reintegration remain almost entirely dependent on external project funding. Although these services are licensed and aligned with national and EU standards, systemic public financing is still lacking. Long-term sustainability requires recognition and institutional commitment.

Atina played a role in shaping Serbia's new anti-trafficking strategy and law. Despite this, crucial reforms—such as revising victim identification procedures—remain stalled. Survivor identification must prioritize protection, not prosecution, and ensure access to services without requiring immediate cooperation with law enforcement. A human rights-based, social-path approach is essential to truly shift systems.

Women and girls from migrant and refugee backgrounds continue to face heightened risks of exploitation and violence. Atina's field teams and advocacy group supported hundreds in 2024. Yet, protection systems still fail to recognize the full spectrum of their experiences, particularly for trans women and survivors of forced marriage or criminality. Services must be more inclusive, trauma-informed, and flexible to address diverse needs.

Through its social enterprise Bagel Bejgl, Atina has supported survivors in gaining work experience and independence. These programs have proven life-changing, but they require patience and long-term investment. Economic empowerment must be seen as a core pillar of recovery, not a secondary activity, with space to scale and adapt to real market conditions.

Projects like BRIDGE, connecting professionals and survivors in Serbia and Kosovo, show that regional cooperation is possible and necessary. Joint research, survivor-led advocacy, and professional exchange build resilience across systems. Regional collaboration models should be expanded, especially where formal diplomacy is limited but grassroots needs are shared.

Atina's work in digital prevention, research, and storytelling has demonstrated the power of youth leadership and creative campaigns to shift narratives. But these areas remain underfunded. Long-term investment in data, communication, and survivor advocacy is vital to improving systems and engaging new audiences.