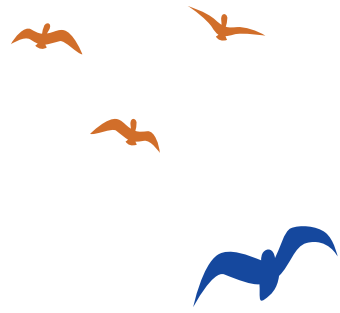




# PROMISING PRACTICES IN PROTECTING VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA PER LA TUTELA DELLE VITTIME DELLA SCHIAVITÙ





# PROMISING PRACTICES IN PROTECTING VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## Table of Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>One of the highest human trafficking verdicts in Serbia was issued during the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<b>6</b>
Victims are persons, not evidence	7
Honest cooperation as the key factor	8
Public judgment is the worst	9
<b>Girls and women with the experience of trafficking contributed to shedding light on the issue of violence in digital surroundings</b>	<b>11</b>
New reality: A third of trafficking victims are recruited online	12
Digital records are forever	13
Society 'blames the woman'	14
<b>Online counselling with human trafficking victims during the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<b>16</b>
Similarities between the events during the pandemic and the trafficking situation	17
How did we bridge the digital gap?	18
<b>Letters of migrant and refugee women from isolation</b>	<b>22</b>
The beginning of the pandemic - life in isolation	23
Isolation within isolation	24
Planning the future	25

<b>Atina's response to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<b>28</b>
The problems for victims of violence will only begin after the pandemic calms	29
Challenges in providing services to the victims during the pandemic	30
Seven times more calls and full safe houses	32
Women's social entrepreneurship is the right recipe for overcoming the consequences of this and all other crises as well	32
New risks and an increase of online sexual exploitation	33

## Introduction

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The coronavirus pandemic has shown that the life of a girl or a woman, victim of violence, is in many ways reminiscent of a permanent state of emergency. Many of the girls and women with such experience, particularly victims of human trafficking, were socially isolated even before the crisis caused by the pandemic. Unfortunately, all the worries other citizens had in COVID-19, which referred to whether they would have enough food, work, and freedom, came true for victims of human trafficking. Atina's experience from the past period shows that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed many other problems in our society which have also negatively affected trafficking victims who already lack support to go through life.

One of the projects we were carrying out at the time "Support to civil society organisations' initiatives to assist and protect victims of trafficking in human beings during the COVID-19 pandemic", supported by the Council of Europe, inspired us to put on paper everything we lived through during that time. In this publication, we wanted to show the strength of women and girls, victims of human trafficking, which has managed to overcome everything despite the distress they experienced. Because of that, we decided to share promising practices in the COVID-19 pandemic, which we are very proud of, and which resulted from a lot of patience and hard work.

We would like to use this opportunity to thank all the girls and women who have shared their valuable experiences with us. We also owe gratitude to colleagues Olivera Sekulić Šošdean and Tanja Dobrić Brankov for their dedication and the efforts they invest daily in their work.

Organisation Atina's team

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

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Judicial professionals, like all other citizens, were affected by the coronavirus crisis in their daily work. Many of them could not do their regular jobs in the same way as before the pandemic, and trials were not even held at some stages. On the other hand, there were priorities which, regardless of the declared state of emergency and movement restrictions, could not be neglected. Detention cases took place despite the pandemic, as have trafficking cases, that is, trials in which victims of human trafficking had to appear as injured parties/witnesses. Courtroom confrontations are known to jeopardise the recovery of trafficking victims, mostly due to re-experiencing the trauma, especially when it comes to children. In one such detention case, in which a minor girl was a victim of trafficking, the investigation was completed in two months, while the trial had a total of three hearings. It all resulted in a prison sentence of 20 years - one of the highest convictions for human trafficking in Serbia. We spoke with the Deputy Higher Public Prosecutor in Pančevo, Olivera Sekulić Šošdean, who worked on this case, after the second-instance decision of the Court of Appeals in Belgrade, about the manner and conditions in which the case was conducted, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire process. The aim of this conversation was to present to the public everything learned from these proceedings in order to try to apply it in further work.

Prosecutor Sekulić Šošdean stated that, on the very day when she was on call, in the midst of the pandemic and the state of emergency, she received this, perhaps the largest and most important trafficking case in her career, and that she believes the way it ended represents success and a good example of joint work. For Atina, this verdict is also of utmost importance, as the girl was recognised at an early stage as a victim of human trafficking and introduced to the protection system.

By a verdict of the High Court in Pančevo of October 30, 2020, the defendant was convicted to 20 years in prison for committing the criminal offense of sexual intercourse through abuse of position, under Article 181, para-



graph 2 of the Criminal Code, and the criminal offense of human trafficking under Article 388, paragraph 3 of the Criminal Code. Upon the appeal of the defence counsel, the Court of Appeals in Belgrade has, after the panel session on March 9, 2021, rejected this appeal as unfounded and confirmed the first instance verdict. The decision of the Court of Appeals, in the part concerning the criminal sanction, cites that the first instance court correctly concluded there were no mitigating circumstances on defendant's side, while the assessed aggravating circumstance were his previous convictions, persistence in committing criminal acts, ruthlessness and heartlessness in committing the offense, as well as a lack of remorse on his part. The Court of Appeals further stated that the first instance court acted correctly when it convicted the defendant to a single prison term of 20 years, finding that this sentence was proportionate to the seriousness of the committed crimes, social danger of the crimes, and the defendant's guilt and circumstances under which the acts were committed, which make this sentence essential to achieve the purpose of punishment.

### Victims are persons, not evidence

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Every crisis carries an increased risk of exploitation. When a crisis occurs, all the resources of a society are directed to its overcoming, and in this case of the COVID-19 pandemic, health response was, clearly, the predominant one. In circumstances of a crisis, the control exercised by institutions inevitably weakens, as all resources are focused on resolving the burning issue, while on the other hand a space opens for criminal groups and individuals to act. People lose their jobs in crisis situations, they are burdened by existential pressure, and more easily fall into traps when it comes to labour exploitation, but other forms of exploitation as well. Due to the measures of movement restriction that are widely present, the possibility of making a profit is reduced, and the risk for victims further increased.

The risks she was exposed to, but also life circumstances of this girl, victim of human trafficking in the case led by Sekulić Šošdean, made a strong impression on the prosecutor. She was thinking for a long time about this girl who was sexually abused by her father, who later sexually exploited her and distributed recordings of sexual intercourse with his daughter on Facebook. "The girl previously escaped from the Home she was accommodated in. As she had nowhere to go, she went back to the father paedophile, without even being aware that he was exploiting her. He changed the girl's view of things; he changed her notion of normalcy. Children are endangered by the nature of things, they are not able to resist adults in many things even in regular conditions," concludes the prosecutor.

During the proceedings, preventive measures had to be respected, and they also affected the establishment of a relationship of trust, which is already shaken when it comes to victims of human trafficking. "When the victim came to give a statement, she wore a mask, and I simply like to see the face of a person who comes to me as a victim. As part of that general relationship of trust that must be established, I asked the girl to take off her mask for a moment, so that I could see her face, because that impression that she does not look more physically mature is quite important. You talk to her like you would to your own child, and you have to do it that way in every situation, to establish a relationship of trust, especially when you know or have at least read what that child has been through." If the support and protection of the victims is lacking at the beginning, when ugly things start happening to them, they need it even more later, and their recovery is much more difficult. "When, at some point, you understand what is happening, and when you try to help the child, that journey is much longer and harder than it would have been in some other circumstances, if, say, the exploitation was immediately discovered, if the girl had not spent that much time with her father, and he had not been indoctrinating her for so long."

Psychological consequences for this girl are devastating. "You just can't help but see the extent to which her psyche has changed. Her father told her it was normal, and it became normal to her, she even believes that she was looking for love that way. It is really terrifying how easily one can usurp a young mind that is highly suggestive, as psychologists explained in the proceedings. She was a child without any support. I really hope that after all this, she will be able to find her own way, and that she will manage to recover. She is now 18 years old, and there is still some time ahead of her during which that recovery can be influenced."

### Honest cooperation as the key factor

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"Human trafficking is not a crime that happens here every day; there were similar cases, but we mainly had trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, without any minors involved. Maybe the state of emergency, and the circumstances of the case, dictated that we end it so promptly, because that child had to be removed from the family that was a threat for her," she said. According to prosecutor Sekulić Šošdean, when such a case is completed so quickly, it is quite satisfying. "When you finish such a case quickly, an investigation in three months, and trial in three hearings, when the defendant receives a sentence of 20 years, which is the maximum sentence under our law, when he is in custody from the first day, which is then extended until he is sent to serve the sentence, when you take care of the victim, when

you see that other actors who did not participate in the proceedings are helping that girl, then I believe we did the best we could. I am happy that I was able to learn so much from this case, and it simply instilled hope that the system does work. While this conviction cannot fix much in the context of what the victim has survived, it can prevent that convict from repeating the offense in the future, and therefore provide some satisfaction to the victim. When we talk about the prosecutors' contribution, and what prosecutors can do except prosecute, they can connect all these factors (Centre for Social Work, Centre for the Protection of Trafficking Victims, Atina and others) that participate in the proceedings and provide support to the victim, presents their work and reports to the court, and it then leads to such a verdict”.

“For me, I must say, it was extremely educational and useful that Atina organised a meeting where I was introduced to their work and the way in which victim support system functions. Through that, I understood what an umbrella organisation is, what non-governmental organisations do, the role of the centre for social work in this process, although it was already somewhat clear to me, as we had cooperated with them. I believe that the meeting, and even my interest, gave Atina some security, the fact they saw me, that they could ask. But that is the task of a prosecutor when conducting the process, to get to know the victim and to provide her full statement as early as during the investigation. When you see a victim who is convincing in what she is saying, you have a sure path toward your goal, to take it to the end of the process, to gather other evidence, and we have done that together. It was easy for me when we entered the process upon Atina’s report, as they had already provided the recording they obtained, and I had persons I could call during the investigation to ask for support, access, guardian... We had a minor from the migrant population who was a witness in the proceeding, it was necessary to ensure that his guardian also came, all during the state of emergency. However, where there is a good will, people find ways, and when the will is lacking, you seek excuses. We found a way!”

## Public judgment is the worst

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The case of this girl is not the first case that was exposed in public which was made aware of all the details. It seems that, because of the pandemic and the fact that everyone spent more time at home, they also had an opportunity to learn even more information. Although it was not in the public interest, nor was it necessary for the public to know, the identity of the girl was revealed in the media along with the details of everything that happened to her. Prosecutor Sekulić Šošdean points out that the interest of

the public may be natural, people express their opinions in the media and on social networks, but it has been determined countless times that these details have little to do with what is really happening. "The information prosecutor has in the case are available only to them and the defence counsel; regardless of the fact that people are trying to obtain information, they cannot get it before it is actually collected in a valid way. Especially in the procedure where the public is excluded from the trial due to the protection of the interests of the minor/injured party. That is the difference between the public perception and what really exists in the case. In other words, it is very dangerous to make a judgment in advance."

When it comes to the role and actions of the media in such cases, as we have seen, it can be extremely harmful and dangerous for the victim. No matter how hard the prosecutors try to protect the rights of the victim, if those rights are publicly violated and the whole of Serbia finds out who the victim is, the fact that the court proceedings were conducted without the presence of the public has no real weight. In this regard, "we should work more on education, explain what the ethics of going public means, and always ask ourselves if it can harm someone, if someone's interest will be harmed," Sekulić Šošdean said.

Bearing in mind the question of how to further protect the rights of victims and injured parties/witnesses within the judiciary, the prosecutor points out those undertaken obligations must be consistently applied always and everywhere. In this regard, the Criminal Code prescribes protection of particularly sensitive witnesses, however that is only one part as protection is provided in many other ways, through safe houses, work with NGOs, cooperation with centres for social work. These forms of protection and support are equally important as a form of prevention, so that violence or exploitation do not occur. When the criminal proceedings take place, the crime has already happened and the victim is there, her rights have already been violated. However, it is important to ensure that her rights are not further violated during the proceedings. The prosecutor emphasises the importance of victim protection measures during the proceedings. "If there are professionals who know how to ensure protection of the victim within the allowed space, if they have an affinity as individuals and a minimum of compassion, they can reconcile professional and human aspects easily. I believe that judges are increasingly recognising the need to support victims in order to prevent secondary victimisation. So these are minor changes already in place, but I think that if you love what you do, and this cannot be done by someone who is not a philanthropist, then you will do everything in your power to support the victim, and make sure she does not suffer any longer."

## Girls and women with the experience of trafficking contributed to shedding light on the issue of violence in digital surroundings

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Women and girls make up the vast majority of human trafficking victims. They are most often exploited for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Fears that the pandemic could fuel the growth of cyber-trafficking and other forms of abuse in digital surroundings were justified, given the measures of restricted movement introduced by many countries.

At the beginning of March 2021, it was announced that there are several groups on the Telegram application in which tens of thousands, mostly men from the Balkans, exchange various pornographic content. They primarily share pornographic videos, but also personal data of ex-girlfriends and other women as well. The administrator of that network in Serbia was arrested on suspicion of committing the criminal offense of showing, obtaining and owning pornographic materials and exploiting a minor for pornography<sup>1</sup>. In order to understand the extent of this issue, it is important to emphasise that only one group - *EX YU Balkan Room* - had about 36,000 members.

In May of this year, a group again appeared on the Telegram application, in which persons from the Balkans share intimate photos of girls from Serbia and the region. Before Serbia, in March 2019, a group on the Telegram in Northern Macedonia published, in a very similar way, contents with girls and women in a pornographic context. Following these events, women's rights activists from the Balkan region, from a total of 139 civil society organisations including Atina, solidarily supported all women victims of digital gender-based violence, and asked relevant institutions to respond in accordance with their commitments and mandate, thoroughly and timely investigate the case of groups on the social network Telegram (such as: *Balkan Room*, *Public Room*, *GevgelijaHub*, *Serbian Room*, *Smokva*, etc.), in order to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/474733/Hronika/U-Nisu-uhapsen-administrator-grupa-na-aplikaciji-Telegram>

punish the perpetrators and protect the victims from further victimisation<sup>2</sup>. In the meantime, news arrived from Croatia that, for the first time in that country, revenge pornography will be a separate criminal offense defined by amendments to the Criminal Code<sup>3</sup>. A court in Romania ruled in one case<sup>4</sup> that impersonation was a crime. The verdict came from the case of a man sentenced to three years and eight months in prison for blackmail, digital fraud, and privacy violations caused by posting intimate photos of his ex-girlfriend on social media and opening accounts on pornographic sites on her behalf.

Due to everything cited above, one of Atina's priorities is to prevent digital abuse from becoming a "new normal" and a phenomenon to which the public, due to its frequency, will become indifferent, under the slogan - virtual is less real, and therefore less important.

### **New reality: A third of trafficking victims are recruited online**

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Greater dependency on the virtual world, and isolation caused by the pandemic, have made the risks of various forms of digital violence much higher. This is also indicated by the analysis of Atina carried out during the coronavirus pandemic, when a large part of global communication moved to the digital space, which, justifiably, further increased the fear of violence and exploitation on the Internet.

One third of human trafficking victims were recruited online - this is one of the conclusions of the *analysis "Behind the Screen: Analysis of human trafficking victims' abuse in digital surroundings"*<sup>5</sup>, published by Citizens' Association for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and All Forms of Gender-Based Violence "Atina".

It was discovered that prior, during and after the trafficking situation, girls and women were largely exposed to abuse in digital surroundings. Specifically, 42 percent of respondents have suffered some form of digital violence, such as cyberbullying, vengeful distribution of explicit/pornographic

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/en/joint-statement-women-human-rights-activists-balkan-region-toward-gender-based-violence-internet>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/novo-kazneno-djelo-u-hrvatskoj-zatvor-za-osvetnicku-objavu-seks-snimke-na-webu-20210526>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bird.tools/online-impersonation-is-a-crime-romanian-court-rules/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/en/behind-screens-analysis-human-trafficking-victims-abuse-digital-surroundings>

content, impersonation, etc. For 31% of them, such relatively new forms of abuse were used for the purpose of recruitment or exploitation, i.e., directly related to the trafficking situation.

This analysis was based on the experiences of 178 girls and women who were using Atina's support and protection programs in the period from 2015 until 2020 and shows a correlation between human trafficking and digital abuse, but also sheds a light on new forms of trafficking. Such a number of respondents in the field of human trafficking victims' protection is an extremely important sample, and it should be noted that data collection process was marked by exceptional motivation of these girls and women to participate in it. The sample in this analysis is representative<sup>6</sup> in relation to the total number of identified victims of human trafficking in the Republic of Serbia.

"The classification of subforms of online violence and abuse is changing day by day, because it is a relatively new phenomenon, while the growth of digital space expands the range of violence<sup>7</sup>", explained Jelena Hrnjak, Programme Manager of organisation Atina. In addition to indicating a high frequency of violence in the digital sphere, this analysis also speaks of the fact that this specific form of violence has become an almost indispensable form of coercion used by perpetrators of violence and traffickers to blackmail, threaten, belittle these women and girls, and unauthorisedly record, or distribute, pornographic material including children. Of the total number of respondents, as Atina's analysis shows, 65% were also exposed to digital threats, which were most often aimed at intimidation in order to change or withdraw a testimony or statement in criminal proceedings.

## Digital records are forever

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"He was posting my half-naked photographs on Facebook and I couldn't do anything about it," said one victim of human trafficking who was 18 years old at the time and found refuge in a shelter run by Atina. "People were commenting on these posts, they were insulting me, called me a slut online, but no one ever wondered what I might be going through." When she reported the case to the police, the girl said they looked at the photos and "laughed". "Later, after I went to the gynaecologist, I gave them the medi-

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<sup>6</sup> In the period from 2011 until the end of 2019, following the statistics of the Centre for the Protection of Trafficking Victims, data show that a total of 641 victims have been formally identified; <http://www.centarzztlj.rs/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/sr/nova-realnos-sajber-zlostavljanje>

cal report that confirmed I was sexually assaulted,” she told BIRN<sup>8</sup>. “At one point I even thought about killing myself or killing him. The photos are still online.”

Half of the interviewed victims of human trafficking said that the perpetrators possessed content they used to blackmail them and force them into various forms of exploitation - 29% of respondents said they were blackmailed by being told that the explicit content they were in, or information about them, would be sent to their family members, and 21% of them were threatened that the content would be published on public portal.

Atina’s analysis emphasises that stalking is one of the most common types of abuse in digital surroundings, and that as many as 55% of respondents have experienced it. It is pointed out that stalking was most often committed by acquaintances, family members (23 percent), and then partners (18 percent).

As many as 63 percent of the respondents suffered abuse by recording and further distributing the content without their consent. In terms of the content that was distributed, in the majority of cases (64 percent) it was content with elements of pornography.

Andrijana Radoičić Nedeljковиć, author of this analysis, emphasises that from the aspect of permanence, “digital violence is even more dangerous, since vengeful distribution of pornographic content can spread like wildfire on the Internet. In such a case, there is no safe place for victims, they are in constant fear of being found, belittled, and hurt”. Also, “women do not want to appear in public because the public does not understand them and usually condemns them, and public judgment can be worse than anything that happened to them in the human trafficking situation”, said Jelena Hrnjak, appealing to the institutions to do everything in their power to prevent re-victimisation of victims.

## Society ‘blames the woman’

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One of the girls with the experience of human trafficking said that society “always blames the woman”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/11/study-underscores-link-between-human-trafficking-and-online-abuse/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/11/study-underscores-link-between-human-trafficking-and-online-abuse/>



“She is responsible for being mistreated, she provoked it, she asked for it... I also blamed myself for being a victim of online harassment, but I was lucky enough to have the support of my family and that my case did end up in the media. Sadly, many women are usually left without any support.”

Cyber-trafficking must find its place in strategic documents related to the issue of trafficking. This type of crime is specific in that “traffickers” connect real and virtual space, committing abuse in both. While all that is happening, we have official records of cases in which, for financial compensation, scenes of sexual abuse of children are shared through “cyber-dens”.

“Unknown persons” are prevalent among the perpetrators of abuse in digital surroundings. This is considered to be someone whom the victim first “met” via the Internet. However, according to their testimony, stalking is the most common form of violence they have experienced in digital surroundings, while the perpetrator in most cases was a person whom the victim met in real life.

Results of the research show that in terms of perpetrators of abuse in digital surroundings, violence committed by an unknown person dominates (40 percent), followed by perpetrators who were known to the victim, such as partners (20 percent) and family members. Of particular concern is the fact that participants stated even police officers were abusers.

Bearing all this in mind, as well as everyday occurrences, it is vital for organisation Atina to have the voices of girls and women with the experience of trafficking be heard - and not only heard but understood and appreciated as well. That is why it is particularly important to emphasise this existing promising practice - the fact that the pandemic failed to prevent 178 girls and women with the experience of trafficking from making their own contribution in shedding light on the issue of violence in digital surroundings.

## Online counselling with human trafficking victims during the COVID-19 pandemic

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During a crisis, vulnerability of potential and existing victims of trafficking rises. There are several reasons for the increase in risk factors: the context of the crisis that is more profitable for traffickers, since all of the society's resources are directed toward overcoming the crisis; internal movement of the population that will increase due to job loss and seeking additional resources; many children will be left without the immediate care of parents/guardians due to poverty, or will be temporarily separated from them, becoming much more vulnerable<sup>10</sup>.

The pandemic that has changed the social context will certainly change the manner of exploitation; for example, persons who had been sexually exploited can be exploited online or at home and remain invisible to the wider environment. Victims do not have the same access to information, nor can they decide on social distancing or compliance with measures introduced to prevent the spread of infection. Due to adopted measures, it is possible that the demand will reduce, which will lead to greater exploitation and violence in order for traffickers to ensure the same level of profit.

As in previous crises caused by wars, natural disasters and social upheavals, psychotherapy was required to leave offices, counselling centres, psychotherapy rooms. However, this crisis required for psychotherapy to fully forgo direct contact and move into a space that provided greater health security - into the world of online communication.

Free movement was restricted, and occasionally completely forbidden. It was necessary to find new and safe frameworks for counselling and psychotherapy in order for life and work to continue to flow. We talked with psychotherapist Tanja Dobrić Brankov about her experience of working in Atina's counselling centre during the state of emergency and the pandemic in general.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://rosanjose.iom.int/site/en/blog/why-has-vulnerability-victims-human-trafficking-increased-during-covid-19>

“My first feeling, as a psychotherapist, was that it was necessary to maintain contacts and good relations with women and girls in need. At the very beginning, I did not have a clear idea how to do that. Guided by the knowledge and experience that human need for belonging, understanding, security, and the fact that conversation and socialising, will not disappear regardless of external events, the opportunity has opened for us to change something. It was necessary to find new ways to make contact. Another physical and geographical space could not be visited, and the virtual/digital space remained open, free and ready to receive us with all the burning human needs. Psychological spaces have been moved to new frameworks and forms of communication, which has brought new challenges, but also advantages.” However, psychological counselling and psychotherapeutic work with victims of trafficking who have survived a traumatic experience carries a high risk of retraumatisation even in a regular situation. The pandemic, as well as the request for isolation, was a justifiable reason for the fear of triggering and retraumatisation, which is why online counselling came to life as early as in the first week of the state of emergency.

### Similarities between the events during the pandemic and the trafficking situation

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Psychologically speaking, the situation of pandemic and quarantine was in many ways reminiscent of the situation human trafficking victims were in during exploitation.

Cristian Eduardo and Shobana Powell, in their author text entitled *A Guide for Survivors of Sex Trafficking during COVID-19*, cite eight psychological coercions used by traffickers during exploitation, which a pandemic can trigger and cause retraumatisation.<sup>11</sup>

“Constant changes in the way our communities react to COVID-19 may be reminiscent of the tactics of psychological coercion used by traffickers. Many human trafficking survivors believed that they could not exit the situation due to emotional, financial and psychological barriers, not physical ones. As Judith Herman states in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, “Physical barriers to escape are rare. In most homes, even the most oppressive, there are no bars on the windows, no barbed wire fences ... The barriers to escape are generally invisible. They are, nonetheless, extremely powerful.” Invisible barriers of social distancing can remind survivors of similar invisible limitations they experienced during the trafficking situation.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://sanctuaryforfamilies.org/trafficking-covid19/#threats>

Explaining further psychological coercions, the authors cite *isolation*, which exists in a pandemic, and is common in situations of exploitation - when a person is isolated from their support network; they also talk about *controlling reality*, which in a pandemic is reflected in the way we receive information through social networks and the media, and through narratives each state creates around the pandemic. Speaking further about psychological coercions, they cite *exhaustion and threats*, as constant stress around the spread and danger of a pandemic leads to general exhaustion, threats to life and safety which additionally increase the stress, and leave a person in a prolonged response to a crisis, which neurobiologically affects their general psychophysical health.

On the one hand, occasional *moments of hope*, and on the other hand *intimidation*, imitate a situation of helplessness in which a victim completely loses control over their life and events in it, while the image of their own reality, and often of themselves, solely depends on the influence of environment/trafficker.

*Humiliation and emotional abuse*, as well as *unpredictable expectations* can also evoke situations during exploitation. Persons who have been marginalised in the past, including victims of human trafficking, have largely remained unsupported in this situation of health crisis due to their individual characteristics such as race, sex, gender, etc. Unpredictable expectations about one's own future and constant uncertainty in many ways imitate the situation of exploitation.

All these circumstances will certainly affect the psychological state of the victims, who will, possibly, remain longer in the situation of exploitation, both due to the fear for their own existence, and due to fewer opportunities to access help and support services.

## How did we bridge the digital gap?

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Many of the symptoms that victims of trafficking face after a situation of exploitation, which are related to their psychological state, are insomnia, anxiety, depression, and phobias. All the listed symptoms intensified with the beginning of the pandemic and were experienced for the first time by those who had not faced them immediately after exiting the trafficking situation.

In addition to the existing symptoms, some of the women and girls also had clinical psychiatric conditions that required specialist treatment, pharmacotherapy, and hospitalisation. As the entire health system was focused

on one disease, for many women and girls psychological counselling was the only source of support both in the emotional and psychological sense.

Due to all the predictable, but also unpredictable, consequences for the mental health of women and girls victims of trafficking, it was important to establish a support network that would be available to all of them, wherever they were.

The online world has opened all the borders that were closed in the physical space, and that fact has brought with it many risks, but also advantages.

“The benefits that the pandemic has brought are, primarily, reflected in the greater availability of this service. As the online counselling became available to every person who owns a communication device, Atina’s counselling service now exists in every place in Serbia, but also outside the borders of our country. At the time when it was impossible to leave the house, psychological support existed in every place where there were women and girls who participate in Atina’s programs,” said Andrijana Radoičić Nedeljković, coordinator of the direct support program in Atina.

Tanja Dobrić Brankov adds that another advantage lies in the fact that online space has significantly fewer restrictions than the physical one, “Counselling has kept its form in the sense of duration of the session. Another advantage is reflected in the development and improvement of digital literacy in some women due to their need and motivation to receive necessary psychological support. Mastering and using various applications, and receiving online counselling, ensured safe participation of women and girls in the dominant global communication, as they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills for online communication.”

Like any crisis in society, this too has deepened social inequalities, and unequal access to information due to illiteracy, whether digital or functional, threatened to endanger health, safety and social connections for entire groups of people.

“Awareness that the challenge of digital communication for some of the women and girls will be a stumbling block, but also a reason to give up, made us use a couple of meetings exclusively to adapt to digital communication and learn about the ways in which different applications are used. This situation, in addition to educational, also represented psychological work, as a person is in a new life situation that requires them to master basic digital literacy, but in that process of learning something new also develops adjustment capacities, strength and ability to adapt,” stated Dobrić Brankov. She added that, we have been “taught to first look at the strengths and advantages as a capacity to overcome crises, both individual crises and

global ones, but Atina's online counselling has not neglected its challenges either".

All of the challenges that could have been predicted, as well as those noticed during the work, represent the potential for development of this service and its adaptation to the beneficiaries' needs.

"Among the greatest challenges were difficulties of a technical nature: not all women and girls had opportunities and resources for online communication, even those who had phones or other means of communication mostly used older devices with numerous issues, and the like. Some of the beneficiaries did not have Internet connection, or it was extremely unstable; they shared phones with their children or partners, or the space where the family lives was simply full of people, so there was no possibility for a person to be alone even for a duration of one counselling session," observed Atina's psychotherapist. "Apart from the technical challenges, there were also deeper and harder ones to overcome, fear and awareness that not everyone will be able to connect and establish trust with the therapist, which has come true in some situations. Knowing the importance of direct human contact, the warmth, energy and non-verbal communication it brings in the process of providing psychological support, online space at times seemed remote, cold, and sterile. With many women and girls who experienced these difficulties, face-to-face counselling continued immediately after the emergency measures were lifted, within Atina's Reintegration Centre."

The experience of violence these women and girls had, and the means used to commit the violence, were considered as a particular challenge. Furthermore, the awareness that some women and girls were blackmailed, filmed, and exploited, required particular investment from the therapist in order to gain their trust and explain that the rules of confidentiality and privacy, which apply in the physical space, are fully transferred online.

Direct contact was not encouraged for a long time, even after the period during which it was completely forbidden. A cautious return to direct counselling throughout 2020, but also the current year, carries additional worries - whether this contact will cause infection, and whether it will endanger lives. This circumstance is a challenge counselling deals with in a paradoxical struggle to provide a person with security in the psychological sense, without endangering their health.

"Being in contact and relations with others in times of a crisis is essential for maintaining mental health and satisfactory daily functioning of every person involved in Atina's programs," concluded Tanja Dobrić Brankov, and reminded that "psychotherapy methods remained the same. Each step is

taken in the best interest of the person we work with, using professional knowledge and skills to that end. Practical experience is also transferred to online counselling, which ensures the establishment and maintenance of the relationship of trust with women and girls. Just as face-to-face psychotherapy requires respect for each person's personal capacities and interests in resolving difficulties and dilemmas, the same principles apply to online counselling for victims of trafficking”.

“Online counselling is a service that will continue to exist even when we leave the pandemic far behind us, with continuous improvement and learning, and in constant desire to be where the women we work with are, to respond to their needs, and be their support in overcoming life's difficulties,” stated Radoičić Nedeljković.

Atina's data show that the scope of psychological counselling during the state of emergency increased by 30%, and that over 50 women and girls have been provided with counselling service in the previous year.

Believing the words of the American psychologist and psychotherapist, existentialist Rollo Reese May, that the purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free, the purpose of establishing online counselling and overcoming the boundaries of physical space is to provide women and girls with a space within which they can continue conquering freedom.

## Letters of migrant and refugee women from isolation

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In many years of work with girls and women with the experience of violence, organisation Atina, which provides support to victims of human trafficking and all forms of gender-based violence, points out that one of the biggest obstacles of the reintegration process that they caught sight of is a sense of exclusion from society, family; distance from oneself, as well as a sense of isolation and not belonging to the world they find themselves in. Women and girls refugees and migrants have, through participation in programs Atina runs, which are also designed and adapted to women accommodated in asylum and reception centres, spoke during the pandemic about what it is like to be stranded halfway to destination, in Serbia, their current refuge country. Some of the migrant women managed to get some form of protection here and begin their lives outside the reception centres.

During the past six years, since the refugee-migrant crisis gained momentum, conversations have been held with women and girls on various topics of interest to them. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the sense of isolation became overbearing, we mostly talked about ways to overcome those feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Once the pandemic brought global isolation, alienation and distancing, the news of the army entering asylum centres and other migrant and refugee accommodations in Serbia further sparked the feeling of uncertainty. By closing the centers, and then the whole country as well, movement restrictions and ban on gatherings made Atina adapt all of its regular activities and find new ways to achieve its purpose, which is to create a space for women to talk about their problems, needs, feelings, and to have that space for themselves - safe, secure and understanding.

Atina's mobile team, which had regularly visited asylum and reception centers until the outbreak of the pandemic, remained in contact with women and girls who reported daily from the centers, talking about their fears and worries, but also the issues that arose in such housing conditions. This is exactly how the *Letters from Isolation* came about, from the idea of opening a space for women and girls to talk about all the challenges, fears and expe-



periences in societies they came from, which aggravate social and gender isolation, as well as with reencountered isolation in the pandemic. These four women wrote letters about their experiences of all these changes, how it reflected on their situation, and their vision of the future. Although, it could be said, their views of the world are different, depending on the culture they come from, what unites them during the pandemic is the female perspective of a challenge.

## The beginning of the pandemic - life in isolation

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"Just before the pandemic started, I began living alone, in my own apartment," Bisa, a 20-year-old girl from Nigeria begins her story, and continues, "I had my job and my apartment, I was previously granted asylum. After a long time, I started making plans for my future, and then the pandemic began. In the isolation that came along with coronavirus, it was not easy. In fact, it is really difficult. I am in a new situation, a new environment, everything is unknown to me. I am alone. I am not prepared for this, in fact no one is prepared, but a lot of things happened to me just then. I can't go outside, but I realise I don't even want to go out. I'm worried. I am very worried, for myself, for my health, but also for my job. They say stay at home, don't go out, but I don't have a solution how to pay for the apartment, bills and food. When people want to help me, they say - don't worry, you will pay next month, but that makes me even more insecure, because I still don't know how I will do it next month, or the one after next, if this lasts."

"I wanted freedom, something I didn't have in my country as a woman. Here, first of all, I was looking for freedom I did not have there," Huma (25) from Iran begins her letter. "In Serbia, my life has changed, but not so much, since I live in a camp. Before the pandemic started, I wanted to leave the camp and live in an apartment, find a job and feel free, and then the quarantine started, and everything stopped. After coming to Serbia, I began learning things that I neither dared nor could do in my country. I started painting, I really liked all the activities outside the camp, I got used to moving, I went to various organisations and participated in the activities they carry out. But now it's all gone. I am locked up in a camp with so many different people. I am trying to keep communication through social networks and to get all the information, and all that thanks to the organisations that have not forgotten us. However, it is very difficult, especially with children. For our children there is no online school, and they are full of energy because of that. The conditions for us are very limited, especially when it comes to trying to structure their day. Of course, that is expected of women in these conditions, to do everything to make life seem normal - make sure children

do not bother anyone, take care of the house, and don't complain. But nothing is normal any longer, and I don't know if it ever will be again."

### Isolation within isolation

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"There has never been a situation like this before. I think this is much more serious now than ever before, because this problem has affected the whole world. Not only one, two countries, but entire Europe, Asia, and now Africa. A lot of people are dying, a lot of people are losing their jobs. It's really hard. I'm also thinking about what it will be like after this. Nothing will be the same again. How people on the bus will look at me when I sneeze; I'm not a person they would say 'bless you' even before this. I am imagining what it will be like now. I'm sure they wouldn't be thrilled to have a migrant woman infect them," Bisa continues, adding, "On the other hand, I am afraid of what will happen to me if I have to go to the doctor, because for me every visit to the doctor, so far has been an endeavour. I don't know Serbian language, the staff doesn't know English, they don't understand procedures for asylum seekers; they don't know, or they are denying me the right to health care. Until now, someone always had to go with me, and now that is not allowed. All these thoughts make me even more afraid of the disease".

"Here, the government and state are telling me now - do not go out, and there (in Iran) my husband used to tell me not to go out. So, it's not the same after all," Gulzar (30) from Iran begins her letter. "Now I have more responsibilities than before, I prepare food more often. I spend more time in the kitchen, and I take care of the house, while, on the other hand, I have to help my child with homework. Sometimes my husband helps me, but when the situation was normal (before the pandemic), we all had our own obligations, so we helped each other better. Now I do more work at home. I think that this situation has brought more obligations to women, that they have to cook more, do house chores above all, and in addition to help the children. I know that this situation will lead to more violence against women, that some will suffer violence from their husbands. I often think how glad I am that we managed to get out of the camp before the pandemic started. Life in the camp reminded me too much of life in Iran. I have two friends whom I talk to, and they told me that the conditions in the camp have become even worse, that the army guards the camps so that people don't go out and that organisations cannot have activities inside the camps. However, I think that should be resolved in a different way, because these people cannot be imprisoned and feel as if they have been arrested in the camp. It should be organised differently - or allow them occasionally to go

outside for a while. I don't think this is good for them. I worry a lot about all the people in the camps."

"I just started working and the virus came. I want to go to work, I want to go out, it's harder for me than it was before the pandemic," writes Almani, a single mother from Iran. "I am overwhelmed with sadness when I sit in the house. I can't help him (my son) much with his homework, it's difficult for me. I don't know the language, and he can't go to school. I'm afraid for his education. I think about this life and life in Iran, and for me this situation with the coronavirus cannot, in a psychological sense, be compared to that in Iran. In the physical sense, it is quite similar situation because the freedom of movement is limited, but in the psychological sense I would not equate them. There are important differences. Physically, again I can't move, but no one can move now, it's not just my problem anymore. I remember how strange it was for me here when I was outside at 10pm, and no one paid attention to me, no one judged me. There, I was not allowed to be outside at 10pm, not because something would happen to me, but because people would look at me, judge me, maybe someone would say something offensive to me, and that is not happening here. It's easier for me when I know that these conditions apply to everyone now."

## Planning the future

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"Particular problem that occurred during this pandemic, and the one I think about a lot, are the inequalities in society. These differences are now even more visible, and they affect all the women in the world. A society that does not support women operates on men's principles. It is even harder for women, especially women who are alone, women who are alone with children, or pregnant women. For all the women who find life hard even without this situation, it is now even harder and worse than for men. I also think of women who now work as doctors, nurses, in stores, pharmacies. About women who suffer or fear domestic violence, now that perhaps entire families do not work, there is no money, and if there were problems in the family before, now it is only worse. I think about women who suffered violence and are now alone in the house again with that same violent man in such conditions. We are all scared of this virus and the whole situation, we can't go outside, and how terrible it is that you are at home every day exposed to risk of violence. And everyone first asks you if you have the virus," Bisa wrote in her open letter.

"This situation with the pandemic, the virus, with the quarantine has changed me. I have thought a lot about some things that might not have crossed my mind before. I read and was shocked by the death of a student from

Nairobi. He studied medicine in Belgrade, died of abdominal pain, lived in the dormitory, and none of the doctors wanted to see him - he went to three hospitals, no one helped him, and then he died. He did not have the coronavirus, and it is not known why he died, and maybe they would have saved his life if they had admitted him to the hospital and helped him. Those are terrible things. He is a foreigner here just like me and that scares me a lot. That's why I'm sad. I thought that this problem we are all in together would bring people closer, but the opposite happened. I don't make any plans for the future; I used to plan, but this happened, and nothing came of them, everything went wrong, everything stopped. I plan from one day to the next. A lot depends on how I feel that day. I'm still in fear, afraid of going outside. There is too great of an uncertainty for me to make any plans. But I definitely keep going on and hope for the best. I try to think positively. And I will make plans again!" Bisa concludes in her letter. "I will work again. I want to learn Serbian. Maybe people will want to live better after this situation, because it made them think of the things they don't have. This situation has taken lives of many people, and someone who may have been dear to you is no longer there. Maybe that will make people be a little kinder to each other. For too long, people have been forced to sit at home, eat, s, but that is not life. I have known for a long time what it's like when you can't hug a dear person. When all this is over, maybe everyone will be able to understand the value of it," says Almani.

"I am constantly thinking about the future," Huma continues, "I'm just waiting for this situation to end, because the borders are now completely closed, and we can't go anywhere. I want a new life, I want to go further, I have a new kind of hope for everyone, and I want to build a new life, primarily because of my children. For me, a normal life is one in which I will not have to make decisions for myself or for my children out of necessity, fear and coercion, but freely. A life in which I will be able to work, and have my children go to school. A life in which I will have the freedom to live the way I want, and to achieve my goals I set up. I learned a lot in these camp and pandemic conditions, I realised what kind of a better life I wanted. I think that every person should learn from every situation what they want better for themselves. Because of the way of life in Iran, the culture and everything I have survived, I think I have made a lot of progress and I have learned a lot about myself and life, I have succeeded and I know that I will continue to succeed."

"I want to return to a normal life, I want to work, to have activities that I love, to take more care of myself, to sleep and eat normally, to be able to have physical activities. Basically, I want to have a normal life," Gulzar writes at the end. "I would like for people in Serbia to try to understand who we are, who the migrants are - a person becomes a migrant because they

have a problem. That problem was so difficult that the person had no other option but to leave their country, and no one wants to leave their home, life, country. Women like me and women I know had to leave because they could not live by the rules that were imposed on them. Refuge means that when you can't find a helping hand in your own country, you must look for it elsewhere, that's refuge."

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

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

Atina, as an organisation that is combating human trafficking and all forms of gender-based violence, did not allow for issues of girls and women with the experience of trafficking to remain in the shadow of the pandemic, but responded promptly to the crisis caused by the coronavirus, adapting along the way, in order to meet the most important needs of the victims.

Atina's experience from the past period shows that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed many other problems in our society and taught us that institutional response alone in such situations is not enough, and that without civil society organisations, especially women's organisations, it is not possible to provide an adequate response to the arising issues. State institutions in the field of human trafficking victims' protection managed to respond to only 30% of the needs of human trafficking victims in the pandemic, while the remaining 70%, or the majority, were provided by civil society organisations. It is understandable that the system's response to the pandemic was predominantly health one, however, civil society organisations, on the other hand, believe that the opportunity was missed for the system to take care of, and eliminate the consequences, for the poorest and most vulnerable categories of the society, including victims of violence. The organisations proposed that (in addition to political and medical), a third crisis headquarters be formed under the jurisdiction of the state, which would take care of all those citizens who live on the edge of poverty, on the margins of society, and who are in social need. Unfortunately, it has

not happened, and they continued to live next to us, not with us, even in the pandemic.

## The problems for victims of violence will only begin after the pandemic calms

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Despite the fact that state statistics show the number of reports of violence against women during the pandemic has decreased, this does not mean that there was less violence. In Atina's experience the problems will only begin once the pandemic calms. Atina made an assessment of the situation and needs a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic, by interviewing 36 women victims of human trafficking, and created some of the parameters necessary to adequately assist them. "We cannot wait for the victim to ask for help in order to react, in order to even admit that the problem exists. Unfortunately, a dominant paradigm when it comes to victims of all forms of violence is the one shaping the question whether victims receive assistance and support if they ask for them, instead of asking whether assistance is offered to victims clearly and sufficiently, and whether support reaches them at all."

Women who started earning money independently, who found jobs before the pandemic, and relied on their own capacities, lost that possibility with this crisis. The vast majority lost their jobs and there are no visible prospects of finding new ones after the crisis, Jelena Hrnjak, programme manager of Atina said. "Many of them were working off the books or for daily wages, and even the assistance of the state did not reach them in terms of the minimum salary, or a part of it," she added. "In the first weeks of the pandemic, 31 percent of women with the experience of violence informed us that they had lost their jobs; by the second week, it was 55 percent. In week four, 92 percent of these women were left without any income."

Experience of the organisation Atina is that the problems will only begin after the pandemic calms. It seems certain that additional efforts will be needed to ensure the visibility of all victims of trafficking, given how much effort is already being made to achieve their visibility both in the labour market and in access to other rights that belong to them but are often not available. After each crisis period, some people need more time to stand on their own two feet, and victims of trafficking are often in a position to need more time and support to rely on their own capacities. However, as they have survived a lot, they are also strong in ways that a person is not even aware of. Atina's role is to show them that strength, and to constantly remind them of it, but to be there for them as well.

If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that human rights and women's rights must be conquered again and again, and that nothing is for granted. Hrnjak underlines that violence is not subsiding, and that there is "a sea of women in Serbia who suffer violence" which has not stopped in COVID-19. "This pandemic has highlighted the position of women victims of violence in our country, society, and exposed them to additional risks and challenges, leaving many consequences for their social inclusion," she explained. Atina, however, had to find a way to help these women. "Atina also runs a licensed service of assisted housing, along with a day centre intended for women and girls, victims of human trafficking, so the services had to be reorganised and maintained during the pandemic. In addition, Atina provides support and accommodation for migrant women, victims of gender-based violence, and that too has been continued with. We have learned that online services are necessary but not enough, and that nothing can compensate for direct human contact," added Jelena Hrnjak.

### Challenges in providing services to the victims during the pandemic

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When we speak of the challenges in providing services to this vulnerable group during the pandemic, the issue of accommodating women victims in shelters is the greatest one, as there were no self-isolation rooms, and women could not be accommodated in safe houses without a confirmation that they tested negative. On the other hand, the state-run shelter for human trafficking victims, which has even before the pandemic faced numerous obstacles in work and had limited functional capacities, came to an even more unenviable position during COVID-19. In the first months of the pandemic, Atina had to use its reserve fund to help women in this shelter, which was left without food<sup>12</sup>. In August 2020, all women and children from this emergency shelter were referred to Atina's safe accommodation program - assisted housing<sup>13</sup>, and the state-run shelter was completely closed, which further increased the pressure on the organisation's work, but also limited the possibility for all other victims of trafficking to use the specialised emergency accommodation service.

The state, therefore, not only did not increase efforts to respond to the needs of trafficking victims during the pandemic, but also limited or terminated

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<sup>12</sup> <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/05/voices-from-the-ground-impact-of-covid19-on-violence-against-women>

<sup>13</sup> In 2018, Atina licensed this long-term service within which women with the experience of human trafficking work on their recovery and economic independence. On an annual basis, the service is used by a third of identified victims of human trafficking in Serbia.



existing services, shifting responsibility largely to civil society organisations. Such situation is not sustainable in the long run, and the state should both financially and in any other way help organisations that provide specialised services. “The state of Serbia must begin to take responsibility and act in accordance to its obligations toward all these victims. This should also be done financially toward support programs and licensed service providers from the ranks of civil society organisations that do not stop their activities even in times of the greatest crises, and effectively adapt programs to the needs of women and girls. Without that, we as a society cannot make a change,” explained Hrnjak.

The very measures introduced against the spread of coronavirus have had a negative impact on victims of trafficking and created new challenges in working with them. The situation of isolation has placed trafficking victims in an even more difficult position, as their freedom is again restricted. Due to such circumstances, the pandemic caused a regression of the victims to the position of dependence on others as well as on the support programs. Particular concern of Atina’s team was the risk of re-trafficking in individual victims, taking into account all available information from the field.

The crisis caused by the pandemic delayed, and in some cases prevented, the process of recovery for victims of violence and human trafficking. “The crisis has shown that violence does not stop, it simply changes form”, Hrnjak said speaking of the challenges organisations faced during the work with beneficiaries in the state of emergency in Serbia, issues, and the ways to overcome them.

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

## Seven times more calls and full safe houses

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Atina was receiving seven times more calls through its hotline than before the pandemic. Hundreds of women from the whole territory of Serbia were calling to get information and seek support mostly for medical reasons, urgent food or hygiene necessities. Most of them were in need of information about the trials in detention cases<sup>14</sup>.

“In three safe houses we run, 80% of capacities were occupied; we were doing regular checks and supplied provisions to the women and children accommodated there. We have set up online counselling<sup>15</sup> with psychologists available to girls and women who were in the state-run shelter and other social care institutions, as well as to those who are residing in their homes and other places,” Hrnjak said speaking of the first months of the pandemic. “For all other women who were not in Atina’s accommodation, case managers were concerned about how long the state of emergency would last and how these new conditions would affect the quality of service provided, how it would affect the trust gained in the relationship, and also how to ensure that victims remain visible, if it is known they have been barely visible even before the pandemic.”

## Women’s social entrepreneurship is the right recipe for overcoming the consequences of this and all other crises as well

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Social enterprise “Bagel Bejgl” had to change its business plan during the pandemic and begin delivery service in order to lessen the economic consequences of the crisis. Speaking of its survival during the pandemic, Hrnjak says that it was “adapting along the way”.

“We are aware that difficult times will come after the crisis, probably more difficult than ever. They will be challenging in a different way, currently unknown to us. That uncertainty is what scares us all. On the other hand, we in Serbia constantly live through beginnings, and this will be a similar story. De integro. Starting from scratch all over again,” Jelena Hrnjak said speaking of the way in which coronavirus pandemic will affect human trafficking survivors and their economic independence. “I strongly believe that continuation of investing in women and women’s social entrepreneurship is the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/en/promising-practices-one-highest-human-trafficking-verdicts-serbia-was-issued-during-covid-19>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/en/online-counseling-human-trafficking-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic>

right recipe for overcoming the consequences of this and all other crises as well”, she added and continued, “I think we should make the best out of this crisis, which I consider a crisis of humanity. In addition to disinfecting our hands and space, I believe this is also the time to disinfect our thoughts and emotions. I know that women will find a way to fight through, just like they always have before - heroically and with a smile on their face”.

## New risks and an increase of online sexual exploitation

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Organisation Atina points out that the existing legal and institutional mechanisms were not adequately respected before or during the pandemic, and that the proclaimed policy of prevention and suppression of human trafficking was not fulfilled in a way that would give effective results.

This is indicated by the processing of human trafficking cases, and bad practice related to the requalification of the criminal offense, most often when it comes to sexual exploitation. Experience shows that in almost nine out of ten cases, requalification occurs, and traffickers are punished more leniently, which sends the wrong and affirmative message to the perpetrators.

In addition to the above, the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has left an additional negative impact on the position of victims of human trafficking, and numerous consequences for their lives. In these circumstances, the already inefficient process of victim identification has become even more difficult, as has the availability of support systems, both health and social.

This situation, as we have seen, also reflects on the economic stability and independence of trafficking victims. Most beneficiaries of Atina’s support program have lost their jobs, which again places them in a situation of risk, slows down their recovery, and further complicates the reintegration process.

There has been more and more talk in public about cases of online violence<sup>16</sup> as well as online sexual exploitation, which especially affects children and is another important segment in understanding this complex phenomenon.

Having in mind these new risks and the evident increase of online violence and exploitation, Jelena Hrnjak concludes, “As a system and as a society, we must show our intention to learn how to take care of each other and not

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.atina.org.rs/en/girls-and-women-experience-trafficking-contributed-shedding-light-issue-violence-digital>

only those who are similar to us and around us, but also about persons who are in different life positions, who are at risk of violence and exploitation, and who ultimately suffer from it. This is especially important today when this violence becomes less perceptible, when it is transferred to the online space, where the possibility to act and help the victims is significantly narrowed. We must keep all this in mind when we create a response, and we must, therefore, create one that is not selective, and includes all members of our society. Finally, we must look at the policies we create and take responsibility both individually and collectively, as humanity. Given that we are responsible for this pandemic, as we caused it with our irresponsible attitude towards nature, with neglect for its preservation, we are responsible for finding a way out of this crisis.”



